



A WAY WITH WORDS IS THE THING

Reviews by Will Daunt

Chris Greenhalgh	The Invention Of Zero	Bloodaxe	£7.95
Geoffrey Winch	Turns Along The Garden Path	Poetry Monthly Press	£4.50
Roger Elkin	No Laughing Matter	Cinnamon Press	£7.99

The Invention Of Zero is an ambitious title, and Chris Greenhalgh's book is an enterprising concept, shifting into prose-poetry about a third of the way in. However, it would be a mistake to read this as two separate explorations. There are common themes, and there's a persistent persuasiveness about the language.

The diction of the poetry is elegantly understated, as it lays out the contradictions of love, and of being. The title piece shimmers with the imagery of landing at Heathrow, with the buildings: 'lit and black, like the ones and zeros/ of binary code.' Here is the beginning of the book's search for meaning in light and dark, life and emptiness. The moon encapsulates that fascination: 'white beyond bleaching,/ the end of abstraction;/ a perfect blank'. Or there is the descending lift in 'Blue Hotel', tugging at the imagination: 'like a diving bell/ through the bottomless/ ocean/ of the hotel.'

The ordinariness of a golf course captures the same contrast. One stanza of 'At The Driving Range' portrays an optician, seeing little as he mends a couple of pairs of glasses. Then we revert to the sport, where: '... the clubhead flashes like a wand/ in your hands'. That control, like the golf ball, is consumed by a vast darkness: 'swallowed by shadows, lost/ amid sandtraps, rabbits, / trembling daisies - / out of sight.'

About thirty-five prose-poems follow, none longer than a page, slipping from first to third (and occasionally second) person narrative as they trace the intensity of at least one relationship, apparently built around a chance encounter: 'Coolly she sails towards the elevator and the trembling bellboy. And then, as the doors suck shut, she is gone/ ...No longer solid among us, she hovers...' ('The first time I follow her ...').

This intriguing mix of ordinary settings and snatched views of beauty takes us as close as Greenhalgh is prepared to permit: we can feel how a moment felt, but do not need to know its wider context: 'Some giant magnet moves unseen beneath the earth, dragging me towards her/. ...I feel her absence like a stone' ('Every time I close my eyes ...').

In a few lines, a sense of some large and recognizable feeling is underwritten by the mundane. So: 'I notice a dent in the lampshade, the bubbles in a pane of glass, the pitted surface of a brick beyond the window ... The universe is full of holes and cracks' ('I notice a dent...').

These small prose pieces, like broken fragments of an unneeded larger work, glint with the different perspectives of love and its imitators: a particular read, that perturbs and pleases in equal measure.

In contrast, Geoffrey Winch's *Turns Along The Garden Path* is an unusually optimistic book - in itself, a rare judgement to make. But as the pupil once said, 'Why are all the poems we read about death and lonely lovers?' And is it a good read?

There's an engaging sense of emerging consciousness in the opening piece, characterized first by sound: 'those early birds with multi-lingual tongues/ singing their coded chorus' ('Upon Waking On A Beautiful Summer Morning'). All well and good (despite the fleeting appearance of a 'zephyr'). The irregular layout and the over-spacing between key words effectively emphasise the blurring of time and sensation, but this is diluted by the concluding reference to the postman, as: '...soon he'll come knocking on my door'.

Here's the book's polarization: a sense of open-ended, positive exploration, slowed sometimes by rather wooden expression. At first, the frequent unconventional placing of line endings seems odd; however, the appearance of prepositions, conjunctions and verbs at the end of lines has a purpose: to increase the language's fluidity and that sense of recreated feeling, as here: 'Then he discovers mischief in/ the laws of desire when/ it aspires to success for/ he'll never hear her sing' ('Desire'). The same effect is extended in 'Gardener's World', where the inspiration of the external world, felt from indoors, is a vibrant absence: '...our/ only bulb did not bloom whilst/ dangling from the dusty ceiling rose'. The wordplay is well-judged, and does not intrude.

'Morning Coffee' carefully balances an emerging seascape against the hot drink's preparation. The sensual mingling convinces, from the 'Coffee-colour stain on the horizon line' to the 'salt taste of your skin'. Elsewhere, there are a number of occasions where the language deflates the author's wider purpose.

The impact of a well-informed piece like 'Chanctonbury Ring' is deflected by tired phrases like 'Ancients who toiled' and near-archaisms such as 'thus breaking the spell the ring/ has bestowed'. And there's a curious reference to 'the stairway to heaven' in 'Alone In Summer'.

Winch risks allowing his style to veer too closely to the prosaic, and at times the line is crossed. In 'Recalling The Cold War', the rendering of 'outer space totally void' is one word too many; the conclusion to the evocative 'Guy Cliffe's House Sunset' is muddled by this wordiness: 'In the midst of such disjointed thinking, superstition/ may be sensed ...'

Turns Along The Garden Path shows a writer honing a distinctive style, which sometimes hits the mark. In other words, be as miserable or as cheerful as you like: your way with words is the thing.

Roger Elkin's creativity is blooming, and, tended with real craft, it makes for a deeply

satisfying read. *No Laughing Matter*, his second volume in as many years, is marked by confident writing on large subjects: a colourful, enticing series of poetic vistas.

The first of these is musical - ironically, approached through the signing of a 'Deaf-and-dumb man's hands'. The elusive beauty in this soundless world, mirrors that which most of us can hear: '... as limbs respond to what his fingers sing,/ he knows his touch unlocks the meanings of your skin:/ the silent dialogues of need'. The next four poems show music as a redeeming backdrop in troubled lives: Tchaikovsky wrestling with his sexuality; Dvorak abandoning any hope of inspiration from his studies, in favour of nature's tunes, such as: '... the zagging/ blackbird crackerjacking through the trees'. Most moving is the image of the apparently-incarcerated music teacher, recalling what he might and must have played, with: 'those hands laddering chords, taking the weights/ of passion, nimbling the scales' ('Hands for a Piano'). This supple use of vocabulary, and finely-tuned diction is typical of the book.

'Botanical Eve', begins a section of pastoral verse, impressive for its diversity. Here's that rare thing: a poem which appears to write itself, unfurling a wonderful evocation of the English countryside, simply by listing the names of flowers: 'Spearwort./ Softrush./ Hardrush, Jointed Rush,/ Saxifrage.' An idea that's as obvious as the wish that you'd thought of it first.

Elkin's writing is informed, but never over-bearingly so. The satire of 'Relics' is two-fold. The traveller's claim that: 'I have suddenly become collectable' appears to chuckle at the anatomical impossibility of some saints' posthumous distribution: 'I've more big toes than St. Peter and Paul'. In fact, the awfulness of most holiday snaps is the ultimate target of the humour: 'Rest assured, I shan't want anything back: ... you can keep it all with Kodak'.

The next piece, 'This is southern Spain', contrasts sparrows, winging 'to lechery' with the repressed desire of a certain kind of English couple, the husband who: 'handles the span of a succulent/ as wide as her thigh/ then fingers its spindly leaf-bud/ lingeringly'.

Whether the book really is *No Laughing Matter* depends on how closely you read it, as well as what makes you smile. At the book's heart, several pieces about family touch tender nerves of recognition. 'Game of Consequences' is both witty and sad as it unfolds and reminds us of how we divert children from uncomfortable truths by: 'Not using words .../ but shrug and fudge, lie with smiles, or pick/ up paper, fold and fold, and with [his] rainbow crayons,/ draw some party monsters'.

Conversely, the title poem closes the collection with the memory of an aunt and uncle whom adults might have thought eccentric and endearing. Not so the child, whose dry perspective undermines the aunt's ghoulish attempts at humour: 'Remembering this, I understand why my childhood dreams/ were littered with dismembered limbs'. Yet the poem also celebrates the wealth of that family of vivid memories. Funny, that.

The beauty of Elkin's writing lies in the authority behind a resonating voice, the wisdom that's scoring the music. We need this kind of poetry, as it helps us to understand more about what it means to live on this small and intricate island.

