

POETRY

## England, Newfoundland and the universe

FRASER SUTHERLAND

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

VERSUS THE CORDUROY KID

By Simon Armitage


Anansi, 68 pages, \$18.95

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GOING AROUND

WITH BACHELORS

By Agnes Walsh

Brick, 72 pages, \$21

## INTERSTELLAR

By Allan Briesmaster

Quattro, 88 pages, \$16.95

Though *Tyrannosaurus Rex Versus the Corduroy Kid* was first published by Faber & Faber last year, this is Simon Armitage's Canadian beachhead, and thriftily includes samplings from two other recent Faber books, verse versions of *The Odyssey* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It's a welcome landing, because Armitage is the most vigorously resourceful of contemporary British poets.

The poet's home is the West Yorkshire city of Huddersfield, and he has the Northerner's attachment to the local. In *Poetry*, many of his concerns are on display:

*In Wells Cathedral there's this ancient clock,*

*three parts time machine, one part zodiac.*

*Every fifteen minutes, knights on horseback*

*circle and joust, and for six hundred years*

*the same poor sucker riding counterways*

*has copped it full in the face with a lance.*

*To one side, some weird looking guy in a frock*

*back-heels a bell. Thus the quarter is struck.*

Surprisingly, there's also a resemblance to Al Purdy, at least in one mood. In *To the Women of the Merrie England Coffee Houses, Huddersfield*:

*But you, under the mock Tudor beams, under the fake shields,*

*under the falsified coats of arms, you go on, you go on*

*O women of the Merrie England, O mothers of Huddersfield,*

*O ladies!*

Armitage favours scenes of random but regulated movement disrupted by a cataclysmic or apocalyptic event: in *KX*, a bomb blast in a railway terminus; in *Horses, M62*, a

"riderless charge" of strayed horses halting a busy motorway. The act of vision becomes an act of transforming displacement. In *RSPG Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January 2005*, "the perched, anthracite, anvil form/ of a jackdaw, rook or carrion crow" is supplanted by "the limp, snagged,/ wind-shredded flag of a carrier bag/ on an overhead wire in wasteland beyond."

Startling reversals are constant corollaries. He ends *The Six Comeuppances*:

*For every learning curve, a plateau phase.*

*For every dish of the day, a sell-by date.*

*A backlash to every latest craze.*

*A riptide to every seventh wave.*

*For every moment of truth, an afterthought.*

*For every miracle cure, an antidote.*

The poet is a connoisseur of menace. In *The Stake-Out*:

*They're watching the house from the woods.*

*I'm two eyes in a face of soot.*

*I haven't blinked for a whole hour.*

*The moment they see me I'll shoot.*

This is language in attack mode.

Since one of Armitage's poems, *Learning by Rote*, is mostly reverse-printed, Anansi might have added a pocket mirror to assist the reader. Agnes Walsh's saucily titled *Going Around with Bachelors* supplies no mirror, but it bundles a CD on which the author reads her poems, varied by conversational "asides" and with ballads sung by her daughter, Simone Savard-Walsh. Her reading is beautifully clear and blissfully free of theatrical tricks.

In contrast to Armitage's tense disjunctive narratives, *Going Around with Bachelors* is soft-spoken, affecting, empathetic storytelling from Newfoundland, Canada's Ireland. The old bachelors and self-willed aunts and spinsters who populate Walsh's poems are given an unsoppy dignity and unselfconscious wit. In *Love*, one of her elderly rural bachelors is moved into a town apartment, and makes acquaintance with a shower. It "must be a treat," the poet tells him.

*Ah yes, you laugh, the shower. That's the first time I had a wash  
since I fell overboard in 1942. I'll have to beat the women off me.*

Soon, Walsh implies, her people will be ghosts haunting the present: those who passed on after a long tenure among the rocks and sea of coves and coasts, "the frozen earth on which you stand," and those who have quit their island home. The same theme echoes in other place-scape settings, such as in Ireland and Portugal. In *For Anita's Oporto*:

*We sat, expecting nothing and anything, and the ghosts spoke  
because we cannot live unless they whisper, unless they shout,  
and echo on the stone squares, and bang into our hearts.*

Walsh's vivid monologues seldom diminish into anecdotes. In the prose *Dad and the Fridge Box*, a warmth-obsessed father converts a new fridge's cardboard box into an indoor shelter: "Men would come to visit him as he sat in his box. They'd say, 'That's a dandy box you got there Bill b'y.' No one paid much mind to it. No one thought it was odd. Because, you see, that was time when the old people used everything."

Walsh makes sure we smell exactly where we are. In *The Tilts, Point Lance*, she also asserts the dialectic of the sexes:

*Inside, the smell of tobacco, dirty hair,  
rubbed-in cod guts, and diesel grease,  
margarine, and burnt wool, stale rum sometimes,  
grunts and nods enough, cures to punctuate.*

*Women want more: curtains, salt shakers,  
nightclothes, verbs, wildflowers, french safes.*

*Here it's stove, bunks, table, chairs.*

But Walsh is not a mere local colorist. She can epigrammatically distill a complex relationship into a few lines. Here, in its entirety, is *Long Distance Lover*:

*I wish I had a long distance lover,  
someone I could write letters to.*

*Darling, when I meet you*

*move out of town.*

If *Interstellar* belonged to the corporate sphere, it would be a closely held company. Allan Briesmaster's wife Holly created its artwork, and it is published by a press the author founded last year with Beatriz Hausner, John Calabro and Luciano Iacobelli. Yet one oddity about *Interstellar* is the poems' remoteness from, yet involvement with, the human.

The names of the author's friends occasionally appear in *Interstellar*, and poems are sometimes "after" other poets -- among them Yves Bonnefoy, Paul Celan, William Stafford and Archibald Lampman -- but these seem almost irrelevant to Briesmaster's great theme, the collaboration of the physical and the metaphysical. Unlike many poets, he does not decry religion while striking religious poses. Birdwatching, stargazing and hill-climbing, even looking at paintings and photographs, are for him occasions of wonder and awe. Against the mysterious dark matter of the universe, he posits a "*bright energy no theory names.*" Most often solitary, the poet in *Planetoids* speculates whether

*. . . only specialists still*

*may wish to ogle, assay, scrutinize.*

*Project how Systems grow, stunt, stabilize.*

*And what motive but vanity might thrill*

*well-heeled explorers on a rendezvous?*

*Crank prospectors' delusional surmise?*

*Or lingering wonder -- what, when, how, and why --*

*which neither myth nor maths will satisfy.*

Briesmaster's questionings and questings about vacuum and plenum summon for him a moral imperative. In *Interplanetary*, he says, "We love best when we feel this Earth isn't all."

He projects one attractive quality typically missing in action in today's poetry: humility.

*Fraser Sutherland's most recent book is The Matuschka Case: Selected Poems 1970-2005.*