

**Review of poetry collections by Alan Halsey and Eric Langley - 'Collected Poems 1992-2016' and 'Raking Light'**

JEFFREY, Andrew

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## HANNAH LOWE

**Michael Mackmin, and Poems 1970-2017**, £10  
Happennstance Press, 21 Hatton Green, Glenrothes  
K17 4SD

The first line of this collection expresses the speaker's surprise at seeing 'Ms / Muse after so long': a sentiment which mingles with my own ideas about how editors (Mackmin has edited the Riato since 1984), if they are also writers, find time and energy for their own work. Perhaps it is time that is critical, since this is Mackmin's first full collection of poetry since 1970. But as for energy, the poems are full of it. The writing is robust, skilful and full of potent emotional force: 'the poems about poetry made me laugh aloud; others had me by the throat, in the way the best poems can.'

The blurb tells us the central theme is love, and I found this forcefully expressed in poems where love seems aligned with close observation—of the landscape and its inhabitants – and in the recording of observation. In 'Two Love Poems' the speaker takes 'holidays from logic, / making the birds and sky / a pattern place for love' and marvels at the wings of a swallow which 'make nonsense of our limbs; Elsewhere, mortality is evoked as in 'Pastoral', which lists small observed and cherished things – 'a few hens sheltering in the porch / a cracked pain, the cardinal on a nail' – to interrogate their eventual absence from the speaker's world, or – what is inferred – the speaker's own absence.

Loss features elsewhere, particularly love lost and betrayed, as in the staggering poem 'Salt', in a series of hazy sea-swept vignettes, we are told of the speaker's wife's affair. This event, though historic, unfolds powerfully into the present via the forensic gaze back at a cosy, bohemian past – a cottage with purple cabinets, 'the blue dress, / fresh orange juice in old glass ...', the things you wanted my dear'. 'Therapy, the talking cure' (and Mackmin's other profession), is mentioned in several poems, and is held up here for both examination and, I think, enactment:

When will the pain get less? It has got less,  
It has! Hi! speak about it, will it go away?  
Helping you choose a dress to impress your lover,  
watching you dressing to be undressed.

This poem, and others which perform the affair and its legacy, are tempered by gentler encounters. In the beautifully cinematic 'Coltishall River', an idea of God' is illuminated through the momentary vision of an unknown woman standing on a boat in a black swimsuit. In 'The Aurelian', a brief meeting with a Siberian roadside seller has the speaker cataloguing 'blue butterflies to collect / the colour of her eyes'. (30). The gaze of these poems is a male one, but avoids objectifying by turning its eye back on the speaker.

Among poems which seem to address 'real life', the wonderfully surreal 'Family Life' stood out – a gothic portrait of a daughter-eating father, and his wife who sews their son into the carcass of a horse to protect him from being consumed. Mackmin's control of voice here is wonderful, and the poem does what the best narrative poems do, finding the delicate balance of story and silence while inscribing powerful sonic and visual information. The image of the father urinating 'fierce' than a stallion, / splash; splash; splash; splash; on the stones, will stay with me.

## *The poems about poetry made me laugh aloud; others*

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## ANDREW JEFFREY

**Alan Halsey, Selected Poems 1988-2016**, 256pp, £12.95,  
Shearsman Books, 50 Weston Hill Drive, Emersons  
Green, Bristol, BS16 7DF.

**Eric Langley, Raking Light**, 136pp, £9.99, Carcanet  
Press, Alliance House, 30 Cross St, Manchester M2 7JQ

Two collections: **Eric Langley's Raking Light** is his 'debüt' shortlisted for the Forward Prize first collection award, taking its name from an art-conservation technique involving shining an oblique and glancing beam of light over the surface of a picture to expose textures, overlaps, mistakes. Langley also cuts a slightly rakish figure in a number of the poems as the pigeon-skips 'hectic' through histories, myths, ideas and forms sending out poem-postcards from his glancing visits.

**Alan Halsey's Selected Poems 1988-2016** does what it says on the tin, gathering an entertaining, energetically varied selection of his longer poems and thus shining a 'Coherent Light' – to borrow the title of one of the poems in the volume – on his work just at the moment when his papers have just been deposited in the University of Sheffield archives: welcome recognition of his continuing artistic importance.

Two poetic careers at very different stages, but some common themes leap out. Both poets explore the relationship between poetry and painting, and madness and mistaken communication, in varied ways and both have a preoccupation with the impact of changes in technology upon art. The cover of Halsey's volume weaves these concerns together. It is a copy of one of his collages and contains the following fully visible words: 'minor prophecies. The textstone... between softwar and hardware? some. Comic prophetic would be a good description for many of the poems that use humour to elegantly express political anger and disgust. As the selection is arranged chronologically this stretches from the fig-end Thatcherism of 'On Change & Exchange: A letter to JM, back in England, 1990' where dreamboats curricula/wreck on a day when the pretext's/penalty's

longer than a week; in poll tax to the Blairite embrace of 'Hollow Swaps. A Gathering of Emblems for Post-modern Finance to Gordon Brown's desperate 'Skips & Charms against Recession: 'In A sifter such as Britain', competing with Cameron's 'The Age of Austenly'.

Langley's cover is a copy of an etching by Abraham Bosse – the writer of the first printmaker's instruction manual – that shows three men with swords practicing perspectival drawing technique. His collection is in three parts, the first part is obsessed with looking, signalled by the first poem, 'Glanced', where the reader is positioned as 'You lovely looker on' and urged to 'keep so lovely looking still'. This looking longs to be intimate and durational but is also voyeuristic; there is a desire to freeze the scene or still the onlooker. The poem 'Fact' has a final stanza which begins with the question: 'And are the ethics of adoration that / I stand far enough back to stare?' This question is instantly complicated by the next two lines which move from staring to the creepily intimate, 'Listening intently behind the closed door / to you to you as you.' This voice of the male gaze is complicated by being put in a passive position in 'du / he / to': the speaker imagines themselves as a waiter being opened by their lover, 'smart sound of tough love / on my round nushell' and further challenged in 'Argus Panoptes' which is spoken by to the Greek heifer-nymph to her guardian giant, the multi-eyed Argus. Io is imagined as a Guantanamo detainee both imprisoned and performing for the giant observer, 'out on wing / in your gym' who must 'stay a wide awake; Argus is eventually killed by messenger god Hermes the 'bringer of luck / The guide and guardian' who sends Argus to sleep with their boring stories. 'This mythical interweaving of visual and verbal exemplifies the first section where Langley uses multi-part long poems to explore the way that variation complicates an initial set-up.

Halsey also uses variation to explore glitchy communication. In what one poem calls a 'syllabus of errors', 'Whitgenstein's Devil' takes us back to the days of modern communication: Each prose section of this long poem has a strange computer communication

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## About the author

**Hannah Lowe's** latest collection is *Chan* (Bloomsbury, 2016). She is the current poet-in-residence at Keats House.

error message title, for example 'WINSOCK ERROR: CONNECTION TIMED OUT' and 'PROBLEMS ON GREEN ROMP RESOLVED'. The prose sections are made up of jumbled variations of sentences that combine Homer, Hegel, Humphrey Bogart, Barnsley, Jack Russells, Andrew Morton and Donald Dave amongst other names. The results are frequently hilarious using mis-heard words and meta-statement to combine facts, scrambled philosophy, historical and comic observation:

One hundred and sixteen people left Barnsley in 1997. I can't see anything funny about this message unless it's got something to do with Humphrey Bogart. Rejection is a subtle form of abduction and I think that's why they don't cut me off when I'm phoning my mother. The middle ages was a place and there aren't many left where the tourist industry could be wrecked overnight by a few non-believers.

Halsey is also fascinated with printing as a technology and printing errors, writing a letter to 'Dear John' asking, 'if the book is printed the right way / but bound the wrong is the poetry / the poetry it was?' The letter playfully takes us into the idea of who possesses the poem by considering a poem's position, concluding:

So if the poem is the poet  
 who stands language on the page  
 on its head then on my head  
 be it if the poet disposes  
 becomes his or my disposition.

If Halsey deliberately uses error to stand language on the page on its head, Langley's second section, a sequence called 'Of those on the ships' explores the idea of original text and copy, retaining a belief in the importance of an original. The sequence takes off from the story of Prometheus a King of Egypt who was so keen to amass a library that he ordered the books of everyone who sailed there to be brought to him. The

books were then copied into new manuscripts. He gave the new copy to the owners... but put the original copy in the library. The poems explore codes and libraries but lacks the energy of the first section. I think this might be due to lack of tension between visual and verbal: whilst the section is intellectually playful it seems too controlled and obvious; the poem's speaker almost seem to know this, two examples from the end of the first two poems of the sequence: 'Of course I knew your Alexandrian law. / I knew you'd come, and knew you'd take them; "You dear and tender monks second guessed each stanza. / In accuracy they never broke my scene, interleafed or intervened.'

The most intriguing poems in Halsey's collection are those explicitly designed for group performances. These hand over authorial control to those involved in the situation so that they can't be 'second guessed'. 'Pilot Likelihoods' exemplifies this as it draws upon interviews with scientists about the significance of uncertainty. The piece is designed to be performed alongside an improvisatory jazz band and gradually allows the poetic voice a greater freedom of choice: by the third movement the voice 'improvises text generated from the grids' and during this movement a second voice unexpectedly enters. The cutting together of different scientific voices frees language to mean something different:

I make a lot of assumptions because  
 we've only got one Earth  
 a region inside which you can get some  
 badly behaved errors we can't get rid of altogether  
 this particular parameter this inherent instability this

If Halsey actively generates error my favourite third section of Langley's volume looks to uncover error. 'Yellow Milkmaid Syndrome' draws upon the language of museum curators to continue Langley's obsession with copy and original. The poem considers the implications of putting the high resolution image of Vermeer's 'The Milkmaid' as a free image on the internet as a way of ensuring the public can distinguish the original from

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a poor copy (most copies are too yellow-ish) Langley deftly uses page space to give a sense of the curator's confused location as a private-public body interacting with the implications of new technology:

People simply didn't  
 Believe  
 That the postcards  
 In our shop  
 were showing  
 the original  
 Mecednia should be seen  
 As advertisement  
 For content. An opportunity.  
 And although potential loss  
 Of phantom income  
 Should be seen  
 As very real.  
 We don't  
 Necessarily  
 Want to make money  
 ourselves, but

Langley's final poem 'Reminents' enacts the process of *Riding Light* by seeming to expose the crossing outs and revisions of an earlier poem. In the volume also called 'Reminents': 'The poem ends by contemplating a painting by Ashlie Gorky called 'The Artist and his Mother'. The image is based on a photo Gorky found of himself as a child with his mother; Gorky's mother had died in his arms from starvation. Gorky painted this image over and over each year, each time moving the mother figure further away from the child. Langley again uses page space to capture this moving story:

their touch  
 painted over and over as his  
 memory  
 or  
 other  
 fades

This ending seems to appropriately capture Langley's attempts – which he knows are doomed – to fix origins and memory with a male gaze. Halsey doesn't have this desire for fixity. One of his uncomfortably funniest poems – 'Blake's Vala: Nine Sketches' – gathers together various commentaries on a Blake sketch and revels in their increasingly bizarre sexual and misogynistic interpretations. In this poem Halsey both knows and embraces the fact that 'error cannot be redeemed'. This makes Halsey incredibly productive and this review has only given a glancing view of the riches contained in selected Poems which should be read and re-read because 'remembering is always revising'.

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#### About the author

Andrew Jeffrey is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University that documents his various encounters with the inhabitants of the Moss Valley on the Sheffield/Derbyshire border. Recent poems have appeared in *Plumwood Mountain Review* and *Green Letters*. His blog is: [www.kyleandrewjeffrey.com](http://www.kyleandrewjeffrey.com)