

Brazil

■ **Manuel Bandeira. *Selected Poems*.** David R. Slavitt, tr. Horácio Costa, intro. Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York. Sheep Meadow Press (University Press of New England, distr.). 2002. xviii + 153 pages. \$12.95. ISBN 1-931357-01-3

ACCORDING TO Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira was “the John the Baptist of *modernismo*—that is, of the great flowering of avant-garde expression that would take place in Brazil in the 1920s. Beyond any doubt, Bandeira, the renowned Brazilian poet and professor of literature (at what is now the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro) who lived from 1886 to 1968, was highly influential in the transition to *modernismo*. During his long life, he had varying degrees of involvement with subsequent movements in Brazilian poetry. At the same time, his own verse is as individualistic and distinctive as it is indicative of any literary-historical trend. However one may choose to categorize Bandeira, he is clearly a major figure in Brazilian poetry.

Selected Poems is an anthology of poems culled from several collections Bandeira published during his lifetime. Care has been taken to include those texts that are indispensable landmarks in Bandeira’s work, such as the much-quoted and often-anthologized selection “The Cactus.” The format of the volume is bilingual, with the Portuguese originals and English translations on facing pages. The English versions are the work of the well-known and highly productive poet, novelist, and translator David R. Slavitt. Slavitt is probably most associated with translations of classical Greek and Latin texts, but here he ventures with often very good results into modern material. In translating Bandeira’s verse, Slavitt has often made bold decisions

in the sense of being prepared to modify the original, at times quite freely. For those readers who are particularly concerned with translation, it would have been useful to see a short statement by the translator summarizing the basic rules he developed and followed to determine how much adaptation was permissible. Nevertheless, the pattern of Slavitt’s choices can be more or less discerned by cross-checking examples throughout the volume. One may at times feel puzzled by individual choices that Slavitt made in rendering particular lines of poetry. Still, when the volume is considered in its totality, the translation exhibits a good deal of internal consistency and clearly is the result of a carefully conceived plan.

The introduction by Horácio Costa does not touch on the questions raised by the translation but rather serves to present Manuel Bandeira and his work to readers who may have no prior knowledge of them and who may not be well acquainted with Brazilian literature. Costa’s comments are well chosen to reach a general educated readership.

Taking especially into consideration the few occasions on which Bandeira’s work has been translated into English, *Selected Poems* is a worthy project.

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Africa

■ **Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing.** Jack Mapanje, ed. Oxford / Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Heinemann. 2002. xxii + 328 pages. \$19.95. ISBN 0-435-91211-9

KWAME NKUMAH, Nelson Mandela, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Nawal El Saadawi are just five of the well-known authors judged to have been imprisoned “principally for their views and beliefs” and included by Jack Mapanje in the fascinating collection *Gathering Seaweed*. In five porous and capacious sections, “Origins,” “Arrest, Detention, Prison,” “Torture,” “Survival,” and “The Release,” Mapanje has arranged some eighty passages of poetry that range from freedom songs to winnowed, individually penned verses and prose.

In prison, particularly in solitary confinement “principally for . . . views and beliefs,” all the issues raised by being a writer—a person of principle, a citizen of a state, and indeed a human being—are focused. Where wealth is measured in a second blanket and privilege is a spoonful of sugar, wars for rights and dignity are waged on easily defined battlefields. For example, disputes

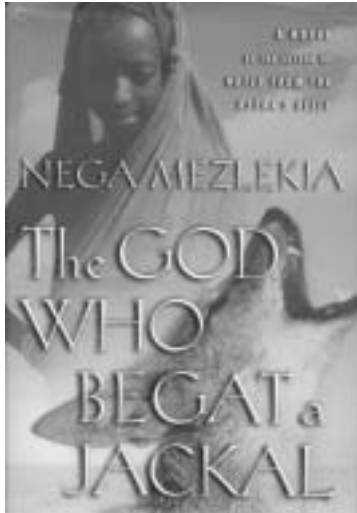
about dress, restraint, and attitude raise such questions as: “Should political detainees (PDs) wear prison uniforms?” “Should PDs submit to being chained when being taken to see a doctor?” And, “Does the very act of registering a complaint imply that the oppressor enjoys a degree of legitimacy?”

Mapanje, whose own prison memoirs are eagerly awaited, has edited the collection with a light touch. Contextualization is limited to identifying the author’s country of origin, and there are very few notes. Attentive readers, alerted by a helpful introduction, are left to investigate background, follow up leads, and uncover ironies. The rewards can be particularly great from following through national traditions, such as the Ghanaian material. Kwame Nkrumah, represented by his account of his prison experiences, casts a long shadow. However, everything is called into doubt by a few words in Kwame Safo-Adu’s letter written from Nsawam Medium Security Prison: the correspondent notes that he is in the very building in which J. B. Danquah, one of Nkrumah’s opponents, had been detained and died. What a flood of questions bursts from that observation.

The editor, whose own detention was authorized by a “prison graduate,” has included little of his own writing. Malawi is represented both by verse (Felix Mnthali) and prose (Edwin Mpina and Sam Mpasu), however, and, in a characteristically understated way, Mapanje leaves the reader to work out where he fits in among the other writers. The fact that Ken Saro-Wiwa refers to him is just one of many examples of cross-reference in a volume that is shot through with an awareness of pan-African experiences of persecution. It is appropriate that the allusion should be by Saro-Wiwa because his use of Shakespeare and the Qur’an draw attention to the effective way that master texts are manipulated by our scribes behind bars.

There is, as Mapanje points out in the introduction, a gender imbalance in the distribution of men and women represented in this compelling anthology, so it is helpful to close with quotes from women writers. The first is Saadawi’s observation, illustrated throughout the volume, that “in prison a person’s essence comes to light.” The second is from Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s contribution that highlights the vulnerability of the arrested, detained, and imprisoned. “We thank God that we have lived to tell our story,” she writes. Sobered by the evidence of inhumanity yet exhilarated by the courage that shines through the collection, many readers will say “amen” to that.

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Ethiopia

■ **Nega Mezlekia. *The God Who Begat a Jackal*.** New York. Picador USA (St. Martin's distr.). 2002. viii + 242 pages. \$23. ISBN 0-312-28701-1

NEGA MEZLEKIA left Ethiopia in 1983 and is an engineer in Toronto. He received the Governor General's Award for his memoir, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2000), which the *New York Times Book Review* called "the most riveting book about Ethiopia since Ryszard Kapuściński's literary allegory *The Emperor*."

Mezlekia's first novel proves that, as he commented in February 2002 at the Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City, he has been influenced by García Márquez.

He heard, with keen interest, how, when Aster was barely five, she defied earthly laws, walking through a solid wall. He was intrigued that she communicated with the spirits of the departed, that she shared the unspoken thoughts of her neighbors and read the auras of the diseased. Her painful experiences at the emperor's hand, and the unique afflictions that rendered her skin transparent, were revealed to him.

At the end, Aster bounces up into the sky after her lover, Gudu, is killed by her father, who is then informed by Gudu's mother, a bondswoman, that Gudu was really his son: "With his fortune long gone, his friends and family members a distant memory, Duke Ashenafi was destined to spend his last days in utter solitude."

The story, we are told in the postscript, is set between 1750 and the late 1800s, narrated by the son of Ashenafi's overseer, who is a friend to Gudu, the court entertainer, and later a fighter. Problematically, the narrator uses contemporary English expressions such

as *mind you*, *proliferating underground market*, *interrogation (torture)*, *opting instead for guerrilla tactics*, *I guess*, *income-tax credit*, *serial killers and arsonists*, *upped the ante*, *bookmakers*, *ride-by-shootings*, and *Pesky Peasants* (the title of a section). Could Mezlekia have joined the Orientalist bandwagon, telling an exotic story of horrifying rapes and killings and religious wars complete with inquisitions, just to titillate Western readers? (On this topic, see Sheng-mei Ma's *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity*.) The story seems to slide by rather than resolve the expectations it raises. Gudu and Aster never achieve consummation, and, despite transformations, she never becomes a deep thinker.

Mezlekia is a sharp ironist. For example, "The emperor's admirals were paid only half of what the old savant was quietly pocketing; for such weekly earnings, a judge could be persuaded to set a mass murderer free." He has not abandoned his social consciousness: "On our way home, Dad must have read the sympathy for the barefoot serfs that was written so clearly on my face, the anguish that I felt for the robbery visited on them, for he ruffled my hair playfully, saying: 'Son, if there were no greedy people in our midst, even a poor dog would be warmly clothed.'"

A standard disclaimer is provided in the postscript, but it is followed by, "The author understands the temptation to draw parallels between invented characters and reality." This is said in a pseudo-García Márquez novel "set between 1750 and the late 1800s" that uses contemporary language by an Ethiopian who survived punishment for being a radical in the 1970s and early 1980s! We must look more closely.

The novel began with the all-seeing god Mawu-Lisa: "With two faces on one head, Mawu-Lisa is both man and woman. Mawu, the woman, is in charge of the night; Lisa, the male, directs the day." Perhaps Aster and Gudu could not consummate their relationship because, like Mawu-Lisa, they were two halves—but they did in that she taught him to read and write. The novel has a message: "The uprising was never undertaken for riches; it was about basic human dignity. Nor was it for revenge, but self-determination; not for shedding blood, but ending bloodshed. Above all, it was about realizing fair access to natural resources."

"Such is the power of fiction," reads the last sentence, "that it stretches one's imagination."

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India

■ **Ashokamitran. *My Father's Friend and Other Stories*.** Lakshmi Holmström, tr. New Delhi. Sahitya Akademi. 2002. 207 pages. Rs120. ISBN 81-260-1347-8

LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM has brought a welcome sprightliness and transparency to her translations of modern Tamil literature, performing wonders with Ashokamitran's *Water*. The novel stands as a model for aspiring translators. Lakshmi's English version of Ashokamitran's selected stories in *My Father's Friend* also achieves such a satisfaction for the world of Indian literature in translation through its crystalline, unpretentious English style. No, Lakshmi does not stand between us and the sensitive writer, Ashokamitran.

Ashokamitran is the chronicler of the South Indian middle class. Essentially, this would mean the materials of bourgeois culture. Though bourgeois is a word that has become almost derogatory, it remains a class also touched by tears in every facet of its life. Though generally considered to be materialistic, the class has yet-unfulfilled longings for the spiritual way of life. It is Ashokamitran's perceptive pen that helps us locate the heroisms imbedded in this mass found in cities like Chennai and Secunderabad, the world where Ashokamitran has lived all his life. Here, no grandiose gestures are possible, but one can fall silent now and then. Silence itself then becomes the heroic act, as when Narayanan's mother silences her pent-up anger with a spontaneous wail upon meeting Syed Mama: "How did your friend have the heart to leave all of you and go away in such haste?"

"Munir's Spanners" is typical Ashokamitran. There is no story as such, no sharp opening, no nerve-wracking drama, or any definite conclusion. A childhood experience gets re-created, the arc of thought swishing across Secunderabad's Marredpalli tank, a Christian cemetery full of headstones and lorry drivers washing their huge carriers. Then the arc falls at the railcar that is being loaded in Secunderabad station. The dénouement comes later when the spanners that had cost poor Munir his job are found in the car being unloaded in Chennai. Interestingly enough, we sense the end the moment Munir reports his loss. Still, we read the story through and read it again, then read it in translation as well, only to get lost in a brown study. Such is life: strange encounters, inexplicable friendships, the way of fate that can be noted in an accidental loss of a spanner, the inevitability of death. Such is the power of Ashokamitran's narrative style. It is as if we have read a complete novel!

Ashokamitran writes not only about what he has seen but also about what he has experienced. Much of his writing tends to be autobiographical. His genius lies in choosing very few incidents from his life, instead of trying to overwhelm us with details. How else could the long story "Festival Evening" fascinate us so? We experience the pity of it all behind the glitter of the silver screen because Ashokamitran has spent a few years in that drab backstage. Even if other selections like "Colours" and "Hurt Pride" do not offer so much elbow room to get into the atmosphere, the author does succeed in re-creating a fully realized experience. "Each story looks at an incident from a particular angle and within a certain scope," he says. "To say any more would put the story in danger of diluting the experience it offers."

The experience in *My Father's Friend* is mostly a teenager's perception of the world around him—a young Brahmin boy's world. Most of the time the boy is drawn to boys from other castes or communities. This togetherness of the omniscient narrator with Munir, Kantimatinathan, Maurice, Terence, and others is the truth about India's secular world. Left to themselves, the boys could create a brave new world tomorrow. Still, the teenage years are fleeting, one grows up, gets into extremist positions, becomes a Kittu who places the radio bomb in the bus-station tea stall past the Kashmiri Gate.

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Indonesia

■ **Pramoedya Ananta Toer. *The Girl from the Coast*.** Willem Samuels, tr. New York: Hyperion East, 2002. 279 pages. \$22.95. ISBN 0-7868-6820-1

PRAMOEDYA TOER'S recent novel, *The Girl from the Coast*, might be more aptly titled "Two Girls and the Coast," since the central narrative of part 3 of the book deals with how the protagonist, the unnamed girl of the title, and her manipulative servant, Mardinah, are both changed by their exposure to the fishing village of the girl's childhood. Toer's novel begins with the girl from the coast, described primarily as "only fourteen at the time, a wisp of a thing," seen by a man known only throughout the book as "the Bendoro," a moderately important Javanese government official, who is struck by the girl's beauty and requests her as his bride. After surviving the trauma of leaving the fishing village that has been her entire world for a beautiful but cold house in the city and a marriage to a man who is rarely present, the girl finds she is just

a "practice" wife for the Bendoro and that he would never be allowed to marry a commoner. Toer's insight into the girl's insecurities and longings to return to her village and later to be a good wife and mate to the Bendoro, especially after the birth of her first child, is skillfully rendered by Toer's simple fluid prose and exacting scene and dialogue. The reader stays close to the interiority of the girl from the coast throughout the first two sections of the novel, building empathy for her and feeling the stasis of her situation, which limits the girl only to reactions to those around her. Halfway through the novel, the girl from the coast summons enough courage to ask the Bendoro to visit her home village. She is accompanied by Mardinah, who informs the girl that she (Mardinah) has the upper hand in their relationship and that it is preposterous for the girl from the coast to believe she will be the Bendoro's legitimate wife.

Book 3 of the novel catapults the girl and the reader from reaction into action as she returns to the village, only to find herself virtually worshipped by the villagers she considers as equals. In the midst of this development, however, the girl from the coast uncovers an assassination plot, immobilizes the power of Mardinah—whose life takes an unexpected turn—and truly comes of age by finding that her status gives her the option of action instead of reaction, at least in the world of her origins. In the final section, Toer breaks the heart of the reader and fans the flames of an unjust situation, before reweaving loose threads of the narrative to come to a realistic ending that risks sentimentality but deftly avoids it, leaving *The Girl from the Coast* a glimpse into the life of a universal woman and her counterpart in a story that leaves the reader edified, touched, and moved.

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Libya

■ **Ibrahim Al-Koni. *The Bleeding of the Stone*.** May Jayyusi, Christopher Tingley, trs. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2002. 136 pages. \$12.95. ISBN 1-56656-417-4

THE WADDĀN OR MOUFFLON is a wild mountain sheep with large curling horns that survives in the remote desert of southern Libya but is extinct in Europe. It is the oldest animal in the Sahara and has been associated in local myth with pagan gods and sacred rituals. Libya's leading contemporary novelist, Ibrahim Al-Koni, has given it an unforgettable role in *The*

Bleeding of the Stone, his first novel to be translated into English. While doing so, he has also continued his interest in the desert as a setting for his novels, evoking its beauty and harshness as well as humanity's resilient adaptation to its challenges and dangers.

Asouf, the main character, is a Bedouin Muslim herdsman who lives alone in the rugged mountain desert of southern Libya. He tends his goats and barter them periodically for barley with caravan merchants from Kano and Timbuktu. His father taught him the need for patience and the necessity of avoiding other humans because of their evil. After his father's death, he lived alone with his mother until she tragically died in a torrential flash flood.

Asouf has learned, like his father, not to eat meat and to respect the animals of the desert, especially the *waddān* and the gazelles. To his consternation, the latter have been increasingly hunted almost to extinction by urban intruders with automatic guns in fast cars, causing the *waddān* to seek higher, impregnable redoubts known only to Asouf. Tempted one day to lasso a *waddān*, he was dragged by it for a long distance on the craggy ground and thrown into a ravine; but he succeeded to hang on to a ledge for hours by his fingertips, suspended, covered with bloody lacerations, thirsty and exhausted but astonishingly patient, until the *waddān* returned and saved him by offering him the rope still tangled in its horns. Asouf's vow not to eat meat was strengthened thereafter in gratitude, and his friendship with the *waddān* became so real that it trusted him and grazed peacefully with his goats.

He did not mind guiding an increasing number of Christian foreign tourists and archeologists coming to the area to see the ancient paintings on the rocks and in the caves portraying the *waddān* and pagan priests in sacrificial rituals. But when two brash visitors demand that he lead them to the *waddān* to kill it for its meat, he tries to throw them off the scent but finally fails.

In their translation, May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley have successfully conveyed Asouf's love for his environment, his ethics, and the culture of Bedouin reconciliation with nature, which contrasts starkly with the aggressiveness and greed of urban people. The translators' choice of vocabulary and simple structure reflects Al-Koni's, but I do not particularly appreciate their uncalled-for but repeated contractions throughout the translation, as in sentences like "he's lost," "he's lost it," "he'd lost," and "he'd be lost" when the text nearby is in proper English with no contractions or colloquial usage. Overall, however, their translation flows well. Al-Koni remains one of two major contemporary Arab writers vividly evoking the

desert in their fiction, the other being Saudi novelist 'Abd al-Rahmān Munif, author of *Cities of Salt*.

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Nigeria

■ **Helon Habila. *Waiting for an Angel*.** New York: Norton. 2003. 229 pages. \$23.95. ISBN 0-393-05193-5

ORIGINALLY SELF-PUBLISHED in a different form as *Prison Stories* (2000), Helon Habila's interconnected short stories that comprise *Waiting for an Angel* are set in 1990s Nigeria under the tyranny of General Abacha. It is a powerful first book. Even the story behind its publication is interesting. Habila had to borrow money to send the required six copies of his book to England, where he would win the Caine Prize for the best African short story.

Habila is from northern Nigeria, and one of the main characters in the stories, Lomba, is a northerner who is always writing a novel and, like Habila, moves to Lagos to work for a national publication to support himself and to enter literary society. Indeed, a Helon Habila appears in a story when Lomba goes to a poetry reading at the house of a famous writer. The situation, however, is far from literary, as Lomba and his editor try to escape the soldiers who follow them to the poet's house.

Prison Stories was originally an autobiographical novel, which Habila revised over the years to give it a more interesting form, with stories moving back and forth in time, told from different perspectives by a variety of characters, and ranging in manner from a poetic fable about seeing the angel of death to directly addressing the reader in order to explain the political history of Nigeria, which led to army rule and the eventual horror of Abacha's regime: a regime that existed only to plunder the nation and keep power. While Habila mentions the imprisonment and death of M.K.O. Abiola (who won a presidential election), the murder of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, and other events of the period, the stories are about individuals, the conditions in which people lived, how they tried to survive, and how they died. The characters range from those among the elite who become mentally disturbed and the daughter of a wife abandoned by an army general to the urban poor who share an outhouse for a toilet and who need to fetch water from other streets that have water pumps. One of many books depicting the land, smells, and violence of Lagos, *Waiting for an Angel* shows how army rule diverted the nation's wealth from improving the lives of the people.

Part of the power of the collection comes from its ironies as well as its form and subject matter. Lomba's ambition to avoid politics and seek fame as a writer conflicts with the realities of Nigeria. He is hired by the newspaper to run its arts page only after he shows he can write about politics. He is ordered to cover a supposedly peaceful demonstration, which the army turns into a deadly event, leading to his arrest, imprisonment, and death. Lomba is discovered keeping a diary while in prison. He is first beaten for it, then the warden trades him privileges for writing love poems the warden uses to woo an educated woman. The woman recognizes the poems as a pastiche of the classics and discovers the SOS message in them. She demands to see Lomba and hears his history, but the warden cannot save a political prisoner.

Many of the stories are set in Poverty Street, where Lomba lived for two years after first moving to Lagos. Helon Habila reveals the difficulty in finding employment and the problems of women in Nigeria, including why some become prostitutes. His stories have a convincing consistency of tone.

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Turkey

■ **Nazim Hikmet. *Human Landscapes from My Country: An Epic Novel in Verse*.** Randy Blasing, Mutlu Konuk, trs. New York: Persea. 2002. xiv + 466 pages. \$39.95. ISBN 0-89255-273-5

TO APPRECIATE what Nazim Hikmet (1902–63) is about in his masterful *Human Landscapes*, it is worth knowing that he was one of the great innovators of modern Turkish poetry, abandoning the classical Ottoman traditions in

favor of free verse; that he was committed to social justice for commoners and the down-trodden and saw the Turkish Communist Party as the instrument of change; that he studied in the Soviet Union and supported the building of a communist society; that he spent many years in jail in Turkey because of his beliefs; that prison deeply affected his poetry, endowing it with serious purpose and simplifying his style; and that he was devoted to his country (as should be expected) yet was cosmopolitan in his interests and tastes.

Human Landscapes, begun in 1941 in Bursa prison and completed in 1950, has much in common with epic poetry through the nobility of its themes, the heroism of its characters, and the sweep of its battles. Hikmet continually drew inspiration from ordinary people and from the universal themes they so vividly illustrated: the perils of humanity's temporal journey and the struggle for human freedom.

Hikmet set no limits either in subject matter or form. He wrote about himself as a poet (he is the imprisoned idealist Halil) in one section and in the next embraced Europe, and he moved from history to contemporary politics to war and linked them all to the lives of common people. At first, he called his work a poem, but he was aware that he was also writing prose and drama. He even used "novel" to describe his creation, not by chance, for as he was writing, he was translating into Turkish Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which inspired him to combine the epic and the personal. He found original devices in his sweeping narrative to relate myriad episodes and diverse characters to one another. A train journey from Istanbul to Ankara allowed him to introduce all manner of human types. As the train made its way across the changing landscape, the memories of the passengers were stirred, enabling the poet to describe the Turkish War of Independence (1921–22) and other events of Turkish history. Even so, he steadily expanded his purview to encompass the pivotal events of his own era and thus was drawn inexorably to World War II. He is unabashed in his praise of the Soviet triumph over the German invaders, and he connects the battlefield with the prisoners in the Ankara penitentiary, where the train has brought them, by means of radio broadcasts in their cells. In the final pages, he returns to the personal life of Halil in Ankara prison, and we catch glimpses of day-to-day existence in the letters he receives from his wife, Aysha. The political is never absent, however, as a worker puts ten biting questions to Halil about the prospects for capitalism after the war.

A powerful read, *Human Landscapes from My Country* is the first complete translation of the novel into English. The translators have done full justice to the original.

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Wales

■ **Menna Elfyn. *Cusan Dyn Dall / Blind Man's Kiss*.** Highgreen, U.K. Bloodaxe (Dufour, distr.). 2001 (released 2002). 128 pages. \$16.95. ISBN 1-85224-544-1

MENNA ELFYN is presently the contemporary Welsh-language poet enjoying the greatest international reputation, due in part to the willingness of her English publisher, Bloodaxe Books, to distribute facing-page translations of her books internationally. The advantage of publishing with Bloodaxe, however, would be irrelevant without Elfyn's contemporary technique and subjects: she writes poems that *deserve* to be read widely, and *Cusan Dyn Dall / Blind Man's Kiss*, Elfyn's third book with Bloodaxe, is certainly her best to date. Since most of Elfyn's readers outside Wales (and a majority within Wales) cannot read her poetry in its original language, translation is a necessity. Elfyn's approach to the translation issue is to secure several translators who are also accomplished poets and who live and work in Wales, including Joseph Clancy (well known for his translations of Welsh fiction writer Kate Roberts), Tony Conran (editor/translator of the *Penguin Book of Welsh Poetry*), Elin ap Hywel (herself a Welsh-language poet), and Nigel Jenkins and Gillian Clarke—Welsh poets who write in English. Rather than producing a mishmash of styles—a serious risk when dealing with poet-translators with rec-



ognizably distinct and mature poetic voices—Elfyn's translators produce English-language versions of her poems that fit together exceptionally well.

The outstanding poems of this collection probe the mysteries of personal relationships (desire, love, friendship) and the complexities of modern culture as experienced in a variety of settings. The poems project a contemporary, personal voice, direct and energetic. Elfyn avoids sentimentality but is willing to risk tenderness. Sometimes she uses domestic images to address a theme with global resonance. In "The Crinoline Tree," Elfyn sees in the survival of a tree that "the men brought . . . back from the war" and planted in her

aunt's garden, a saving "Cross-fertilization: earthly echo / of the Gardener's touch." Elfyn demonstrates an especially acute pull toward rendering the experience of women—even those from quite different cultural circumstances than her own—as in "Singer's Remsen," in which a woman in a bar in the remote Welsh-American village of Remsen, "slunk towards me, pressed my flesh as if in touch / with the softness of a peach." Sometimes the poems reach directly for large subjects, endowing elements of geography and weather with surreal and spiritual qualities, as with "Cloudburst." Some poems are simply terrifying, like "Crack," which begins, "It was God's fault / for giving us imagination."

Elfyn's growing international reputation is matched by her international range of subjects, for she is one of the most widely traveled of Welsh poets. "Comet in a Field" is set in Media, Pennsylvania. Many poems have New York City for their setting. There are poems prompted by experiences in Vietnam, Spain, Sri Lanka. And yet, Wales follows Elfyn: sometimes she chastises her people; sometimes she celebrates them. As the opening stanza of "Raincoat in Asheville" demonstrates, however, she never gets away:

Leave home without a coat?
Not on your life—
even jaunting through a land
where a cloak would seem uncalled for
the damps of my nation
will find and drench me.

David Lloyd
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