

Why should poetry be illustrated? Not for the purposes of elucidation, according to two of the most inventive of contemporary poets. As Paul Muldoon puts it, there are no "right-in-your-face" connections between his own rococo musings in *Plan B* and Norman McBeath's poignant photographs, or between the gloriously raunchy "translations" in *When the Pie was Opened* and Lanfranco Quadrio's sweeping, Icarus-like drawings of wings. Alice Oswald's *Weeds and Wild Flowers*, accompanied by Jessica Greenman's exact and haunting etchings, is emphatically "not an illustrated book", but a book of poems and pictures in dialogue. In all three, the visual format asserts its difference, delimits the nature of poetic form, while also focusing the way poems slip in and out of visibility, in and out of what they seem to be about. "The very idea of a 'subject' soon begins to seem crudely inappropriate", suggests Muldoon. This is not, Oswald warns, "a reliable guide to wild flowers". Connections, then, are quizzical, sly, tantalizingly askew. If the format suggests the gift book or pamphlet, it also makes a serious point about what poetry, and art, might be up to.

Everywhere, the pastoral stillness of McBeath's photographs offsets the energy of Muldoon's brilliantly promiscuous ear. The one direct reference, to "Apollo wrapped in polythene", already sounds like a play on its own sounds – a trick everywhere apparent in these poems: "calm above the calamitous", "Dolphin and *Dauphin*", "pulley-glitches,

Ear and Ox-Tongue

ANGELA LEIGHTON

Paul Muldoon

PLAN B
64pp. Enitharmon. £15.
978 1 904634827

WHEN THE PIE WAS OPENED
41pp. Sylph Editions and the American University
of Paris. £10.
978 0 955 29638 3

Alice Oswald and Jessica
Greenman

WEEDS AND WILD FLOWERS
80pp. Faber. £14.99.
978 0 571 23749 5

Alice Oswald

A SLEEPWALK ON THE SEVERN
48pp. Faber. Paperback, £7.
978 0 571 24756 3



"Orchid" by Jessica Greenman; from
Weeds and Wild Flowers

gully-pitches", "'Cork' for 'New York'", "Clapper-lugged, cleft-lipped". This is Muldoon the virtuoso, master of mistake and retake, a poet whose wild laws of echo and erratum play fast and loose with our expectations of sense. Visual connections, if

intended, are similarly jokey. The line "those pigs had seemed content" meets a blissful-looking sheep in a field, "a KGB surveillance tape" meets an ominously knotted rope on a wall, and the first line of the collection, "On my own head be it if, after the years of elocution and pianoforte", resonates in two photos of a beaten-up piano in a field, its keys punched in like broken teeth. Otherwise, language follows its own queer noises: a poem on the painter François Boucher being a characteristic tour de force, with its ritornello form and rollicking route through the sounds of words: flurry, hurry, murrey, mulberry, mull, worry, hull, hulk, for example.

If this is poetry showing its workings, even taking us for a ride, it is a thrilling, wild, fair-ground ride, with few let-ups for the squeamish. Yet serious concerns lie just below the surface. There are poems about a tortured political prisoner, about a "girl with third-degree burns", about "a dying friend" with cancer – though to say they are "about" is to locate a topic hedged with aural distractions. How far poetry might distract us from the matter of these "abouts", without becoming heartless, is a question Muldoon's poetry knowingly raises. Certainly, the invitation to read by ear, rather than for story, situation, human interest, is to forfeit the safe ground by which we normally find our way in language. *When the Pie was Opened*, a pamphlet of verses and translations beautifully produced by Sylph Editions, is another reminder of Muldoon's extraordinary versatility. Translations from the Irish, the medieval Welsh, from Ovid and Kostis Palamas, all set their idiomatic exuberance against the limits of verse form. From the medieval Welsh "Y Gal", "The Cock" ripely upbraids, praises, derides its unruly member, that "Pestle-prow, arse-artillery, / the tight twat's pillory, / a thatching-stake for a girl's lap", till a poem full of boasting and bravado touches, in true Rochesterian style, on existential pathos. Other "ball-broodings" include a meditation on the testicles, "a topic . . . far from exhausted" we are assured, though fears of exhaustion can be heard in its darker references to tumours and hospitals. Muldoon's imagination is, at its best, alert to the ominous note of what lies outside

the furious energies of his language. This is a delightful production, full of resonant cross-references, as if no poem were an island; and the whole crossed by Quadrio's impersonal wingscapes, as if to remind us of other flights and falls.

By comparison, Oswald's *Weeds and Wild Flowers* looks demure. Faber's handsome format hints at the coffee table, recalling a Victorian tradition of illustrated flower poems by women. But it is the genius of Oswald to alter the angle just enough to turn a homely genre into a scary artwork. Here too, etching and poem don't quite match up, as if something wayward had jinxed the system. In fact, these innocuous titles, "Bristly Ox-Tongue", "Bastard Toadflax", "Dense Silky Bent", start to stir into a kind of life, a collection of creeps and nutters, lechers and loners. The tone hints at Stevie Smith, with her similar sense of horror and whimsy, but Oswald's personifications are so shifty that nothing quite settles into itself: "Stinking Goose-foot has grown human. / It could happen to anyone", she begins. Fact and likeness, name and pun, slip in and out of each other, conjuring up a world which loses none of its threat for being a world of flowers. It is Oswald's own ear that lifts these poems out of the sentimental-moral tradition they recall. Not nature poetry in any heartwarming sense, and certainly not ecology, this is a reminder that the subject matter of poetry might be anything and nothing, a pretext that, at its best, quickly disappears into the odder, self-discovering workings of a poem. Oswald herself has written that "The ear hears into . . . to keep language open, so that what we don't yet know can pass through it". If we thought we knew what a volume of flower poems might be like, this one teaches us to listen, and look again.

True to this poet's inventiveness with new forms, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* is neither a play nor a dramatized interplay of voices. Although there are stage directions and presences: birdwatcher, sleepwalker, fisherman, vicar, wind, chorus and others, these are not characters done in voices, but rather, as Oswald puts it, registers that "talk towards the moment of moonrise". She seems, once again, to be reaching beyond subject or subject matter, towards something constantly doing and undoing itself in language, like the moon: "Yes this is the moon this hurrying / Muscular unsolid unstillness". Between so many *uns*, what we "don't yet know" starts to take a kind of shape. The best of these poems are less about landscape or moonlight, and the things that happen there, than uncertain, curious liminal states. If the wide cast of names and "characters" sometimes distracts – what is the birdwatcher after? who are the plethora of people "with no shoes" or "with ribbons"? – the power of the writing comes from the lilt of a voice which runs on through them, brightening into wonderful lines such as the egret's "Prodding and poisoning his knife and fork". In both these volumes, Oswald manages the note of the faux-naif with a tact and lightness which skirt the dangers of sentimentality with wonderful intelligence.

Muldoon and Oswald are unlike as poets: Muldoon omnivorous, cosmopolitan, well-established, Oswald more restrained, more local, still developing. Yet both push at the boundaries of what poetry can do, and it is works like these that keep contemporary poetry lively.