Remco Campert. *I Dreamed in Cities at Night*. Translated by Donald Gardner. Introduced by Paul Vincent. Arc Visible Poets: 18. 2007. (Arc Publications, Nanholme Mill, Shaw Wood Road, Todmorden, OL14 6DA). ISBN: 9781904614364. £9.99.

Remco Campert is the author of numerous novels and poetry collections, and has been a high profile writer in Holland for decades. Thanks to the dearth of book length English translations, however, he is little known in the UK. I for one hadn't encountered him and, judging from this excellent collection, it appears I've been missing out. A lot.

The poetry I tend to enjoy most is that which has no sense of its own 'importance,' and Campert's is delightful in the extent to which – to use his translator's words – it "eschews the monumental style." To a degree this is reflected in his subject matter too. Little is beneath his attention and he writes poems about everything from raincoats to neutered cats! Indeed, some seem explicitly designed to offer a corrective to pretentiousness. In STREET THEATRE, for instance, the poet is sitting on a bench beside an old man and his dog when they spot a movie star stepping out of her limo:

> and holding her sun-hat in place
> gave us an eyeful
> of her cream-white armpit
>
> the mutt yapped
> and the old gent and I
> stood up in unison
> sang a ditty
> did a couple of dance steps
> and waggled our bottoms
>
> she didn't see us

With its irreverent, colloquial style this could almost be a Charles Bukowski poem; certainly, like Bukowski, Campert has the common touch. He also has the patina of an important poet and, while modesty pervades his work, he understands the potential of the written word, as the final stanza of BACK IN TOWN suggests:

> only poetry remains
> your lines still smell fresh
> just around the corner
> the world opens

Despite their unassuming tone, Campert's poems do indeed open worlds: they do so quietly, slyly and, very often, comically. Consider the poem IN THE DARK, for instance, reproduced here in full:

> Sometimes I see spectres
> in the street late at night
> you who are no longer here
> loitering in an off-white dress
> or else my father's face
> gaunt in a suit
> of pre-war cut
> or to my fright
> in a plate-glass pane
> myself still going strong.

This is typical of Campert's deceptively simple style. Here he establishes continuity between the past and the present, simultaneously suggesting transience and permanence. While death may haunt us in life, the poem hints at something eternal and transcendent. And notice the humour elicited by the word "fright" – it brilliantly undercuts elevated sentiments, seeming to imply that he's startled, not only by his own reflection, but at the accidental profundity of the moment he captures.

Campert closes one of his poems, LACK OF PROOF, with the lines, "the most beautiful poetry/is that which has never been written." This may well be so, but some of the stuff that *has* been written is pretty good too, his own work very much included. If like me you've never encountered Campert, I urge you to seek him out.

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Michelene Wandor. *The Music of the Prophets*. Arc. 2006. (Arc Publications, Nanholme Mill, Shaw Wood Road, Todmorden, OL14 6DA). ISBN: 1904614639. £6.99.

This is the third in a series of book length narrative poems addressing the history of Jewish people in England. It deals specifically with the resettlement of the Jews in the mid-seventeenth century following their banishment in 1290.

The poem begins by drawing a parallel between the year 1656, and Genesis. The former is the year of the lifting of restrictions and, as such, another beginning for Jewish people: "in the beginning was 1656 and all that." Notice how two intertexts are being signalled here – the Bible, alongside *1066 and All That*, Sellar and Yeatman's mock history of England. The juxtaposition of the sacred and the comic creates an irony which leads us to suspect that this is unlikely to be a po-faced history, and it marks the first of numerous literary allusions.

The characters at the heart of the book are the two men responsible for facilitating the return of the Jews: Oliver Cromwell in England, and Menasseh ben Israel in Holland. Both are deftly rendered

> Rembrant's Menasseh
> has round, slightly uptitled eyes
> a neatly downturned moustache
> a small, pointed beard

wide white collar
dark coat
buttons down the front

Oliver is rather well set than tall
high cheekboned face
long chestnut brown hair
well formed mouth
warts
a bony, big-bridged nose
eyes of piercing sweetness.

The phrase “piercing sweetness” is indicative of the succinctly expressive quality her language often has, while the decision to isolate the word “warts” is characteristic of her playfulness and her delight in working against the reader’s knowledge of popular history.

The problem with long narrative poems is that they sometimes struggle to cohere, but that isn’t the case here. This is partly a result of the various repetitions and structural refrains throughout the piece:

this is the story of two people

this is the story of two peoples

and one God
your God or mine?

Is there a suggestion here that the very thing that divides us can also unite us, or is she hinting at the inevitability of division? Either way it is a quandary that Michelene Wander loves to dwell on:

do Jews have souls?
is there coffee in the afterlife?
your afterlife or mine?

Notice how the syntactic parallels between the two stanzas create the cohesion I mentioned. And notice also the humour, with the comic yoking together of the metaphysical and the mundane. It is an irreverent mixture but – as the poet seems to sense - when you are dealing with difficult questions, humour can be the most amenable route to take. At the very least it offers some sort of consolation for the fact that there isn’t a simple answer.

The poem concludes with Menasseh and Cromwell both dead, but with the promise of a new beginning: “the ground opens/in the end is the beginning.” This, of course, brings the poem full circle and consolidates still further the cohesion Wander creates in this humorous, thoughtful and immensely enjoyable piece.

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Desmond Graham. ***Making Poems and their Meanings.*** **2007 Bloodaxe Books (Highgreen, Tarset, Northumberland, NE48 IRP). ISBN: 978852247614. £7.95.**

This is the 6th in a series of lectures given at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, published in book form by Bloodaxe.

Graham's three linked lectures address a variety of issues underpinning the creative development of poetry. The first, OPENING THE DOOR, for instance, discusses how important the promise of publication and editorial feedback was for the WW11 poet, Keith Douglas. His editor's "direct encouragement and active help … was a part, possibly a crucial part, of the creative sources" for his poems, significantly influencing the character and complexion of his work. After making a case for acknowledgement, support and creative feedback, Graham goes on to discuss the importance of emulation in a poet's development, demonstrating how Wilfred Owen began by imitating Sassoon, only to eventually eclipse him in the quality of his achievement.

The second lecture, THE UNHEARD PROMPTER, considers the relationship between sound and meaning in poetry. Whilst conceding the fallacy that "sounds have meaning in themselves" he argues that "sound can be employed by the poet not only for pattern but to *suggest* meaning and guide the reader" [my emphasis]. Referencing, among others, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, George Herbert and Ivor Gurney he reveals how poets can manipulate expectation via the skilful use of rhythm and metrical variation.

NO LESS THAN BREAD, the final lecture, deals with the potential significance of poetry. Where does significance come from, and how might poetry be said to answer the questions it raises? Again he explores these issues with reference to several poets, but ends with a reading of David Jones's *In Parenthesis*. He shows how texts like Ronsard's *Chanson de Roland,* and the Welsh (some say Scottish) epic *Y Gododdin*, contribute to and complicate the meaning of *In Parenthesis* and, though his conclusion is obvious, it's not so obvious that it isn't worth reiterating: meaning has a variety of sources - "legend and history, across cultures and language" - a fact which, if nothing else, undermines the possibility of closed reading: "For the reader, whatever his eyes see or the editor indicates, there is always a question mark."

Graham is a sensitive and intelligent reader who, in these lectures, offers subtle and lucid criticism that will be of interest to poetry scholars and lay readers alike. An excellent contribution to a valuable series.

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The Triumph of Revolution**: Poems by Anja Sladek, Edita Albahari, Ivan Weiss, Jiri Norsky, Marek Erland. Translated by Rupert Loydell. Rewind Books. 2007. No address or price given.**

This pamphlet collects together a group of poems that address the theme of revolution. None of the contributors are known to me, which is surprising given that their work is so powerful. The fact that the text includes no biographical or contextual

information might be seen as an oversight by some, but I think it adds rather than detracts from the impact of the collection.

Several poems imply that we all share a responsibility for the suffering of oppressed and persecuted people, as Anja Sladek writes in ARE YOU LISTENING?

> Are you listening?
> This did not happen without you
> This did not have to happen at all.

These sentiments are echoed by Ivan Weiss in THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSAID: “This world knows the truth/but our reports fall on deaf ears. We are all guilty now.” Without a specific context for such statements it is difficult to know if they’re *literally* true, of course, but few would argue that apathy is a killer. And, as suggested, the lack of context is not necessarily a flaw. If readers aren’t given one, they provide one, and if anything this augments the poems, underscoring a sense of the ubiquity and contemporary relevance of the theme. The sentiments expressed in this collection apply to a plethora of conflicts the world over.

The Triumph of Revolution is an uncomfortable read. There is little in the way of optimism here – though Anja Sladek, for instance, writes of “the possibility of freedom” in the poem THE POSSIBILITY, this is more than countered by despair. Indeed, Edita Albahari’s references to “Words blowing in the wind” (in FOR DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION), and Jiri Norsky’s to “Unshared vocabulary/inarticulate debate,” (in TEARS) seem to indicate a lack of faith in language itself. The consensus seems to be that genuine triumph via revolution is likely to be elusive. Consider Marek Erland’s AN IMPORTANT CHAPTER, reproduced here in full

> Looking for a happy ending
> is just a waste of time.
> The final scene is not yet written,
> there is not even a plot outline
> to go by. We may well be
> beyond the opening chapter,
> but it is still ‘once upon a time’
> when it comes to the end
> of our fighting, of this war.

Erland identifies exactly why we don’t need a geographical, biographical or historical context for these poems. It is because, at the risk of sounding like a postmodernist, there doesn’t seem to be such a thing as progress. These poems would have been relevant practically anywhere on the planet a thousand years ago and, sadly, they’ll doubtless be relevant in a thousand years time.

Paul McDonald