

Observation Notes

Rowland Bagnall on three books that explore the complexities of perceiving people, landscapes, and art

Lavinia Greenlaw

Selected Poems

Faber £12.99

Thomas A Clark

that which appears

Carcenet £19.99

Victoria Chang

With My Back to the World

Corsair £12.99

‘When we read [an] author’s work in definitive or collected editions,’ writes Geoff Dyer, ‘we are *there*: nothing comes between us and the writer’. ‘[E]verything in a ‘Selected’ format,’ however, ‘comes in tacit quotation marks: those provided by the editor’s choice of material.’ For Dyer, when we encounter a selection, we are, by definition, ‘in the realm of massively extended quotation.’ As such, reading any poet’s selected work is bound to raise some questions, not only about the poetry that might be missing, but about the type or kind of writer being curated.

For much of her career, Lavinia Greenlaw’s reputation has been rooted in the scientific. Brought up in a family of scientists and doctors, she is perhaps best known for writing poetry *about* or *in response to* science, producing ‘Science for Poets’, to borrow the title of an early poem – or even poetry for scientists. Several poems in her second book, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (1997), were produced during a residency at the Science Museum in London; *Night Photograph* (1993), her debut, features poems on the life and work of Galileo, Marie Curie, and a poem (‘The Man Whose Smile Made Medical History’) reflecting on her grandfather’s experience of undergoing pioneering plastic surgery, treating injuries sustained during the First World War. While a handful of Greenlaw’s ‘scientific’ works resurface in *Selected Poems*, it is notable, to me at least, how many of them don’t: no ‘Science for Poets’, no ‘A Letter from Marie Curie’, no ‘What We Can See of the Sky Has Fallen’, an early poem celebrating the cloud studies of amateur meteorologist Luke Howard. Of the poems that do make the cut, a few have been tinkered with: ‘The Innocence of Radium’ and ‘Galileo’s Wife’, both from *Night Photograph*, now appear as ‘Radium’ and ‘Galileo’. While these might seem minor changes and exclusions, they appear to indicate Greenlaw’s attempts to shake her former reputation. As she suggests to Tim Kendall in an interview of 1997, ‘The main difficulty

with *Night Photograph* has been the “poetry about science” tag. [...] I only became conscious of how much science there is in the book when it was pointed out. Since then, I have resisted science like hell.’

As if to maintain this resistance, *Selected Poems* introduces us to a poet whose major preoccupation, more than science and its discoveries, is with ideas of perception and attentiveness. Where Greenlaw writes about technology and the instruments of empirical measurement, from telescopes to X-rays, her interest is in how these (often optical) devices enhance and shape our observations, allowing us to see ‘the current arrangement’ (‘Dreams of Separation’) of the world in greater detail. As if to emphasise this theme, *Selected Poems* appears in tandem with a new collection of the poet’s essays, *The Vast Extent: On Seeing and Not Seeing Further* (2024), in which Greenlaw writes about the limits of perception, from the darkness of caves to the abstractions of the Arctic Circle; the two books share a colour scheme of ocean greens and olive greys, suggesting something of their shared anatomy. ‘In 1993, I published my first book,’ notes Greenlaw in *The Vast Extent*: ‘I’ve been writing about the difficulties and variables of vision ever since. How do we make sense of what we see? How do we describe what we have never seen before?’

As a poet, Greenlaw’s keenest sense is sight. With great consistency, her poems offer a masterclass in seeing, whether casting her eye over Larkinesque outskirts, where ‘the light tears open / the smoke from the power-station chimney,’ ‘a continual breaking up into sky’ (‘From Scattered Blue’) or training her attention on ‘the curled fist of an ammonite,’ ‘the only still thing in a shifting world’ (‘A Change in the Weather’). ‘Greenlaw is a precisionist,’ writes Edward Hirsch in his introduction to the poet’s third collection, *Minsk* (2003), one whose looking generates something like ‘Description in action’ (‘The Casual Perfect’), a quality that owes a debt to the American poet Elizabeth Bishop. ‘What [Bishop] shares, to a remarkable degree, is how she sees’, reads a passage in *The Vast Extent*. ‘The thrill is in the live-action replay of her adventure with her subject: the initial surprise, the feeling out, the determination to describe.’

What all this seeing builds, in Greenlaw’s work, is a set of questions about orientation, concerning how the self relates to a continuous environment. ‘Minute by minute so complete’, read lines from *A Double Sorrow: Troilus and Criseyde* (2014), Greenlaw’s reworking of Chaucer’s poem, ‘Each brings the question of the next: / Is this your true self? / What of this can I possibly keep?’ This sense of orientation, of locating oneself in the present moment, explains Greenlaw’s apparent interest in failing or disintegrating senses, as in ‘The Long Day Closes’, which describes her temporary loss of vision, and several poems set in abstract landscapes:

where the eye can’t tell
sea from river, hill from valley,
near from far, first from last, in from out

– any one thing, in fact, from any other.
(‘Blackwater’)

The volume closes with a run of poems from *The Built Moment* (2019), the poet’s powerful reflection on her father’s descent into Alzheimer’s, his mind caught in the present tense. ‘Something is stopping him leaving,’ she begins, ‘nothing becomes / the immediate past’ as ‘the world folds itself up behind his every step’ (‘The sea is an edge and an ending’). As the sequence continues, we meet a poem whose title asks perhaps the central question of Greenlaw’s poetics to date: ‘Where are we now?’

This same question accounts, in large part, for the poetry of Thomas A Clark, whose sparse, sculptural accounts of the Scottish landscape embody acts of attention with something bordering on devotion. Uniting four collections published between 1994 and 2017, *that which appears* contains a quarter-century of looking, documenting Scotland’s flora and fauna with microscopic clarity, a record of ‘the sure and present / sense of what there is’.

Clark’s writing is rooted in the landscape: part natural history, part environmental survey; part mapmaking, part field guide. ‘To write about a place where one has settled,’ writes Harriet Tarlo in *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (2011), in which Clark’s ‘The Grey Fold’ appears, ‘is always to be discovering the knowable and unknowable, to be alive to its specificity.’ Clark’s poetry is nothing if not hyper-specific, a detailed journal of his findings, bearing witness to encountered things: ‘a line of pebbles / laid out on the sand’, ‘isolated crags / and corries’, ‘a heron with blood on its wing’ (‘That Which Appears’). At times, Clark’s writing falls into a kind of catalogue, listing phenomena:

cormorant and herring gull
opine and clover
sorrel and sea kale
redshank and plover [...]
(‘The Hundred Thousand Places’)

As if noting them down in the moment they catch his eye, ‘the flicker of everything / at the edge of attention’ (‘Farm By the Shore’). The minimalism of Clark’s project, enhanced by the white space that surrounds the (often single) stanzas on each page, aligns his writing with the concrete poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay, not to mention a number of visual artists whose work makes use of written language as a means of documentation. Generated through his practice of extensive walking in the highlands and islands of Scotland, noting the ‘small continual / adjustments’ (‘That Which Appears’) of that landscape as he goes, Clark’s poetry finds its clearest ally in the form of British artist Richard Long, whose own walks (and accompanying photographs and texts) have formed the basis of his work for over half a century. Like Long’s work, Clark’s poems exist as records of his moving through the landscape, a series of proofs.

Clark's style is plain, his use of language unembellished and frequently monosyllabic, as though his words stood for the things themselves, like rubbings from reality. There is something totemic about Clark's stanzas, both celebratory and elegiac, commemorating what he finds – or, rather, what finds him. (After all, he reminds us in 'Farm By the Shore', 'everything you see / has sight of you' .) There are glimpses of astonishing beauty here – 'the richly / embroidered ground', 'the blue butterfly's / moment on the purple / thistle flower' ('The Hundred Thousand Places') – no sooner noted down than disappeared, the landscape 'quickly redescribed', 'continually remade' ('Yellow & Blue'). Clark's writing develops an ecosystem of its own, a tapestry of interlocking, endlessly related parts, 'a succession of / departures and accommodations' ('That Which Appears'), rising and falling with each turn of the page. Like Inger Christensen's *alphabet* (1981), whose insistence on the existence of worldly phenomena simultaneously acknowledges its presence while mourning its imagined loss, Clark's writing balances each 'moment / of stillness among / evidence of collapse' ('That Which Appears'), urging us to look around and pay attention to the world while we are able to. 'The hills and rivers, deer and wild flowers that appear in the poems are not elements of pastoral', writes the poet in a recent blog post, 'They are our contemporaries' and 'Any broadening of ethical concern must include them.' 'It is not my hope but my experience that attention may be close to affection,' he continues, 'that perception is already a form of participation.'

Prompted by a commission from New York's Museum of Modern Art, Victoria Chang's latest collection equally considers questions about the nature of looking and participation. Engaging with the life and work of Agnes Martin – the majority of these poems are named after the artist's paintings – *With My Back to the World* offers a measured, metaphysical account of selfhood, depression, and the challenges of trying to respond to life and art in language. Adopting a poetic voice that seems almost self-consciously empty of a lyric 'Self', Chang's poetry strives for something more objective, as if suspicious of the mind's ability to paper over reality, adjusting and obscuring it. 'Agnes says to give up facts, to *have an empty mind*', reads one of several poems to quote from Martin's writings, 'That if *your mind is full of garbage, if an inspiration came, you wouldn't recognize it*' ('Untitled, 1978').

In one sense, *With My Back to the World* exists as a record of Chang's engagements with Agnes Martin, documenting her encounters with an artist whose work – often monochrome and minimalist, composed of repetitive gestures – triggers a paradox of meaning. As Chang explores, Martin's artworks simultaneously invite and reject interpretation, remaining stubbornly neutral. After all, writes Chang, 'If you / ask a tree too many questions, it will fall down' ('Untitled #12, 1981'). Throughout these poems, Chang questions the notion of an artwork – a poem, a painting, an object, a person – becoming something more than simply what it is. What if 'The small pencil marks on the painting aren't measuring anything[?]' she asks ('Red Birds, 1964'). 'I think poetry and art are navigating the unknown and the inadequacies of knowledge', suggests the poet in a recent interview. 'It's not knowing what you're going to

say before you say it, it's not knowing where you're going to arrive when you're done. It's about discovery, not certainty.'

Alongside these considerations, Chang boldly confronts a period of persistent depression, which seems to separate 'the mind [...] from the feelings' ('Mountain, 1960'), the feelings from the body, even the body from 'the woman it represents' ('Untitled #10, 2002'), just as 'the meaning of / a word can exist without the word' ('With My Back to the World, 1997'). Several pages in the book are grey, as though a handful of Chang's poems had been clouded out by fog. Elsewhere, the collection reproduces versions of several poems responding visually to Martin's works, obscuring and erasing language with a range of linear marks and gestures – scratches, tallies, crossings-out – revealing the influence, perhaps, of Mary Ruefle's practice of erasures. As with Martin's work, Chang's visual experiments emphasise the temporal aspect of her writing, a sense of measuring or plotting time, like scratching days into a prison wall, waiting for change, or else attempting to maintain a sense of structure, a way of keeping time from spilling over, becoming formless and flood-like. The collection's second section is given over to a diaristic poem, 'Today', a moving not-quite-elegy to the poet's father, drawing on the painter On Kawara's *Today* series, a sequence of monochrome canvases displaying nothing but the date of composition.

'Someone wrote that Agnes made small simple repetitive gestures that led to something larger', writes Chang ('Falling Blue, 1963'), which 'resembles a life, each day a mark on the canvas.' *With My Back to the World* accumulates, with muted authority, into a meditation on the role of art in responding to the strange onslaught of life, raising a number of difficult, arresting questions, if not suggesting any answers. 'Is it possible to write down how we feel without betraying our feelings?' asks one poem ('Play, 1966'); Is it possible / to be seen, but not be looked / at?' ('The Islands, 1961').

Rowland Bagnall's second collection, *Near-Life Experience*, was published by Carcanet in 2024.