which to move, infinite possibilities to choose. Thus, this excess itself becomes menacing, its humor dark, because it is meaningless.

Marie shows Toussaint moving beyond gestures of futility and gestures of liberation, and beyond the existential problems of the *nouveau roman*, but it does not show him solving them. Instead, he substitutes intimacy for freedom—which, though it may indulge in rainstorms and slanting yellow streetlight as its milieu, may at least be attainable. And in dramatizing this intimacy, Toussaint's meditations on the circumstances of fate and death do not deflect storytelling or plot, as they do in the earlier novels, but rather look into its very center with a sentimentality that can no longer be dismissed as ironic: "Its only aim the quintessence of the real, its tender core, pulsing and vibrant, a truth close to invention, the twin of fabrication, the ideal truth." In *The Truth About Marie*, Toussaint comes very close to mastering a style that embraces both ideals, so that the novel, with its cliché rainstorms and dazzling ceremonial descriptions, is like Marie's wildflower arrangements, which the narrator praises in the novel's closing section for "never forcing novelty or originality," yet calmly and expertly bringing together, in one place, "the obvious and the impossible."

John Lennox

§

Roy Fisher, *Selected Poems*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2011. 155pp. $15.95

August Kleinzahler's compact selection from Roy Fisher's fifty years of poems presents a poet of consistent preoccupations: his native city of Birmingham, landscapes of the British Midlands, his own domestic interiors, and American jazz music. But despite this steadiness of attention, Fisher is also a poet of great formal variety, and his restlessness, in addition to his avoidance of the literary centers that have defined postwar British poetry, has made him hard to place. While Marjorie Perloff has praised Fisher's 1971 experiment "The Cut Pages" as an "unwitting precursor" to Ron Silliman's "new sentence," and Donald Davie has compared Fisher to Philip Larkin, the poet presented here keeps company with neither Language poets nor the Movement. Furthermore, the poet shies away from personal anecdote and overt self-expression. Kleinzahler characterizes Fisher's poetry as "almost entirely without charm," restless and impersonal, but the poet who emerges from these pages is finally an intimate, deeply companionable one. For Fisher, writing poetry is the work of finding himself in relation to the things around him and the ideas in his head. Thus, this modest and seemingly impersonal

writing reveals a speaker who lives a life in and by poetry.

The 1971 sequence "Metamorphoses" exemplifies the kind of non-narrative impersonality Kleinzahler calls typical of Fisher's work. Not once in the five prose sections does a first-person pronoun appear, and few events disturb the poem's scenes. Yet the voice in "Metamorphoses" is extraordinarily patient in its deep observation:

> Red beans in to soak. A thickness of them, almost brimming the glass basin, swelling and softening together, the colour of their husks draining out to a fog of blood in the water.
>
> The mass of things, indistinguishable one from another, loosing their qualities into the common cloud, their depth squashed by the refraction and obscured in the stain, forms pushed out of line. Five beans down it may be different.
>
> Down in the levels, it's possible to think outward to the edge; with a face to the light, there's no looking out, only hunching before the erosion. Back!

The poem gradually transforms quotidian particulars into abstractions. The particular objects ("red beans") give way to their qualities ("a thickness" and "the colour of their husks"), which culminate in a metaphor ("a fog of blood"). The second paragraph generalizes further, dissolving particulars into "the mass of things," its "indistinguishable" categories and properties. The paragraph is also *about* categories and properties, meaning its descriptions are both literal and figurative; "forms" serves as both the beans and the idea of the beans. Likewise, in the third paragraph, the "levels" are not only the layers of soaking beans but also the thick of daily experience. At this level of abstraction, "five beans down it may be different" is an almost awkward qualification. It signals that Fisher's modesty and commitment to the physical facts do not permit indefinite flights of fancy. The exclamation "Back!" warns the speaker himself away from the edge and back toward the thick of things themselves.

The line "it's possible to think outward to the edge" becomes a kind of phenomenological assertion that describes what Fisher does in "Metamorphoses" and other poems. He accounts for his method in a statement printed on the back cover of his 1971 volume *Matrix*:

> Almost without exception my poems are propositions or explorations rather than reactions to personal experience. The poems are

> to do with getting about in the mind, and I tackle that in any way I can. I have to get from one cluster of ideas to another without a scaffolding of logic or narrative, but I want to make the transitions within the terms of what I call poetry. I take it that the way a poem moves is the index of where the feeling in it lies: often, I think, my poems set up movements towards overt feeling from beginnings in neutral or enigmatic scenes.

What Fisher calls poetry, then, is not an anecdote of an experience but the form of his experience itself—not a way of talking about himself but a way of becoming himself. To read his poems, even when the poet does not refer to himself, is to observe him "getting about in the mind," among the particulars of a daily life and the ideas that attend them.

Thus the variety of Fisher's poetic forms indicates just how many ways one might "get about in" daily life. The steeply enjambed free verse of "The Memorial Fountain" is also intently observational, but where "Metamorphoses" steadily tracks the mind at work on a single object, here the eye more swiftly lights upon multiple things:

> The fountain plays
> through summer dusk in gaunt shadows,
> black constructions
> against a late clear sky,
> water in the basin
> where the column falls
> shaking,
> rapid and wild,
> in cross-waves, in back-waves,
> the light glinting and blue,
> as in a wind
> though there is none.
> Harsh
> skyline!
> Far-off scaffolding
> bitten against the air.

The spread of lines across the page gives a sense that these multiple phenomena take place at once in a given space. The shifting left margin loosens the links between lines, suggesting a porous quality to the various objects and elements—light, water, air—in the scene. We might read "in cross-waves, in back-waves" as describing the shaking of the "water in the basin / where the column falls" or "the light glinting and blue"; that last adjective, "blue,"

further conflates light, water, and air by describing one or all in mutual terms. Is the water blue, or is the light in the water blue? Can the air display color? Fisher makes it so we need not—and perhaps cannot—choose between discrete impressions of a scene.

But despite his talent for complex observation, Fisher regularly diminishes his art with self-deprecation. That suggestive passage from "The Memorial Fountain" is dispersed into irony several lines later: "As for the fountain: / nothing in the describing / beyond what shows / for anyone." The poem turns then toward the poet himself:

> And the scene?
> a thirty-five-year-old man,
> poet,
> by temper, realist,
> watching a fountain
> and the figures round it
> in garish twilight,
> working
> to distinguish an event
> from an opinion;
> this man,
> intent and comfortable—
>
> Romantic notion.

Fisher avoids the first-person voice even while referring obviously to himself, and in doing so demonstrates the fine difference between irony and self-detachment. By setting himself above the scene to comment on it, he is able to acknowledge his struggle to achieve accurate discernment. The poet he describes is "working / to distinguish an event / from an opinion," careful not to suggest that he can overcome his own "realist temper" or his "Romantic notion" of writing. The tacit acknowledgment is that, labor as the poet might, event and opinion will not finally be distinguished; for Fisher, ideas and experience will not come apart. Although the rhetorical abatement allows him some distance from himself, the speaker's self-deprecation simultaneously invites the reader into his confidence.

As Fisher calls attention to his tendency toward rhetorical impersonality, the poet makes his own personality—his role as the speaker of these words—a primary condition of the poem. He begins "Of the Empirical Self and for Me" by directly addressing the matter of personal pronouns:

In my poems there's seldom
any *I* or *you*—

you know me, Mary;
you wouldn't expect it of me—

Here the poet's consciousness of himself as a third person is transposed to the first person. Subsequent poems from Fisher's middle period take up this first-person self-consciousness as an explicit problem. In his dispositional modesty, he tends to subordinate personality to observation, but he also wryly acknowledges that such modesty risks aloofness. Fisher's challenge, then, is to speak more forthrightly of himself in the first person while preserving his fidelity to external things.

The long poem at the center of *Selected Poems*, "Wonders of Obligation," elegantly achieves that balance. Across fourteen pages, memories of wartime and contemporary Birmingham, primary school "jakes," and childhood picture books mingle with images of hares, moths, and the changing sky. The poem unfolds in irregular stanzas separated by irregular spaces as Fisher idles through recurrent words and images at a new speed. We drift from a straightforwardly autobiographical memory:

I saw
the mass graves dug
the size of workhouse wards
into the clay

ready for most of the people
the air-raids were going to kill:

still at work, still in the fish-queue;
some will have looked down
into their own graves on Sundays

to, several pages later, subtly drawn images of regional fauna:

Near Hartington
in a limestone defile
the barn owl
flaps from an ash
away through the mournful afternoon

misjudging its moment
its omen undelivered.

The hare
dodging towards the skyline at sunset
with a strange goodwill—
he'll do for you and me.

Fisher moves among memory, observation, and interpretation, and rather than insist upon connections between them, he lets us hear quiet echoes of one in the others—for instance, of German bombers in the inscrutably ominous barn owl. The poet of scrupulous observation ("five beans down") remains finely tuned to physical particulars, but he permits them to signal an order beyond the physical. Fisher does not insist on the meaning of omens—they remain "undelivered" and "strange"—but he acknowledges their mysterious presence and, even as he retreats from interpretation, takes comfort in what meaning he does read in the world: "He'll do for you and me."

In the associative logic and irregular form of "Wonders of Obligation," the poet recognizes himself:

Now I have come
through obduracy
discomfort and trouble
to recognize it

my life keeps
leaking out of my poetry to me
in all directions. It's untidy
ragged and bright
and it's not
used to things

mormo maura
asleep in the curtain
by day.

In such moments, Fisher's poetry inverts standard autobiography. Rather than writing in response to his own experience, he reads his own experience in the poetry he has written—the graph his life has made upon the page. *Selected Poems* makes a portion of that graph widely available to American readers for the first time.

Patrick Morrissey