



**Andy Fletcher. *the mile long piano*. Ragged Raven, 2007 (Ragged Raven Press. 1 Lodge Farm, Snitterfield, Warwickshire, CV37 OLR. [www.raggedraven.co.uk](http://www.raggedraven.co.uk)) ISBN: 978 0 955255236. £7.00**

You get the impression that if Andy Fletcher were ever to play the piano it would genuinely need to be a mile long – no ordinary keyboard would accommodate the breadth of his creative imagination. His writing teems with protracted metaphors: in this collection you'll encounter a couple rowing across a field of grass in a boat, a man who spends his life apologising to the carpet, a poet who inflates himself with foot pump, a museum where the only exhibit is wind, a son who paints his father white, a town where jellyfish appear out of nowhere, another where bubbles become currency, another where real birds are replaced by replicas, another where fishermen fish indoors, a world in which warships are made of rubber, another in which America is relocated to the Isle of Wight, and so on. He is a master of unexpected juxtapositions and surreal adventure. In TANKER, for instance, the speaker pulls back his curtain to find: "an ocean-going tanker/down the length of the street." Clearly this is a poet who has no respect for logic and who relishes subverting it. But – despite the absurd, fantastical images - the poems often seem to reflect rather than challenge reality. Thus Fletcher's tanker – like so many of his figurative images – is a metaphor for a world that always has the capacity to surprise us, even when it appears mundane. It warns about the dangers of taking such world for granted. The point is made at the end of TANKER which closes with the words "*maybe it's always been here but we've/never seen it before.*" This is another way of saying that the world is potentially more interesting than we think. Of course, one of the things that gives it this quality is the power of the human imagination, something Fletcher celebrates throughout the collection. This can be seen clearly in the poem EXHIBITION. Here people search for meaning in an empty art gallery, staring at the blank walls, "trying to see what's not there." Everyone is bewildered until:

a man calls to us  
*come over here folks*  
*this is the moon raising its eyebrow*  
*ah yes we say*

gazing at the empty space  
and beginning to see

You can read the poem as offering a new spin on ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ tale, but it does more than this. For me it makes the same point as John Cage’s 4’33” – just as there is no such thing as silence in Cage’s auditorium, so there is no such thing as nothing in Fletcher’s exhibition.

a latecomer arrives saying  
*sorry I think I’ve got the wrong place*

*no no*  
*come on in* we tell her  
*this is it*

Art is all around us so long as there is such a thing as the human imagination. If you are sceptical then my advice is to pick up Fletcher’s superb collection: he will convince you.

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**Mari Jose Olaziregi (editor); Amaia Gabantxo (translator). *Six Basque Poets*. Arc Publications: New Writers from Europe and Beyond. 2007. (Arc Publications, Nanholme Mill, Shaw Wood Road, Todmorden, OL14 6DA. [www.arcpublications.co.uk](http://www.arcpublications.co.uk)) ISBN 13 978 1904614 26 5. £10.99**

I learned a lot of interesting things from the editor’s excellent introduction to this volume. I learned that Basque is the oldest language in Western Europe, for instance, and that it is only spoken by approximately 7000,000 people. The implications of these two facts are fundamental to the writing of each poet in this anthology. The sense of a proud cultural heritage sits alongside a sense of a language and a culture under threat. Seldom have I encountered a book where the function and efficacy of language and literature is such a pervasive theme. Joseba Sarrionandia’s poem LITERATURE AND REVOLUTION, for instance, explores the possibility of literature becoming a vehicle for change and concludes that this is not likely, at least not in the case of the Basque cause: “Has anything been written in literary journals like *Voprosi Literaturi*/ or *Tel Quel* about the Basque prisoners on perennial hunger strikes?” The answer is no and the implicit point is clear – the literary establishment

can be as reactionary as the political establishment; indeed, the two can be one and the same. Language and literature is equally significant in Rikardo Arregi's poem

PAPERS ON THE PAVEMENT:

They got wet, my papers that fell on the pavement,  
turbid ink flew from the words,  
and as from now,  
memories here from the future.

It is not surprising that poets writing with minority languages should fear the effacement of their treasured medium and, with it, the "memories" it articulates. Perhaps it is this prospect that motivates Miren Agur Meabe to ponder the possibility of an alternative, non-linguistic mode of communication in her poem CODE

I proclaim an alternative code:  
unrelated to words,  
a language without phrases,  
a tongue that cannot be condemned to memory,  
a prose to fool promises

Elsewhere poems directly explore the shortcomings of language, as in Kirmen Uribe's reflection on poststructuralism, THE UNSAYABLE, in which "Floods have washed away the bridge between words and things." But Uribe does more than bemoan the lost status of the signifier; his lament has a political dimension too: "You can't say a despot's decision is murder," he says, reminding us that moral relativity has accompanied our denial of absolute meaning. Felipe Juaristi, meanwhile, links language and place in his poem, GEOGRAPHY.

I was born here,  
yet I don't know this place.  
We speak the same language,  
yet I don't understand my people.  
This is my homeland,  
bit by bit she kills me,  
yet I always return to her strange domain,  
like a sick man to his pain.

He cannot detach himself from his homeland, of course, because it defines him, and the same is true of language. Language defines him, as it defines us all – each poet in this book understands this and that is one reason they are so passionate about language, and concerned that it's under threat.

The highest profile writer in this collection, Bernardo Atxaga, presents his reflection on language in his brilliant poem ADAM AND EVE. Here he tells us that, after leaving paradise, Adam and Eve “had to learn new words like pain, work, loneliness,” and, “as their dictionary grew, so did the number of wrinkles on their faces.”

Language ages us, it seems, and it does so, the poem implies, because language is life. Again, language defines us; as Jacques Lacan would say, it *is* us. Hence, despite the sadness that language articulates, Atxaga’s Adam and Eve can’t be too despondent at their fall from Paradise. Their exposure to the broad sea of language is also an exposure to the rich variety of life and possibility. Hence, Adam tells Eve,

“Eve,” he said, “...it wasn’t such a misfortune to lose Paradise; despite all the suffering, all the pain, despite what happened to Abel. What we have lived through is, in the noblest sense of the word, life.”

The reader of this excellent anthology will, like Atxaga’s Adam and Eve, be exposed to the rich variety of life and possibility, and be reminded of why we should treasure language and literature. It offers a platform for six powerfully resonant voices which do exactly that, and makes an important contribution to world letters in the process.

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**Paul Durcan. *The Laughter of Mothers*. Harvill Secker, 2007. (The Random House Group Ltd., 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA. [www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)) ISBN: 978 1 846 55023 2. £12.00**

Durcan is one of the most respected poets currently working in Ireland and, in a career that spans over forty years, he has published over twenty books. He’s picked up a few prizes along the way too, including the Whitbread Award for Poetry and a Cholmondeley Award. His latest collection covers a lot of ground, but its principal theme, at least for the last third of the book, is his mother, Sheila MacBride. She was the niece of John MacBride who was executed for his part in the Easter Uprising, and to some extent his mother was a rebel figure too. In *MOTHER’S ALTER BOY*, for instance, he describes watching as she applies her make-up, and as a picture of the Pope also looks on, disapprovingly –

Every time I dared to glance up at Pacelli  
His nostrils appeared to be in the act of flaring.

But my mother paid no attention to Pacelli.  
My mother attended to her personal devotions  
As if Pacelli was not there.

Elsewhere he describes other acts of rebellion, from upbraiding a priest who is rude to her son, to playing golf in a bikini. As well as being a nonconformist, his mother was also an intellectual giant – in *FIRST PLACE IN IRELAND* Durcan tells how she scored the highest grades in Ireland “In her final year law exam.” But despite the spirit of dissent and intellectual potential, Sheila is unable to avoid the snare of convention. She marries John, a barrister, and is forced to forgo a glittering career as solicitor. Her marriage stifles her and her successes are confined to the domestic sphere –

She became famous  
For making cakes and ice cream

However, there is a sense of inevitability about her capitulation, and Durcan seems to suggest that, given her time again, his mother would not change the course of her life. In the poem *DAUGHTERS OF THE CIVIL WAR*, he adopts his mother’s voice to make this point

There was Niall and Nevin and yet I chose John  
And if the reel could be rewound back to its source  
There again would be Naill and Nevin, but again I’d  
    choose John.  
A woman has to choose the man who is wrong  
Over and over again  
As if she were fast asleep,  
Otherwise how would she know she was the same  
    woman?  
How would she know the names of the men who’d  
    been slain  
In her childhood in the Civil War when she had been  
    fast asleep?

Our choices are a reflection of who we are, of course, but how much control do we have over that? The poem seems to link identity to the broad historical context which inevitably determines the shape of our lives, and which we cannot escape – to do so would be a betrayal, of sorts.

Durcan is rarely a lyrical poet - his language could often be described as prosaic - but he uses plain diction with precision and renders Irish life, both past and present, vividly and powerfully. The poems portraying his mother are particularly effective – the work charting her decline and death is as touching in parts as Dunn’s *Elegies* – and the book as a whole is yet another significant achievement. It suggests that a further major prize may not be too far away.

Paul McDonald, 07