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preface

Poems try out poets as much as poets try out poems. As you read through these commentaries you might be surprised by how often an idea, a memory, a word, an image or a rhythm imposed itself on someone, who then was faced with the task of discovering what it meant, or of how to make sense (or nonsense) of it.

Even after a poem has made itself known, it remains puzzling. How does a poem work? No one seems to know, really, but in the commentaries some very interesting insights into the making of certain poems are offered by those who wrote them.

The selection I made was not intended to be exhaustive, or exclusive in any way – it was hard to limit it to twenty one poems – and I have not attempted to make anything more (or less) than an enticing sampler of great work in a field that's full of exciting and original voices.

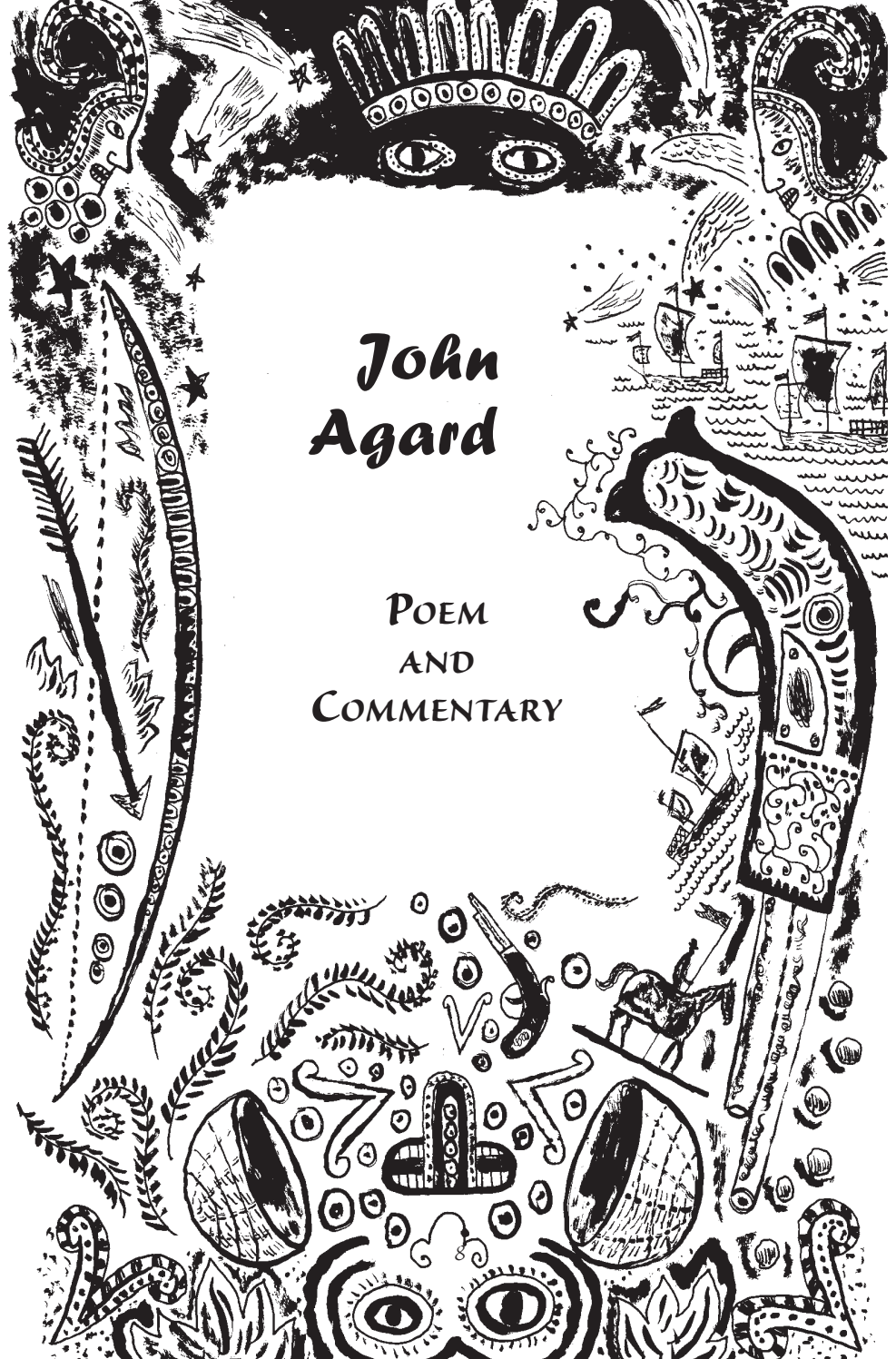
From the beginning I had the idea of approaching this in a way that was "inclusively Anglophile" – as Richard Wilbur put it when he saw the proposed list of poets. While the majority are from England and the United States, there are also poets here from Canada, Australia, Guyana, India, Scotland, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa. You may notice, as a point of interest, that what rhymes in one accent doesn't necessarily rhyme in another. "Diva" and "beaver", for instance, might rhyme in England, but in North America the hard "r" at the end of "beaver" might, for some, ruin the rhyme's effect.

I selected poems that surprised me. It seems like an embarrassment of riches to have them collected all together in one book. The poets were also asked to explain something about how they came to be. For some reason I expected more overlap in the commentaries, and I was delighted when they came back as varied and fascinating and unalike as the poems they were discussing.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to read the poems out loud. I don't think you'll be able to appreciate them fully until they've entered your mind through your ears as well as your eyes.

There's so much more I'd like to say about the book, but I'll stop here and let the poems (and poets) speak for themselves.

Jon Arno Lawson



Old World New World

Spices and gold once cast a spell
On bearded men in caravels.

New World New World cried history
Old World Old World sighed every tree.

But Indian tribes long long ago
Had sailed this archipelago.

They who were used to flutes of bone
Translated talk of wind on stone.

Yet their feathered tongues were drowned
When Discovery beat its drum.

New World New World – spices and gold
Old World Old World – the legends told.

New World New World cried history
Old World Old World sighed every tree.

Old World New World: *commentary*

To mark the beginning of the new century in the year 2000, there was an anthology of poems I had great pleasure in editing. It was entitled "Hello New" and a number of poets were invited to contribute a new poem. It was a very open-ended invitation. The poets were free to go down any road as long as the word "new" appeared in the poem.

The results were exciting and intriguing: from the welcome of a newborn lamb or moving into a new house to dipping into a new book or having to come to grips with a new language. The variety of subject and approach by the poets showed how one little word can be a springboard into a poem, and it also gave the reader that thrill of encountering the word "new" in an unexpected context. That was the challenge and the fun.

And that was also the background to the inspiration for "Old World New World", which first appeared in that anthology. I was hoping to use "new" in a not too predictable way. I suppose poets are always hoping to inject the familiar with freshness and surprise. As one poet, Ezra Pound, famously put it: "Poetry is news that stays news."

So thinking about the word "new" led me to thinking about "New World", that expression used by European

explorers to describe the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean, which got their name from the Carib Indians. These Indians were all part of a network of Amerindian peoples, including the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans, who had established civilisations in the Americas long, long before Columbus was even born. To these "pre-Columbian" peoples, whose canoes were sailing the Caribbean many centuries before Columbus' ships, the lands were not exactly new, but to the sixteenth-century Europeans, they were an "undiscovered" world – a New World.

When I was at school in Guyana, where I was born and grew up, there was never any mention that the Vikings and the Phoenicians might also have sailed to the Americas. Our history books always said that the history of the West Indies began with the arrival of Columbus, ignoring the indigenous peoples who had long inhabited the region. In the Guyana rainforest, for example, there are living descendents of ancient Amerindian tribes such as the Carib and the Arawak. You could say their presence is a reminder of old pre-Columbian civilisations. Do they bear witness to an Old World or a New World?

All this, of course, might make interesting history, but interesting history doesn't necessarily make interesting poetry. The poem seeks to invoke the shadow

behind the facts and to invite the words not just to relate but to resonate, hopefully in a concise and memorably musical way.

"Old World New World" brings together in one breath a meeting of two worlds, two civilisations, two hemispheres. One of those hemispheres had bows and arrows and no horses. The other had guns and horses. The Amerindian civilisation, as you know, was to be destroyed in what is called the age of conquest or the Age of Discovery.

But you don't want to overload your poem with too much information, like a room cluttered with furniture. You want to leave space for the reader's imagination to feel at home. Sometimes two rhyming words can bounce off each other like atoms and chime a thought into being. Take "caravels" and "spell". The word "caravels" (light, fast-sailing ships developed by the Portuguese) has a somewhat threatening sound. Columbus and his men arrived in a fleet of "caravels", driven by the desire for gold and exotic spices as if they were under some kind of spell.

For the Amerindian peoples, the so-called New World was rich in ancient myth. For them, the feathers from tropical birds like the macaw and hummingbird

were a natural part of their dress as well as something to exchange at the market and on the battlefield. Feathers were also used in medicine and as offerings to the gods. Feathers were companions in rituals and ceremonies.

Why not try reading the poem aloud? Poems get excited when they're read aloud. Yes, try out your "feathered tongues". And I'll keep my fingers crossed that you will no longer be a reader curled up in an armchair, but a wise old shaman or shawoman offering up a few words on the fate of two worlds (Old World New World) and how they will affect each other forever.

John Agard

Carol Ann Duffy

Poem and Commentary

Five Girls

Philomena Cooney
wears green sandals,
yellow ribbons,
silver bangles;
knows three secrets,
lives in a tent
in the middle of a field
near the River Trent.

Arabella Murkhi
speaks in Latin
keeps her cat in,
sleeps in satin.
Went to Turkey
just like that.
Absolutely *loved* it.
Amo amas amat.

Isadora Dooley
loves her jewellery.
Pearls on Sundays,
diamonds Mondays,
rubies Tuesdays,
Wednesdays blue days,
Thursday Friday Saturdays
It-doesn't-really-matter days.

Esther Feaver,
opera diva
dressed in beaver,
loved a weaver;
took a breather,
grabbed a cleaver,
now the weaver
will not leave her.

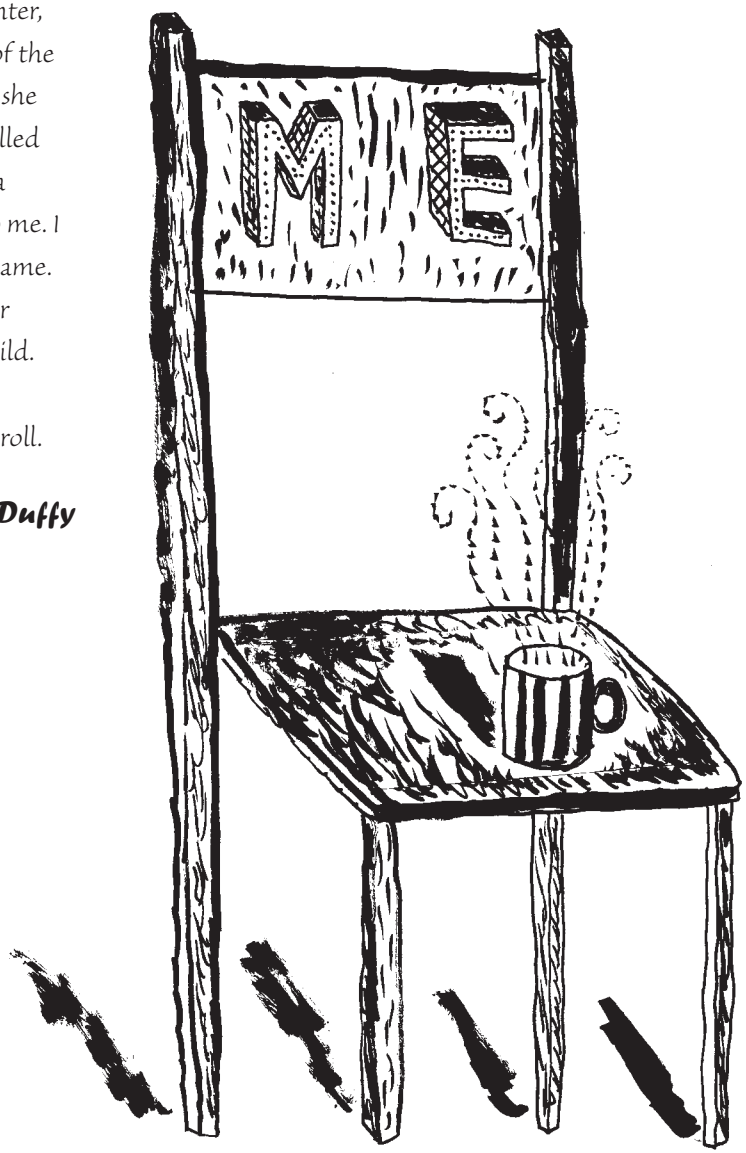
Joan Stone
liked a good moan,
lived on her own
in a mobile home.
The doorbell never rang,
neither did the phone;
so she pressed her ear
to the dialling tone.

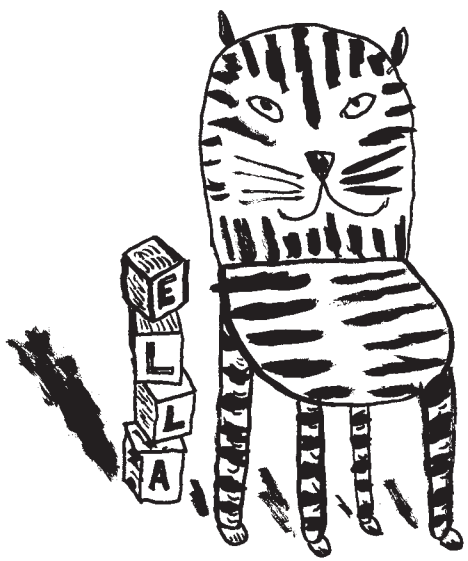
Five Girls: *commentary*

I wrote this poem to amuse my daughter, Ella, when she was four or five. Two of the names are the names of real children she knew at the time. One is a name recalled from my own childhood – Philomena always sounded strange and exotic to me. I liked following the rhymes for each name.

My own mother invented similar rhymes to amuse me when I was a child. The other great influence on me in childhood was the work of Lewis Carroll.

Carol Ann Duffy



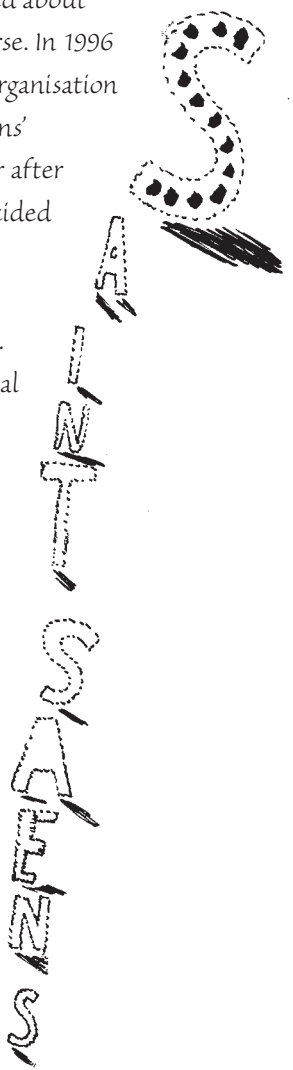


Aquarium

Fishes swim
without a goal
in aquarium or bowl.
We can watch them
through the glass:
bits of sunshine as they pass
in a circle round and round...
Little fish are nowhere bound.
They don't know
the mighty motion
of the waves and
of the ocean.
They must wait
for time to pass
locked up in a cage of glass.

Aquarium: *commentary*

I am a South African writer who started writing very late in life and since 1984 have published about twenty-five books, mostly nonsense verse. In 1996 I was asked by a South African music organisation to write poems to accompany Saint-Saëns' "Carnival of the Animals" (1886). A year after completing a version in Afrikaans, I decided to write English words. I chose not to translate the Afrikaans poems directly, but to have each poem completely new. Here is the Afrikaans poem with a literal line-by-line translation:



AKWARIUM

Vissies glip
en vissies gly–
'n reënboog
voor my oë verby.
Vissies swem
en vissies plas–
hoef hul lywe
nooit te was;
eet nooit boontjies
eet nooit kool;
gaan ook nimmer
na 'n skool.
Ek bly hier
en hulle dáár
en nooit sal ons
kan saambaljaar
Vissies swem
en vissies plas,
maar tussen ons
–'n muur van glas

AQUARIUM

Fishes slip
And fishes glide–
a rainbow
before my eyes.
Fishes swim
and fishes splash–
and never need
to wash their bodies.
They never eat beans
nor cabbage;
They never need to
go to school.
I remain here
and they remain there
and we will never
romp together.
Fishes swim
and fishes splash
but between us
–a wall of glass.

After so many years, I cannot remember how the English poem was written. But I did find some scraps of sentences in a notebook, one of many I sometimes grab when I need a clean piece of paper (the same notebook contains notes, addresses and even recipes I jotted down between 1984 and 2006):

Fish all swim without a goal
in the silence of a bowl

You don't know the sea and ocean
You don't feel the mighty motion

divided by a wall of glass

To me the discovery of these jottings shows the truth of A.A. Milne's words: "One of the advantages of being disorderly is that one is constantly making exciting discoveries!" It also proves that the poem was not written in one sitting.

I remember seeing a cartoon of two fish swimming in a goldfish bowl and the baby fish asking the mother: "Are we there yet?" This suggested to me the swimming without an end in sight.

Because Saint-Saëns' piece of music is known as "Aquarium", my phrase "in the silence of a bowl" was later changed to "in aquarium or bowl". I think "a cage of glass" is much better than "a wall of glass", as it emphasizes the idea of being imprisoned.

Looking back, I've also noticed a few things that were intuitively written into the poem, such as the many "s" and "sh" sounds, which suggest the sound of water splashing – swim, glass, bits, fishes, watch, sunshine, motion.

But I prefer not to analyse my own poems, and when people read things into my work that I myself did not specifically intend, I start believing that maybe I am cleverer than I thought!

Philip de Vos