

but making them so top heavy that they capsized in the bath and had to have keels added, not least because I remember similar problems with my own rather more pacific sailing vessels of a decade later. However, one point of the book is also perhaps to preserve something of a family's history. Certainly we are told: "The rich have their portraits and family trees. The less rich are lucky if they have a few names in a family bible. We had no family bible and everyone before my grandparents had vanished into oblivion."

However, just as in the poems there is nearly always something leading out into strange territory, so this is not just a family memoir and a lot of very good History is quietly slipped in. No more is this so than in the description of the Daniel family listening to Churchill's Finest Hour speech on the Radio. The father observes that with Gandhi about, the likelihood of the Empire lasting a thousand years is remote. The Mother remembers with unease Gandhi visiting the Prime Minister without a proper suit and the implicit discourtesy. But then she gets Churchill right (or one side of him): a warrior and descendant of the Duke of Marlborough and implies that is what is needed to beat Hitler. Like of all this book it is a canny piece of observation.

FRED BEAKE

WELL-BEING: PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND SOCIAL...

Born In The NHS by Wendy French and Jane Kirwan. The Hippocrates Press, 12 Chandos Street, London, W1G 9DR; 240pp., £12.00

This book is a collaboration between two poets who have been employed in the National Health Service for many years. Jane Kirwan as a dentist; Wendy French in the field of mental health, having been head of Maudsley and Bethlem Hospital School for fifteen years. The book is fragmentary autobiography in prose and poems. By 'fragmentary' I mean a galaxy of anecdote, reminiscence, observation, opinion and so forth that, quite simply, adds up to a wonderful panoramic view of the work of the NHS. It is an A to Z of the illnesses that receive treatment under the NHS umbrella and must surely count as one of the most delightful medical books ever assembled. But while clearly both of its authors firmly believe in universal healthcare paid for by the state, as propaganda the book has

the least designs on the reader of anything I have ever read...to echo Keats on poetry. And this is because the authors come at the subject from a background of objectivity by virtue of their scientific training. Also, there is never any overt proselytizing or rant; but through the additional vehicle of poetry – itself, when successful, a child of truth – a bringing of constant delight and fascination to the medical journey. By way of illustration, here are a few lines from Jane Kirwan's poem 'Gold', about a day she went into work, despite being pregnant, to fix a patient's tooth:

Three months before you were born,
the technician off sick,
I went in early to do the casting.

The wax impression of a patient's fractured cusp
already embedded in plaster,

I set the mould in the centrifuge

added the gold – it forms in the last few seconds
of a star's death –
you started to kick.

Note 'the last few seconds / of a star's death' giving a different universality to the description of an already universal experience of dental treatment.

Elsewhere, one gets a witty note in prose from Jane that is both anecdotal and illustrative of a radically different approach...even to dentistry: 'A friend of my sister in the sixth form in the early 1960s wanted to be a nun. Part of the preparation was to have her perfectly healthy teeth extracted and have full dentures. The convent superior said this was to save the cost of future dental treatment.'

And here is Wendy French, ever-alert to minutiae, to those most ordinary, if troublesome, of creatures: bed bugs. 'Bed bugs have returned. Even expensive hotels in New York and London now report incidents of infestation and they're extremely difficult to get rid of: freezing them out seems the only satisfactory method...' Clearly, it is best to stay in hotels without heating, if we wish to avoid bed bug bites!

Here is a short poem of Wendy's in the section devoted to 'Pain'. She quotes, shortly before, Hannah Arendt who 'observes that pain is the most intense feeling we know, yet the most private and least communicable'.

MESSAGE

The night you killed yourself the duty nurse phoned.
Swore she'd left a message on my machine.

So after I'd heard officially, replaying my messages –
your voice – you say the day, the time, I'll be there.

The summer exhibition or *Brighton Rock* at the ICA.
I can't decide, I'm with the smoke-filled clouds
travelling aimlessly across pure cold and pale skies.

*Although this young girl inflicted pain on herself it was clear that the
emotional pain she suffered had been far worse than the physical pain.*

There is so much in this book, and too much to say about it for a
short review. I'll give my last quote with a whole poem by Wendy French
from the section on 'Palliative Care':

IIN LIMBO

So different from Guy's, no outdated anti-smoking sign, just
the usual well-thumbed magazines and leaflets
offering massage, homeopathy. The nurse adjusts
the tubes, checks the intravenous drip,
changes pads, so we, the visitors to this other world
can leave assured it's safe, secure to house the dying.

Death here is softly sprung, neutral coloured,
no squeaking up corridors, no clanking trolleys.
The notes from Bach's cello sonata come from somewhere,
this digging down to find what lies beneath.
We're here counting each movement as an open wound
waits for healing. The nurse will come, say the unsayable
but all I can think of is you, so adaptable
and how you said you'll learn to love the dark.

Finally, having cast around for a phrase to praise this book especially, I've
come up with 'a good read': that cliché not often associated with books
either scientific or poetic!

WILLIAM OXLEY

THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT MIGHT OCCUR

Waiting for Bluebeard by Helen Ivory. Bloodaxe Books. 112pp. £9.95p.
Sying by Steven Matthews. Waterloo Press, 95 Wick Hall, Fruze Hill,
BN3 1NG. 55pp. £10.00.

The Night My Sister Went To Hollywood by Hilda Sheehan. Cultured
Llama Publishing, 11, London Road, Teynham, . 60pp. £8.00.

Helen Ivory's *Waiting for Bluebeard* is in two parts the first exploring the
childhood of a girl who grows up, in the second part, to be a woman living
in Bluebeard's house. In the interview I did with her for the spring issue
of *Poetry Salzburg Review*, Ivory acknowledged that the collection is the
closest she has come to autobiography, but it would be a mistake to
conflate the autobiographical and the personal. These are intensely felt
personal poems, successfully transforming their experience into general
truth.

'Moon Landing' opens Part One, with the narrator's pregnant
mother watching men playing "hopsotch on the moon" while her
daughter "will not budge". Leaving the hospital, the mother is "oblivious
of the entourage of swans" following her from myth, and equally oblivious
when her daughter rises to the ceiling as a soap bubble, to remain there
until she is "covered in cobwebs / and had begun to form words in my
throat". The use of personal pronouns throughout makes this the
narrator's story, and it is a story full of moons and cats, ghosts and séances,
"kittens gone from their basket" to the "mother's bone-hollow meow".
Significantly, in 'My Mother's Room,' there is a hint that the narrator's
mother too is occupying a Bluebeard's house, "but with hands turned to
fishes", so that she is unable to open a closed door. The horror seems quite
specific in 'The Family at Night,' with the mother "in the kitchen
pretending to eat" while the children see little with their "button eyes"
and speak even less with their "stitched-up mouths". The rarely-present
father is the ghost in these poems, a figure who builds a fairy tale
nightmare shed in 'The Story of the Shed,' and turns himself into his own
twin in 'My Two Fathers,' one twin sulkily "asleep like a bear", the other
a skin torso filled with stones, anchored "to the armchair". Out of such
surreal and threatening imagery is Bluebeard's house born.

In Part Two, the narrative 'I' becomes an observed 'she', an