AMERICAN VOICES
by **Kathleen McDermott**

The Art of the Lathe by **B.H. Fairchild**
The Waywiser Press 2003, ISBN 1-904130-02-X, £8.95, 80pp.
The Lords of Misrule: Poems, 1992-2001 by **X. J. Kennedy**
The John Hopkins University Press, 2002, ISBN 0-8018-7168-9, $14.95/£11.00, 108pp.
Open Slowly: Poems by **Kate Light**
Zoo Press, 2003, ISBN 1-932023-04-6, $14.95. 68pp.

A BRIEF, BARBED EXCHANGE OF LETTERS took place in the April 2003 *New Criterion* between B. H. Fairchild and the *bête-noire* for many contemporary American poets, William Logan, a poet-critic himself, whose Randall Jarrell-ish wit and relish in demolishing most of the poetry that comes under his nose seems at times tediously programmatic. Fairchild pointed out what he purported to be errors of fact — it is always best to stick to fact, it makes one sound reasonable and balanced, rather than annoyed — in Logan's review of Fairchild's new book, a review which also made more than passing mention of *The Art of the Lathe*, with Logan remarking that the latter had been "praised for its sentimental account of working life." Not so, rejoined Fairchild; it was praised for its "UNsentimental account of working life." Additionally, in implying that the machine shop workers in Fairchild's book were mere factory workers and unskilled, Logan, Fairchild intimated, simply showed his ignorance of the situations in which many of *The Art of the Lathe*'s poems were set. "I worked in an oilfield machine shop for twelve years," Fairchild stated, "and feel qualified to speak of it truly." The implication was that Logan, the desk-bound critic, had no real knowledge of the situations behind those Fairchild poems he so fulsomely dismissed. In reply, Logan asserted tartly that to be desk-bound was now also true of Fairchild, and that he was a "desk-bound poet romanticizing his "heroic" past."

British readers can now make up their own minds as to the romanticism or otherwise of *The Art of the Lathe*, which is newly published in Britain by Philip Hoy's enterprising Waywiser Press. It's a handsome black glossy hardback, with a group photograph of workers of the American Iron and Machine Works Co, Houston, Texas, from 1940 on the cover. The book's American edition appeared in 1998; it has since been heaped with awards. (The American poetry scene's love of giving prizes seems sometimes almost in inverse relation to the indifference of the mainstream reading public.) Waywiser's edition lists seven, as well as a shortlisting for the National

Book Award in 1998. The book carries a handsome encomium by Anthony Hecht, in which he notes that many of the details here "should remind us that Mr Fairchild knows at first hand about industrial precision instruments and the sort of specialised labor that entails bodily exhaustion, exacting discipline, and physical danger. This makes him an altogether different breed of poet from, say, Byron, Tennyson, Cummings, Shelley, Pound, Browning and Yeats, all of whom, by fate or fortune were never obliged to work for a living." This all sounds impressive in a masculine, indeed, almost martial way: "bodily exhaustion, exacting discipline, and physical danger." A world indeed quite unlike that occupied by, it may be implied, those flabby louche degenerates who never had to do a stroke of work in their lives! No wonder a "desk-bound critic" such as Logan might have found it a touch risible, or feel, perhaps, got at. Most reviewers, and many award judges, however, seem to have taken Fairchild's background at face value and been duly impressed by the poems. So, does the book live up to the hype?

Well, yes and no. The lack of tonal variation — the poet has been accused of "humourlessness" and this seems, largely, true — makes *The Art of the Lathe*, for me, somewhat wearing to read entire. In fairness, however, the book's dryness of tone and lack of humour are also aspects of its strength. Its poems accommodate many of the incidentals of 1940s and 1950s American life — they are full of brand names, for instance — and the harshness and emotional and spiritual poverty of the bleak mid-western towns of Fairchild's background, while remaining open to the aesthetic dimension of existence. It is understandable that Anthony Hecht praises this poet's marrying of brutality and beauty as an aesthetic; it is frequently his own practice, too.

The fundamental dichotomy between the brute given and the aspirations beyond it is flagged up almost immediately. In the seven page, four-section 'Beauty', the book's terrific opening sequence, the poet is asked by his wife what he's thinking of while at "the Bargello in Florence"; he replies, "beauty", and in a flashback to his machine-shop life in Kansas, recalls how it's a word no male member of his family has ever used; the poem continues by recounting a memory of seeing Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss discussing the concept of beauty on TV:

> We were in Kansas
> eating barbecue-flavored potato chips and waiting
> for *Father Knows Best* to float up through the snow
> of rural TV in 1963. I felt transported, stunned.
> Here were two grown men discussing "beauty"
> seriously and with dignity as if they and the topic

> were as normal as normal topics of discussion
> between men such as soybean prices...
> ....
> They were discussing beauty and tossing around
> allusions to Plato and Aristotle and someone
> named Pater, and they might be homosexuals.
> That would be a natural conclusion, of course...

'Beauty' goes on to describe Bobby Sudduth, a repressed homosexual and foul-mouthed fellow machine worker, against the backdrop of the Kennedy assassination (Sudduth's comment is the ironic, "*Oswald, from that far, you got to admit, that shot was a beauty.*"). Section III describes the strange incident in which two young men from California "who look like Marlon Brando", taken on to cover extra work in the machine shop, suddenly strip off naked and stand among the machines before the men — an event, one imagines, almost as cataclysmic in its smaller context as the Kennedy assassination. They are told to leave by the poet's father, who steps in to intercept the red-necked and terrified Sudduth advancing on them menacingly with an iron file. The poem's fourth section returns at its close to the poet standing before Donatello's David, remembering his father's letter recounting the news of Sudduth's suicide by shotgun. "Beauty" is a remarkable poem, interweaving aesthetics, the homo-erotic subtleties and refusals of male experience, high art and the brutalised and brutalising Sudduth. It is written in a long rangy line, conversational, yet beautifully modulated and controlled, and carries an epigraph from James Wright's 'Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio', that gladiatorial poem in one reading of which sporting heroes become figureheads for the potential of escape into more successful lives.

Sport occurs more than once in this masculine book, primarily as an emblem of male "bonding". If, in 'Old Men Playing Baseball' the energy of the poem's somewhat straitened quatrains seems insufficient to take it clear of sentimentality — "Boys rise up in old men, wings begin to sprout/at their backs" the poem's narrator informs us unconvincingly at the end — then 'Body and Soul' is a baseball poem that could surely be enjoyed even by those uninterested in sport. It seems destined to become an American classic. Like 'Beauty' it employs a long-limbed narrative line which shows Fairchild at his best. A group of old men recount how in their earlier adulthood they used a fifteen-year old boy to make up a baseball side. The boy turns out to be not quite the stand-in they imagined, but the baseball genius Mickey Mantle; he sends every ball pitched at him beyond the horizon: "It is something to see." It's to the poem's credit that revealing the narrative's plot leaves undiminished

the force of this 110 line poem, much of which is in its atmosphere and incidentals. The poem continues:

> And that's the story, and those are the facts.
> But the facts are not the truth. I think, though, as I scan
> the faces of these old men now lost in the innings of their youth,
> I think I know what the truth of this story is, and I imagine
> it lying there in the weeds behind that Allis Chalmers
> just waiting for the obvious question to be asked: why, oh
> why in hell didn't they just throw around the kid, walk him,
> after he hit the third homer? Anybody would have,
> especially nine men with disappointed wives and dirty socks
> and diminishing expectations for whom winning at anything
> meant everything.

The poem develops into a moving meditation on masculinity and restraint, genius and the ordinary. The poet risks sentimentality in John Wayne-ish statements such as "...they did not [walk him] because they were men, and this was a boy," but he gets away with it because such statements are embedded in so much of the imagery of disillusion. The poem closes with the narrator's realisation that the old man recounting the story has

> encountered for his first and possibly
> only time the vast gap between talent and genius, has seen
> as few have in the harsh light of an Oklahoma Sunday, the blonde
> and blue-eyed bringer of truth, who will not easily be forgiven.

'Body and Soul' is a big, full-blown, stops-out bruiser of a poem which, matching in its virtuosity that of the "bringer of truth" at its heart, a reviewer despairs of praising enough. One simply wants to quote the whole thing.

Among such summits as 'Beauty' and 'Body and Soul', most other poems in a volume would be bound to seem foothills, and this is the case for this reader with much of the rest of *The Art of the Lathe*. This, however, is only relatively speaking. Most other poets would surely have been delighted to write pieces with the quality of 'The Book of Hours', a fine vignette mingling contemporary and artistic realities; 'The Invisible Man' with its wonderful evocation of children's literalist speculations — "If he itches, can he scratch? If he eats/Milk Duds, do they disappear?";'All the People in Hopper's Paintings'; a dry paean to nicotine and the aesthetic of smoking in 'Cigarettes' which even a lifelong non-smoker can appreciate; 'Speaking

the Names', an atmospheric memory of once-known people vanished from a "land of revivals and lost farms..."; 'Old Women'; and the book's title poem, a scholarly meditation on the history of the lathe which switches to the actual machinists beside the poet.

Despite the uniformity of tone, *The Art of the Lathe* is a powerful and unusual book. It contains two astonishing poems, big achievements in every sense of the word, as well as much solid and arresting writing. Anyone interested in some of the best recent American poetry should have this volume.

If B.H. Fairchild paints at times in Hopper hues, X. J. Kennedy in *The Lords of Misrule* seems something of a miniaturist, all lively watercolour wash and ink. Kennedy, though he has been co-opted by the New Formalists, is an old Formalist. He has written in metre and rhyme for over 40 years, producing along the way such classics as 'In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day' — this ageing good-time girl's lament for her lost youth is unforgettable, I'm told, when the poet himself performs it *falsetto* to the tune of 'The Old Orange Flute'— or his eight-line 'Little Elegy' for "Elizabeth"

> Whose quicksilver toes not quite
> Cleared the whirring edge of night.

"The whirring edge of night." What a phrase!

The Lords of Misrule contains sixty poems. It shows the old poet — born in 1929 — comfortable with his chosen styles. It brings together Kennedy the elegist, epigrammatist, social observer (and, at times, moralist) and quirky ironist, to boot. If there are no poems here to match, perhaps, his best, there are numerous very likeable and beautifully constructed ones. My own favourites would be 'The Purpose of Time is to Stop Everything Happening at Once', an amusing confirmation of what appears to be a quotation from Einstein; 'A Snapshot Rediscovered'; 'Jimmy Harlow'; 'Street Moths'; 'Décor'; 'Mr Longfellow's Iron Pen'; 'Heard Through the Walls of the Racetrack Glen Motel'; 'Obscenity'; 'A Beard of Bees'; and 'A Curse on a Thief', a comic revenge piece in Irish Gaelic mode. Here, for instance, is 'A Beard of Bees', subtitled '*at the farmer's market*', which captures something of Kennedy's idiosyncratic vision:

> The arbor of his chin
> Bedangled with a cluster
> Of yellow grapes that buzz
> Like an electric razor,

This raiser of honeybees
With face in half-eclipse
Coaxes some hairs aside
To clear space for his lips.

He's a master of close shaves.
How well he does one thing,
With what abandon braves
Disaster's sting
Quite unlike refugees
Crossing a land-mine sector.
A whir — his mustache flies
Away in search of nectar.

If this, admittedly, is slight, it's slight in the manner of a modern day Herrick; its freshness makes one understand why Kennedy is such a popular children's poet.

Some women readers may well be put off a little on occasion by Kennedy's unquestioningly masculine take on matters — in 'Deer Ticks' for instance, he can compare a Taranto brothel's "famous sixteen year-old whore/Who even let her patrons kiss her lips" with a lyme-disease spreading deer and express surprise that this "vision delicate as breeze" could pack "the sword" of TB, with which she infects an officer. It's hard to imagine most women having any sympathy whatever with Officer Brock's plight — their concern is likely to be all with that unfortunate sixteen year-old pressurised, in all likelihood, into prostitution — but, then, Kennedy seems never to have had much time for political correctness, as a dip into his *Cross Ties: Selected Poems* will show. It contains exuberant poems with titles such as 'Flagellant's Song', part of which goes, amusingly, "Hooray, the birchbark's thwacking!". To his credit, Kennedy has little of the carefulness of sensibility which its detractors sense in a good deal of the New Formalism. And side by side here with a piece such as 'Deer Ticks' is the somewhat Augustan 'Obscenity', a satire on the widespread consumption of various forms of pornography: "Can actual love endure?" the poet asks. He stands up for genuine emotion:

No website though it tease,
  No film with core steel-hard
Can blaze like Eloise
  For kindly Abelard.

Arf! arf! the smut hound bays,
  Belaboring his flea.
True lovers let us praise
  And pure indecency.

An epigrammatic wit such as the closing sentence's final phrase is one of Kennedy's enduring qualities.

Kennedy also has an acute eye for the contemporary, as in 'Police Court Saturday Morning', or 'Street Moths', a portrait of sex-starved youths eyeing up the passing talent, in which sexual success would be "a fix of light", or in the wryly comic 'Décor', where the pizza parlour's ancient family portraits gaze from the walls

in helpless resignation
From painted backdrops — waterfalls and trees —
On blue-jeaned lovers making assignation
Over a pepperoni double-cheese.

'A Curse on a Thief', meanwhile, demonstrates that Kennedy is one of the last people one would want to be cursed by. A thief steals fisherman Paul Dempster's "handsome tackle box" of thirty years standing, bringing the narrator's wish that

The bass
He catches from Paul Dempster's pilfered gear
Jump from his creel, make haste for his bare rear,
And, fins outthrust, slide up his underpass.

And that:

he be made to munch a pickerel raw,
Its steely gaze fixed on him as he chews,
Choking on every bite, while metal screws
Inexorably lock his lower jaw...

Tonally, *The Lords of Misrule* is a pleasingly various collection. One of Kennedy's most refreshing characteristics is his artistic extroversion. There is little dwelling on his own psychological complexes here and, despite occasional inversions and oddnesses of syntax to a modern ear, his verse seems never less than sprightly and cleanly constructed.

A piece such as his 'Jimmy Harlow', an elegy for a friend irreparably

injured in a car accident who died at age thirteen, though quite free by Kennedy's standard, and with the cavil that, to the best of my knowledge, hares don't live in burrows, gives some idea of his best qualities: clarity of diction, clear-eyed empathy, and a strong awareness, as he himself has written, paraphrasing Hardy, that in poetry "only emotion endures."

> My third best-friend in grade-school, Jimmy Harlow,
> Like some shy twitch-nosed hare
> Yearning to quit its burrow,
> By teacher's harsh words once reduced to tears —
> That day when, nine, you charged across the street
> Not reckoning the car you'd meet by chance,
> You stained a blanket thrown
> To swerve the snowflakes from your broken bones.
> You whined there, waiting for the ambulance.
> ....
> I saw you last
> At a New Year's party, locked in fierce embrace
> With the loveliest girl in the place,
> Dredging her with your sharp-chinned corpse-gray head.
> I was aghast.
> By April you were dead.
>
> Lie in the ease of winter, Jimmy Harlow.
> If I begrudged you her, I do not now.

Kate Light's *Open Slowly* follows on from her lively debut volume, *The Laws of Falling Bodies* — sassy, quirky, thoroughly cosmopolitan love poems written by a young-ish single New York woman in a style Millay in emotional frankness, Dickinsonian in idiosyncrasy. *Open Slowly* is a more obsessive collection, whose narrator — who, it seems reasonable to assume, is the poet herself — is fixated on one man, perhaps he whose

> ... long
> strong
> exhalations
> of bone
> and soft fur
> draped all over
> her

she celebrates in 'Greg's Legs'. Whatever, he is a typically dilatory man, at least to the volume's narrator. To compound matters, she loves him to distraction. This is the emotional underpinning for *Open Slowly*. The poet tries to fathom her inscrutable and impossible lover, an attempt doomed to that failure inevitable when logic attempts to comprehend illogic. Of course it's easy as a reviewer to wish that friends had merely helped the poet to snap out of it — the personal nature of this book invites such comments — but, as anyone knows who's been there, the obsessions of Eros are not so easily escaped. Light is loosely associated with New Formalism — though she has always seemed too sassily individual, too much her own artist to be subsumed in any movement — and many of her poems rhyme and scan, though not at the expense of her own voice. One never feels, as Randall Jarrell said was the mark of dead formality, that one hears a metronome ticking in her verse; Light's poems all have solid beating hearts, sometimes too much so. At her worst, she can seem just another love-crazed woman endlessly circling round the same theme, and all perspective is lost. (She can write, without a blush, "*I loved him so...*".) At its best, however, and there is a reasonable amount of that, the poetry becomes the heart's authentic notation of her quest to be bonded to her soul's match — the *raison d'être* of love poetry down the centuries: that desire for, as Sappho had it, one loved face on the whole dark earth.

Light's poems often give the impression that she is discovering what she wants to say line by line; she has a fine ear for the nuances of speech. Here, in 'Getting Serious', the narrator describes an encounter with her lover as he expresses concern for another woman:

> Half asleep did you sign something one night,
> get drunk and marry some chick you'd just met?
> How did you get there, how did you GET
> SERIOUS, a fiddle thrust into your hand, lady
> by your side? Shit. And now you're calling her, frantic
> the night she's not home yet, swearing you don't care,
>   swearing that nothing's going on, NOTHING, mind you,
>   ROMANTIC —
>   it's just that...you're concerned, because she's NOT THERE;
>   IS SHE ALL RIGHT?

Light expertly captures both the man's speech progression and the narrator's increasing distraction at the situation; not until the reader scrutinises this does she realise that the poem is — rather deftly — rhymed.

Open Slowly is divided into five sections named after the seasons; it's movement is from "Fall" to "Fall", as if to emphasise the circularity of the narrative. Yet one would be ill-advised to make any assumptions as to the lightness or otherwise of the poems' contents on the basis of their season: the ordering seems chronological. Her lover leaves her, her lover comes back; she's five weeks pregnant without knowing it, until she miscarries, and he behaves with predictable indifference; she becomes intrigued by documentaries about the brain and its capacity, not least for addiction — whether to drugs (a predilection of the lover's) or to love (her own high). The book has none of the acid dismissals of a Dorothy Parker, or of Fleur Adcock who in one poem would have her name etched in acid on a former lover's eyeballs; Light's narrator never comes into a full possession of what Stevie Smith called "anger's freeing power"; instead, the narrator thrashes around on the leash of her dilemma and, even at the book's close, is still dreaming a reconciliation, imagining the soul calling "off its guard", when

> the wish that all of us were born into
> rises up, and I come back, in joy, to you.

Some readers will find this all deeply affecting, others, somewhat exasperating. Whatever else it is, *Open Slowly* is an attentive charting of the weathers of the heart in the throes of a grand passion. The best poems here — which include 'Getting Serious', 'Greg's Legs', 'Rules of Sleep', 'But He Carried', 'Whale Bone Pelvis Moon', 'I Know What the Answer Is', 'The Apple' (a lacerating exposé of the sexual possessiveness behind love), 'Collecting Pretty Things', and 'Little Miss' — are powerful expressions of grief and irony arising from the book's central dilemma. In *Open Slowly* Kate Light has written a vigorous, if at times an uneven book; her voice is quite unlike anyone else's.