



Conversationalists

Catherine Smith *Lip* Smith/Doorstop £7.95 paperback

Sandra Tappenden *Speed Salt* £12.99 hardback

I love these collections, both of them. You emerge from them both, thinking how well you know the writers, not caring if what they say is true or untrue, completely careless of persona. They feel – however different they are – completely real. They do not fuss; they are not, in any sense of the word, fussy. They just come out with it.

Catherine Smith's first collection *The New Bride* was a Smith/Doorstop pamphlet, but out-gunned almost every full collection that year. *The Butcher's Hands* was just as good. Her writing is disarming, unflustered, confident – it's frank and conversational, and inventive in an understated way. 'Understated' might seem a strange adjective to describe a collection that is so open and pleasurable about sex, about being randy, about lust, love, having affairs. It is practically bursting with sensuality. It's full of animal, but the writing is as cool as a prize cucumber – see, it's set me off.

And, according to Smith, that should be celery, anyway. There is a great poem about the erogenous properties of celery

so pale and skinny-ribbed,
like the sleeve of a sensible might-weight sweater...
...it tastes of water –
or of glum afternoons at your grandmother's flat

until, presto! it turns out to stimulate

the pituitary gland,
contains two pheromones that cause arousal.
All you need to do is lie back, relax, snap a stalk,
shake off the water droplets, ease open the top button
of your jeans, stroke yourself and crunch,
wait for the chemicals to kick in, then ring
your lover on his mobile...

Smith is constantly funny and unexpected about sex. There's a great poem about a man who's forgotten his 'Special Word' in a bondage session (this is so clever that I can't reveal it); and another, 'China', about a woman trying to buy a china shepherdess ('with flushed cheeks') for a mother's birthday, only to be reminded of how a lover had bought *her* 'Chinese eggs... how he'd pushed them/ inside her'. (Don't ask; I have no idea; I must lead a quiet life.) As the prim purchase proceeds, her mind and body go into sexual spasm. Something similar occurs when, in a supermarket, and with her baby at home, a new mother's breasts begin to leak milk. That's an interesting enough image for a poem, anyway, but the closing five lines are totally unexpected:

I folded my across my chest,
my wet patches, as guilty if,
my body programmed to release
this sweet, illicit flood, I'd seen
an ex-lover, and suddenly come.
(*'Milk'*)

There is a quite brilliant poem about a girl losing her virginity, and imagining how different it would have been if her poster-boy, David Cassidy, had been the lover:

...he didn't
nudge me onto my back, like you did, grunting
as he unzipped my jeans, complaining

you're so bony, and demanding, *Now you do something –
hold it like this*. David took my virginity
in a room filled with white roses, having smoothed

the sheets himself...

I'm not saying all 46 poems here are about sex – as many as 17 aren't! – but all the poems have an intimate, witty tone, albeit one which Smith is always ready to throw away if she feels like expressing love, loathing or the urgent surges of desire. There is a great putdown poem 'Your Unsalted Butter Is Still In My Fridge', and an equally great I-don't-care-if-you've-left-me poem, 'Request', which begins 'Send me your bed, but please, don't change the sheets.' *Lip* – great title – has a reckless and welcome energy.

Sandra Tappenden's second collection, *Speed*, is even more powerful than her first, *Bags Of Mostly Water*. In one sense, her writing needs a more conscientious reader than Smith, since she is a poet of tangents, oddities and aphorisms, and doesn't expect you to receive the quick, sudden shots in the arm that Smith provides. Instead, she takes you out for a good think, and you have to be prepared for her entertainingly wayward lines of thought. She lends you an arm, and walks you into the bizarre bazaar of her images.

Tappenden's skill is in proposing questions or lines of inquiry, which she conducts in a spirit of uncertainty. 'I can't put my finger on it,' she says, or 'Perhaps' or 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure' or 'Hmmm'. These tentative, hesitant notes are constantly struck, even when she is coming out with strange and obsessive statements about age, place, time, relationships:

Hugging can be an ordeal in the summer
especially when the hugger and hugee
are uncertain what size life they are in.
(‘The Climate of the Hypothalamus’)

or

... if I had a hammer
there'd be one less cat in the world or I'm sorry
I seem to have confused you with my dad.
(‘To behave repeatedly like an idiot
does not mean I am an idiot’)

or

Louis said couples are bound
like roots of a living tree; certainly
you can't ever un-know anybody.
(‘Pretty Junk’)

Everywhere Tappenden looks, she sees alternatives, and either chews them over, or, on occasion, spits them out. In ‘Options UK’, she compiles a long series of possibilities for moving or not moving:

or move to a seaside town with one factory
or move to a cheap place cheery with air-borne poison
or move to a beauty spot of potential meltdown
or move to a place of lonely reason
or move to have everything torn down
or stay and make good with nods to the stayers

or stay and help yourself to the discarded goods
or stay and wonder where knowing went
or stay in the mud hole you like like an elephant
or stay and write about being left
or stay because going would be the same
(‘Options UK’)

And in another poem she nails the impossibility of making decisions in one final verse:

Where does anyone live nowadays?
Certainty is a product like anything else
and poets are not much use are they
I often think I overhear someone say.
(‘People who are drawn to take free stress tests’)

What I love about Tappenden’s poems (and her prosepoems) are their good-humoured refusal to give straight answers – not to herself, not to her readers. Her work is there to read because it is compulsively typing and untying knots. It is highly skilled – in an age when sestinas are raging through everyone’s collections, hers is nicely disguised, making the most of the form’s conversational possibilities, without ever drawing attention to itself. And the whole collection bursts with apparently random ideas, and great surprises – it begins with the startling ‘I’ve found it helps to carry an egg in my pocket’, and finishes ‘The extraordinary rushes away like days. It is always, though I hate that word and didn’t mean to make this complicated.’ Offbeat; out on its own; unmissable.

Smith and Tappenden are quite different poets, published originally in different poetry magazines – *Smiths Knoll*, *The Rialto*, *The North*, *Poetry London* for the former; *Shearsman*, *Stride*, *Shadowtrain*, *Tremblestone* for the latter. What brings them together is that they talk from the heart – and that they are both so strikingly original as to lose other new collections in their wake.

Bill Greenwell