

FOOTBRIDGE OF A GLANCE

ALICE OSWALD'S *Dart*, published in 2002, is widely recognised as a breathtaking achievement. Extending over forty-eight pages, *Dart* traces and celebrates Devon's great river, from its source high on Dartmoor down to the open sea.

Mesmerising and unpredictable like the river, Oswald's poetry does not fit comfortably into any school or movement. She herself is individual and private in the extreme, and her poetic output is steady rather than prolific; nevertheless, she has so far enjoyed a star-studded career. Her rise to fame began in her twenties when she won the Eric Gregory Award, given in Britain each year to the most promising poet under thirty years of age. She then won the prestigious Forward Prize in 1996 for her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*. This was followed in 2002 by the T. S. Eliot Prize which she deservedly won for *Dart*.

So beautiful and exciting were these books, that the forthcoming publication of another collection by Oswald is awaited with eagerness. *Woods etc.*, which will be published by Faber in May this year, covers her output since the birth of her first child eight years ago; and in it the daring experiments with language and form continue.

After reading *Greats* at Oxford, Oswald trained as a gardener, and worked in such gardens as Wisley, Chelsea Physic Garden, Cliveden and Lord Rothschild's estate. She now lives on the Dartington estate in Devon, where she job-shares with her husband, caring for their children in the morning and writing in the afternoon.

Oswald's classical education is carried lightly in her poetry, in the form of allusions to such literary and mythical figures as Sisyphus, the Danaides and Osiris. Other disciplines which inspire her work include science (especially astronomy), folklore, alphabets and ogam stones. When she read her poetry at the *Resurgence* day of last year's Ways with Words Festival at Dartington,



the emphasis was on planetary bodies; other public events have concentrated on trees. Whatever the subject matter, the poems are based on precise empirical observation and delivered in strong, often unorthodox rhymes, rhythms and forms.

The dominant source of inspiration for her poetry, however, is her passion for the countryside and the working people she meets. She has a deep empathy with the local farming community and a healthy respect for physical labour. She refers to this as "the physicality of maintaining life". While preparing *Dart*, she spent many hours talking to people who live or work beside the river:

*and the sailmaker grabbing his sandwich,
and the rich man bouncing his powerboat
like a gym shoe,
the boatyard manager, thriving in the
narrow margin between
storing boats and keeping them moving,
costing and delegating,
structuring deals and wrapping up
proposals.*

Dart relied heavily on the speech patterns and dialect of people Oswald met along the river:

*o I wish I was slammicking home
in wet clothes, shrammed with cold and
bivvering but*

*this is my voice
under the spickety leaves,
under the knee-nappered trees
rustling in its cubby-holes.*

OSWALD'S POETRY can be uncompromising, but it is also playful. Noises are explored and incorporated into the poems, such as the pair of owls calling "ave and ouch" in *Dart*. Continuing this trend in the new collection, we hear a bird calling "crex crex corcorovado", and the noise of a woodsman at work:

*Whyoo whyoo whyoo, that's him making
crosscuts
With bowsaws and pitsaws.*

The major themes in this new collection are drawn from the natural world and cover earth, water and air. Images, whether they refer to sound, sight or imagination, are, as in *Dart*, precise and memorable. In the woods, "an owl's call opened the darkness"; the flower which in *Dart* made its appearance as "an old dandelion unpicking her shawl" is now

*an old woman taken by the neck
and shaken to pieces;*

in a field she muses

*May two fields be bridged by a stile
And two hearts by the tilting footbridge of
a glance;*

we share the excitement of a stormy sky in

*there goes the thundercloud shaking its
blue wolf's head;*

and the waxing moon is perfectly caught in its not-quite-perfectly round form:

*and growing rounder and rounder
a pert peering creature
I love her sidling and awkward
when she's not quite circular.*

The same incisive light that brings stars, stones and flowers to life is just as powerful when trained onto people. It would, for instance, be diffi-

cult to find a better description of unease growing into fear than

*In my throat the little mercury line
That regulates my speech began to fall
Rapidly the endless length of my spine.*

Within and beside Oswald's excitement with language, her quirky images and earthiness, there is also in her poetry a reverence and spirituality that mark her out from the ordinary. Sometimes this is no more than language impregnated with the scent of liturgy, such as in *Seabird's Blessing*, or a new slant on a biblical theme, as in *Gardeners at the Resurrection*; at other times there are hints of a deeper spiritual understanding. For instance, one wonders whether the references at the beginning of *Dart* to creation being called into being by the utterance of the Word are entirely coincidental:

*The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out
Who is it?*

Trying to summon itself by speaking...

One of poetry's tasks is to enable us to see the world afresh. Oswald's skilfully crafted poems, with their crystal-sharp images, are guaranteed to clarify our vision and reconnect it with our hearts.

THIS MARCH FABER will be publishing an anthology, *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, edited by Oswald. The collection contains some of the very best poetry that celebrates the countryside without sentimentality or nostalgia.

In *The Thunder Mutters*, ancient and modern, long and short jostle together in an intoxicating celebration of the countryside. There are extracts from Chapman's translation of Homer and *The Dream of the Rood*; the whole of the Benedicite; translations from French, Hungarian and Welsh poetry, and an extract from an Aztec dictionary; well-known favourites from recent centuries; works by contemporary poets; and, of course, a good range of anonymous works.

The deep respect for oral tradition displayed in Alice Oswald's own poetry is also reflected in the choices she made for this anthology. ●

Dart, *Woods etc.*, and *The Thunder Mutters* are published by Faber.