

Gael Turnbull, *There Are Words: Collected Poems*. Exeter: Shearsman (in association with Mariscat Press), 2006. 496pp. \$30

The poet and publisher Gael Turnbull (1928–2004) was born in Edinburgh, grew up in Canada, studied medicine in Cambridge, England, and by the late 1950s was working as an anesthetist and general practitioner in Ventura, California. It was there in 1959 that he founded *Migrant*, one of the first and best of the mimeographed little magazines that transformed the poetry scene of the late 1950s and 1960s. *Migrant*, and the small press into which it evolved, formed an essential line of communication between poets in the UK and North America, publishing Ed Dorn's *What I See in the Maximus Poems* and Robert Creeley's *The Whip* as well as celebrated early books by Anselm Hollo, Roy Fisher, and Ian Hamilton Finlay. A generous and independent figure, Turnbull was one of the finest Scottish poets of the gifted and adventurous generation that also includes Finlay, Hamish Henderson, and Edwin Morgan.

Playfulness is the engine of Gael Turnbull's poetry. Again and again in this remarkable and often very moving *Collected Poems*, Turnbull reminds himself, and us, that it's OK for poetry to not absolutely always be a matter of life and death, that the acts which best define us as human might, in fact, be the things no one needed us to do, but we did anyway. Gael Turnbull, remember, was a medical doctor and a morris dancer.

Late in his career, he wrote a wonderful strand of poems in praise of the gratuitous, like "A Racing Walker":

who is the self-mortifying saint of travellers,
ascetic of movement, clown of urgency,
even a sort of hero of the ungainly—
and commands our amazement
by the ferocity of his intransigence.

Turnbull had a fascination for such curiosities. In *Transmutations* (1997), he describes another:

A VERY INGENIOUS MECHANISM, keeping time to within half a second
a week, the limit of such device when not running in a vacuum: the hands
driven by an electric motor which raises a gravity arm which in turn falls to
drive a pendulum, which, by its position, determines that period of swing
during which the motor is made to run faster so that over the whole period
the rate is most precisely varied,

and thus, though pendulum and movement are never actually connected, yet the latter drives the former and the former controls the latter.

Turnbull himself would take the idea of the poem as a “machine made out of words” to its logical conclusion (he had a deep respect for that other poet-doctor, William Carlos Williams), constructing hand-made machines for displaying moving text. There’s a real sense of the physical pleasure of making in Turnbull’s work, from his early struggles with the ink duplicator in printing *Migrant* to the beautiful late poem-installation, printed upside-down to be read reflected in a Glasgow pond (not in the *Collected Poems*, but reproduced on Turnbull’s page at the British Electronic Poetry Centre).

The book is a monument—too static a word—to possibility, the possibility of continuing to write, of continuing to perceive and respond, over fifty years of a life lived at a pitch of sensitivity which could easily have battered down the hatches for self-preservation. I don’t think Turnbull was big on self. One poem paraphrases David Hume:

he allowed others
might be different in this particular
of their being but for his part, when
he entered intimately into what is called
himself, always stumbled upon some perception,
never caught himself without a perception,
never could observe anything but
each perception and were all removed
should have been entirely annihilated

Note the characteristically swallowed pronouns. Throughout the poetry, Turnbull seems most himself where his self intervenes the least.

There are the fine, late “texturalist” poems, each a “reweaving of an existing text into another texture, previously only implicit.” My favorite is “All the Blue: From the Director’s Book of Josiah Spode,” the English ceramicist’s dramatic recipe for heating a mixture of plaster, borax, and cobalt monoxide in a reverberatory furnace to create a substance known simply as “blue”:

but as a large proportion
of the colour will persist
in ore sunk to the bottom,
it will be necessary
to pursue the same method

with the residue and then—
although the exact duration
and quantity of heat

