shadow of history casts a sardonic chill:

> It's true what you've heard about my mouth.
> Radio signals in the fillings, sparks in the snap
> of mints in the dark. I am silent and afraid
> and I find comfort in world news watching
> everything blow up except my apartment.
> I'm aware this is very American of me.

Long may this poet's quiet but resonant signals keep coming.

Carol Rumens's next collection, provisionally titled Animal People, *is due from Seren in 2016.*

HAPPY VALLEY

Jack Underwood, Happiness, *Faber, £10.99*
ISBN 9780571313617
Sarah Howe, Loop of Jade, *Chatto & Windus, £10*
ISBN 9780701188696

reviewed by William Wootten

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The promise of Sarah Howe and Jack Underwood has already been spotted and rewarded. The names of their mentors, editors, poetry groups, universities and awards are to be found in the acknowledgements pages of these, their first full collections. So, with both poets already in their early thirties, and with their books each bearing the stamp of a commercial press, one now hopes to find, not just signs of their promise, but evidence of their achievement.

Underwood, who has a PhD in Creative Writing, a subject he now lectures in, is certainly a sparky performer. His deployment of varying types of blank verse can be pleasingly deft; he can have an attractively expansive tone of poetic address; he is also quite a phrasemaker. Metaphors and similes may be just the smart side of cliché: "The streets look like they want to be frying eggs / on themselves" or grand and luxurious (though, in this case, unlikely to float): "Sometimes your sadness is a yacht // huge, white and expensive, like an anvil / dropped from heaven". Mild surprises

in diction, or in the succession of sentences, have a quirky zip: "Spring // is here so now the plants and animals / are starting to have sex again. We've unblocked / the drain of its crud and bumf; the smell is waning."

Still, a successful poem is more than a series of attention-grabbing tones and phrases. And here Underwood can run into trouble. 'Inventory of Friends' begins: "I run through the grass-topped lives of my friends", a line at once celebratory yet bringing to mind the grass of the graveyard. But the poem fails to live up to its opening, and by the time we get to "I try to imagine having / her mind: funny, smart and odd as twenty / emperor penguins filing through the door / of a black limousine", the would-be arresting lines have become merely flashily diverting, the poem's potential squandered.

Underwood has a fondness for hypothetical subject matter: what if "I lived in a cave and you were my only visitor"; what "If guns // were more popular in our culture"? What if I injected blood into a banana in order to see how people would respond? What if I had a child and failed to look after it? What if I'd had a sister who'd died and believed myself haunted by her ghost? In these last two cases, some of the details are undoubtedly well drawn. Yet since, according to the poems, Underwood hasn't yet got a child, and, it turns out, never had a sister either, they still feel contrived and manipulative. More generally, the poems in *Happiness* tend to read as if occasioned, not by pressure of life or the imagination, but by casting around for a subject for a poem, the aping of first-hand experience and the desire to get a response. It's only when the subject genuinely seems to disturb Underwood himself, as it does in the 'The Ashes' and 'Wilderbeast', in which death and the sexual devil become not just scary masks but entities capable of grabbing both poet and reader, that he actually achieves the reaction he so often seeks to force.

Underwood's poetic influences are well assimilated, though largely restricted to recent mainstream British poets and the odd contemporary American. And when his poetry does make use of the poetry of the more distant past – as when he riffs on John Donne's 'The Good Morrow' by asking "Were we gherkins bobbing / in our harmless jars"? – the result could scarcely be labelled a profound communion. Sarah Howe's poetic influences spread deeper and wider; her overt encounters with poets past and present are less bumptious. Occasionally, she writes apprentice *homage* ('The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia' is wannabe Geoffrey Hill; 'MONOPOLY (*after Ashbery*)' is as advertised) or an ill-fated exercise in

style ('Start with Weather'). But the way Howe has schooled herself in the work of a host of twentieth-century British and, more especially, American poets results in considerable stylistic range: along with the loose-ish blank verse there is free verse, a host of stanza shapes, as well as some very convincing prose poetry. Moreover, Howe, who teaches Renaissance English literature, also possesses an impressive knowledge of earlier English, Chinese, Greek and Roman literature and culture.

Howe has the rare ability to write poems that clearly relate to the academic study of literature yet which are not, in the bad sense, academic. 'Sirens' is, in essence, an essay on Theodore Roethke's 'Elegy for Jane'. It is artful, insightful and unpretentiously erudite in the way it uses fascination with Jane's "pickerel smile" to explore both Roethke's themes and images and wider mythological female figures and themes of doubleness. But what makes the poem is its ability to feel its way into Roethke's lines, their characters and their relationship. This quality of empathic reimagining is one of Howe's greatest assets. Whether she is revisiting her mother's tales of childhood or relating the imprisonment of Ezra Pound, she manages both to treat her protagonists sensitively and to be a live presence on the margins of their stories, making second-hand subject matter appear not stale and appropriated but fresh and shared.

Howe, who has a Chinese mother and an English father, was born in Hong Kong and moved to England as a child. This dual identity and inheritance gives her a favoured theme, though one whose treatment always comes across as personal, felt and particular, not programmatic. It also bequeaths her source materials and subject matters we're unused to in English poetry. And while I'm sure both will seem far less novel to Chinese eyes than to mine, having witnessed Howe's ability to give oft-rehearsed Western tales worthwhile revisits I would be surprised if familiarity would much diminish one's respect for the ways in which they are employed. The poems on Chinese subjects do, however, tend to heighten the sense of wonder and the sensuous evocation. Occasionally, this strays into straightforward overwriting – a slight problem with 'Crossing from Guangdong' – but the richness of texture can be appropriate, as well as beautiful, tallying especially well with the child's-eye view, as is the case with the fine sequential poem 'Islands'. Nor does it preclude the examination of more troubling parts of Howe's Chinese inheritance – the "tale of the woodsman's daughter. Born with a box / of ashes set beside the bed" is no less an examination of the low status of women and the infanticide of girls

by its being related in the magical terms of the folk tale. The treatment of what Howe's note cautiously refers to as the "Tiananmen incident" in '*Innumerable*' gains, not lessens, in strength by keeping to her own recollections of that day as a five-year-old at the "Jockey Club's Happy Valley track".

Such restraint in the face of such subject matter is at the opposite pole from that sensationalism without substance one can find in Underwood. Indeed, it is one of a number of qualities and excellences which make the majority of poems in *Loop of Jade* not just promising – as the poems in Underwood's *Happiness*, for all my reservations, undoubtedly are – but mature and accomplished. *Loop of Jade* is one of the best first collections I've read in recent years.

William Wootten's The Alvarez Generation *(2015) is published by Liverpool University Press.*

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

Christopher Reid, The Curiosities, *Faber, £14.99*
ISBN 9780571321452
Caitríona O'Reilly, Geis, *Bloodaxe, £9.95*
ISBN 9781780371467

reviewed by Eamon Grennan

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The opening poem of Christopher Reid's new collection reveals some of his most striking and entertaining qualities: immediacy of address coupled with a strong speaking voice; a sense of performance and persona; an attitude that's part detached comedy, part the wink and nod of knowingness, part genial companionability. The voice in 'The Clowns' is that of a humorous, plain-speaking, politically alert observer ("His courtiers are no help – he hasn't any; / ditto, the palace guard"). Speedily colloquial, this mix of humour and political scepticism defines a particular point of view – one, however, that doesn't tempt us to identify it with the poet himself, instead locating it decisively in this invented character. So, no surprise that 'The Clowns' should concern a king who puts on, or has put on him, motley. Put-on indeed. In this motley compendium of "curiosities" – each poem a bravura description of a particular object, animal, situation, event, whatever (and each title a