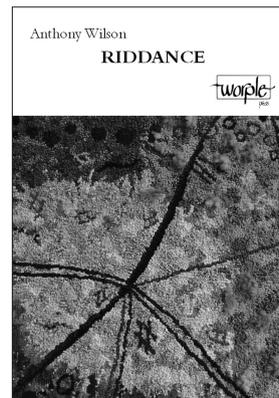
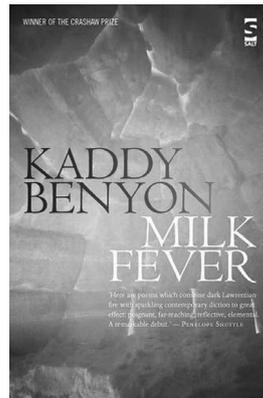


“time to notice”

Andrew Neilson



A Promiscuity Of Spines

Patrick Chapman
(Salmon Poetry, €12.00),

Milk Fever

Kaddy Benyon
(Salt, £12.99)

Riddance

Anthony Wilson
(Worple Press, £10.00)

Patrick Chapman's new and selected poems, **A Promiscuity Of Spines**, traces the Irish poet's career over five volumes, with thirty new poems included. His first two collections, **Jazztown** and **The New Pornography**, were published in the 1990s. Judging by the selections in this new volume, the debut is the stronger of the two books, showcasing an inventive young poet (Chapman was twenty-three at the time) with a line in playful ideas such as *Sentient Glass* or the "race of nuclear-accident victims/Living in boisterous harmony under the ground/ Between the bombed-out stations of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Circus" (*Worms*). By the second collection, the poems seem more diffuse and the ideas less energetic, to the point that one lyric, *San Andreas Fault*, appears to base the reason for its existence solely on the unorthodox yet mimetic line-break of its ending: "America, distracted, will not notic-/e."

The poet's next phase was more than ten years in the making but produced three collections in short succession during the late 2000s (**Breaking Hearts and Traffic Lights, A Shopping**

Mall on Mars and **The Darwin Vampires**). The poetry has regained its energy of ideas, spanning the unexpected monologue of *Covetous Foetus* “I want your life. I want/ Your car. I want your/ Job.” – to a moving elegy for Grant McLennan of The Go-Betweens in *To a House of Tin and Timber*. Yet there remains a certain flatness to the language which often detracts from the vivid ideas at play. Take the rather pedestrian beginning to another poem haunted by a deceased rock musician:

You had driven west to put geography
Between yourself and my bleak humours. I
Was stunned by news, received in solitude:
Cobain had pulled a trigger on himself,
The pills and whiskey incident, a dress rehearsal rag.

Now his wife and daughter desolate,
His mother had proclaimed her son
A member of that stupid club.

(Cobain)

Given the darkness of the subject matter, the poetry is conversational in an uninteresting way — “stunned by news”, the bereaved family “desolate” — while labouring the mother’s infamous verdict on Kurt Cobain’s death rather clumsily into the verse.

The work becomes more textured in the Pushcart Prize-nominated **The Darwin Vampires** and the new poems included in this volume. **The Darwin Vampires** takes in a broad sweep of contemporary concerns, from global warming (4”) to 9/11 (4’33”), and marries it to more personal issues. At times this can lead to somewhat unlikely successes, such as the unflinching ode to skin disease in *Hidradenitis Suppurativa* or the morbid death-fantasy of *Gloria Mundi* — which nonetheless reaches a lyrical summit worth travelling to: “I desire within my reverie/To settle on the solar wind,/And float serenely far beyond Centauri”. A similar astral theme animates perhaps the finest of the new work, *Giddy Andromeda*:

No one, on watching you move,
Could pinpoint exactly where you were

Or know how you suspected
That your suns were going out,
Not singly but in clusters.

In his best poems, Chapman’s direct address leads to other such unforeseen moments of sadness.

Kaddy Benyon’s debut **Milk Fever** introduces a new voice with an assured and musical diction, one which can clot around certain word sounds then spring away with impressive agility:

Step closer, teetering to a mutter
of tricked thoughts as they pulse
in reverse - whispers to wisps of light —
the somatic throb of ancient hurts.
Here is the slipping point, here

where chlorotic roots slacken to slime.
Lean over the river’s mutable skin
and catch a twin reflected back —
fleeting, lovingly; the shock of
tenderness grazing the heart like water.

(Holy Water (I))

The use of assonance to create a thick seam of sensuality is typical, while the shift into memorable phrase-making (“grazing the heart like water”) is a hallmark of Benyon at her best.

Milk Fever is a book aswim in imagery from the natural world and mythology. It is poetry which takes its strength from writers such as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Alice Oswald — all authors referenced in epigraphs within the text. The female body is never far from the verse, and Benyon often deploys the familiar trope of using terminology from the world of nature to describe the physicality of her protagonists:

Sometimes I just want to show
you the places I’m mottled, rotten
and bruised; I want you to lean close
enough to hold the strange fruit
of me and tell me I may yet thrive.

(Strange Fruit)

Perhaps because such imagery is indeed familiar (a feeling exacerbated in this particular poem, sharing as it does a title with a well-known lyric by another influence on Benyon: Seamus Heaney) not all of **Milk Fever** seems as original as it might. And while Benyon has a strong sense of tone throughout, the collection also feels somewhat baggier than it need be.

When properly focused however, Benyon can produce truly startling metaphors (like “the ticking crucifixion” of *Mother as a Windmill*) and her talent for earthy language lends itself well to the erotic in pieces such as *Poem #87, Call it Love* and (*Not*) *Penelope’s Web*. She is a new poet worth watching.

Finally, Anthony Wilson’s volume **Riddance** certainly amounts to the most bang for your buck, offering more than one hundred pages of poetry for a round tenner. Quantity alone would not recommend this collection, of course, but the quality is there too. In part this is undeniably because of the subject matter: cancer, and the poet’s battle with said disease, which gives the work real urgency. The end result is a moving, often harrowing, book, while also offering a bracing demonstration of a skilled writer facing his grim subject head on.

The poems, particularly in the first section previously collected as the pamphlet **The Year of Drinking Water** (written while Wilson came to the end of his treatment), deal with the many awful aspects of the disease, such as *Men Who Sit in Waiting Rooms, I am Becoming My Grandmother*, and the blunt recitation of *Lost*: “Lost my hair/Lost my appetite/Lost my energy/Lost my nails”. Yet Wilson also injects a great deal of humour into his enterprise, including likening his appearance to Doctor Evil at one point, and that humour underpins his treatment of the cancer almost as another person, even a lover (indeed, one of the poems of recovery is entitled *The End of the Affair*). The technique also allows for the distancing required to make good poetry of such bad personal experiences, while in the process almost equating the cancer itself with a malignant yet powerful muse:

You gave me time to notice —
apple blossom, hand movements,
the light taking leave of rooms...
...By then all I knew were symptoms:
insomnia, night sweats, a cough
I could not shake off.
Because of you I revisited old LPs —
I did not want to die

(*Tumour*)

Perhaps Wilson is most powerful in his ambivalent portraits of life after cancer, and in several poems he dismisses his survival as any form of triumph:

There is a pause as I look into their eyes,
these kind people who cooked meals,
gave lifts, sat in silence as they watched me
make coffee in return for their flowers.
I thank them and say I am fine. Relieved,
pleased to have been of help, they leave.
I cannot tell them what they do not want to hear.
The honest truth is I did not disappear, but think
I did, sometimes, and want to, even though I look terrific.

(*The Honest Truth*)

Riddance moves onto other subject matter, starting with the cancer of another – *All Lives, All Dances, All is Loud*, a long elegy to a friend of the poet — before taking in a broader canvas, including a sequence of oblique “estuary sands” pieces and a couple of unexpected poems about golf tourism which within the overall context of the collection are almost ludicrously life-affirming.

The shadow of Wilson’s cancer nonetheless extends to the final page and the most affecting poems are those which bring the lyric and the humane together amid the horror, such as in *The Hand*:

We hold on to what we can.
The evening fades, grows weak and
dies, as I will one day, surely, a man
like any other but that you held my hand...

...And
yet: we hold on to what we can;
a fast-disappearing man
locks fingers: in giving he loses his hand.

Rather than scare anyone away, the serious nature of **Riddance** is precisely what recommends it to a wide readership.