Introducing Karen Solie, I would adapt what Joseph Brodsky said some thirty years ago of the great Les Murray: ‘It would be as myopic to regard Mr Murray as an Australian poet as to call Yeats an Irishman. He is, quite simply, the one by whom the language lives.’ Solie is Canadian (born in 1966, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, of Norwegian immigrant stock), the author of three previous books of poems, *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Modern and Normal* (2005) and *Pigeon* (2009), and now this ‘new and selected’, and, yes, she is the one by whom the language lives. I wonder, a little bitterly, what the point of English as a soi-disant world language is, if our smug maps have only the UK and the US on them, and everywhere else is apocrypha or appendix, the province of specialists or pity. Enormous credit goes to Bloodaxe for commissioning this exhilarating volume, Solie’s first book publication outside Canada.

If I wanted to show someone – an agnostic – what a modern poem can do, I would show them something by Lawrence Joseph, or Frederick Seidel, or Karen Solie, all different but all modern, all *modo hodie*, all fresh today. A poem of Solie’s is sentences in unpredictable but deep sequence in unpredictable but braced lines. It seems out of control, but isn’t; it exhibits grace while falling, which is perhaps what grace is. It runs the gamut from nervous, garrulous charm to the glory and shear of impersonal style: it is idiomatic splicing in one voice. It offers wisdom, fact and bitter experience (yes, it is pessimistic, or negative, or critical, or ironic, depending on what one word one wants to use, but then so would Whitman be if he were back among us: in Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* Ulrich says ‘the man of genius is duty
bound to attack’ and Brecht wrote in ‘An die Nachgeborenen’: ‘Truly, I live in dark times!/A bland word is foolish. An unlined brow/Indicates impercipient. The man laughing only/Laughs because the terrible news/Has not yet reached him’). It is a noticing, a naming and a connecting, an electric errancy. It is round-the-corner knight moves in a world of pawns, or almost worse, rooks; googlies and chinamen among dobbers. It is a widening and widening optic, that returns us unexpectedly (‘the variable/when the outcome is unknown,/as always the outcome is unknown’ – take that, Mr Rumsfeld) to the place we began. It may be to comic or grievous effect. It is an adventitious gallivanting movement across country that makes denser, bunched sense than any more rational or measured or predictable progress. It looks baroque, but actually it’s stringent – and vice versa. (I’ve come to think you can’t actually have poetry without dandyism, and that includes all those I’ve mentioned: Frederick Seidel self-evidently, but also those seemingly austere figures Whitman, Brecht, Murray and Brodsky. As Wallace Stevens said, ‘It must give pleasure.’) It looks random, but like Thom Gunn’s blue jay scuffling in the bushes, it ‘follows some hidden purpose’. Other things, set beside it, look lame and tedious – like prose. It reminds me of another axiom of Brodsky’s, that poetry is a function of speed: it gets there faster than prose, and goes further.

Quoting will come, but it is hell, and you need to know that. Solie doesn’t write many short poems – say, 12 lines or fewer. They are wonderful (‘Untitled’, ‘The Prime Minister’, ‘Pigeon’), but somehow atypical; her standard length is a full page and upwards, say thirty to fifty lines — pace the author, more like a medium-haul engine. So I eye up a passage in a longer poem, and before long I neither know where to stop nor where to begin. I go on to another one. Same deal. A review — a representation — of the poems is utterly beyond me if I can’t even take representative bites out of them: I am left staring down at their beguiling, unassimilable teem and squirm. There is hardly a poem in The Living Option that I wouldn’t cite with alacrity and delight. I could write out the table of contents (Solie has wonderful titles: ‘Your News Hour Is Now Two Hours’ or ‘Cardio Room, Young Women’s Christian Association’ or ‘Your Premiums Will Never Increase’. As good as anything by Eno). I am floundering. The only reservation I have about the book is that it leaves out a number of other, equally marvellous poems. Perhaps that’s where I should begin: the livre des refusés, grief at omission (though please understand that there is more than enough in The Living Option to overwhelm any new reader – 65 poems out of a total of 143 in the three books, plus 26 new pieces)?

Enough with the computations. Take the first poem in Solie’s first book, a sly little shocker called ‘Eating Dirt’. There’s a home movie, it seems, of the author in infancy, a sessile toddler, ‘huge and white on the just-turned plot./An early grinning vegetable/sprung up overnight, feeding/methodically, in fistfuls’ – she is doing what it says in the title. With grave
charm, Solie worries ‘at the wisdom/of this documentary, its complicity/in my vice, where it
has led’. ‘After all’, she says sagely, it’s not as though she doesn’t know: ‘some cravings/are
only charming when you’re small.’ So what does she do in the poem? Knock it on the head,
desist, reform, try something else, cold turkey? Not a bit of it. She carries on, taking care to
do it secretly, though she tells us about it, and it sounds worse than anything before, with
‘lick’ and ‘fingers’ and ‘private’: ‘I’ve since learned,/when potting houseplants,/to lick my
fingers/in private.’ The poem establishes Solie in her East of Eden terrain (no pun), which is
the less than ideal, the less than attractive, the recidivist, the unlucky, even the cursed and
doomed. The poem pushes me towards another instaurational poem, by another farm child:
‘Digging’, the first poem in Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*. Both are poems that lay
claim to a slightly unexpected, even slightly implausible, persistence, while acknowledging
that their makers have left the straight way: one digs with his pen, the other retires to eat dirt.

Or take another un-adopted poem, one or two along in *Short Haul Engine*, ‘Boyfriend’s Car’.
Every word dangerous, every word a specification:

Rhetorical question. Naturally,
a girl would choose
the adult conspiracy
of smoked glass, darkened interiors.
Privacy. Its language
of moving parts, belts,
and unfamiliar fluids.

Again, the fast puns, the spaces in the narration, the withdrawn third person, the fearless co-
opting of abstractions (privacy, language, adult), the uneasy coexistence of power – or
powerlessness – and glory, divine and human (surely Apollo hovers somewhere behind the
poem). ‘Hair in the door handle,/white white arms/prettily against/the grain, the red’ is as
compressed and expressive as anything in Akhmatova (say, the polluted image of her braids
in the man’s pipe-smoke). The finish is a split of pity and terror, maximised by the line-breaks:
‘When she asked/to go home he said/Well now that depends/on you.’ As she will go on to
show in the ‘found’ poems of *Modern and Normal* (say, the jock’s monologue in ‘Bruce. After
Last Call’), Solie has a dandy’s ear for speech, others’ as well as her own.

Another excluded poem, from *Modern and Normal*, is ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above
Duncairn Dam’. A literary, even a poetic-sounding title, one of precious few moments of suggestion or allusion (given the savage sneer of ‘reading Bly by night/Rand by day’, it’s probably just as well for literature). It’s one of the great things about Solie: so much is primary, hasn’t been written about before, pays no dues, does without obeisances or retreading or sheepishness. And when she does quote or refer, it’s not from poets but philosophers and thinkers, her preferred form of accelerant or authority. (Hence the unusual thinkiness of her poems, their unfashionable tolerance for abstraction, and, not coincidentally, my difficulty in quoting from them.) Here, though, a touch of Wordsworth or Coleridge in the title, a bit of Romantic plein-airism and genius loci. And where are we? A fish camp. Somewhere where an aggressive type of snail has kept away moneyed visitors, though in other respects conditions are favourable. Still, the place has failed to take off in the desired way. Ergo Redneck heaven. It gets wonderfully dry, factual notations:

On the north side, squatters’ cabins and planted shade trees. Further up is the dump. Burn pit, fish guts, trash. Recall the neighbours. You can’t just do whatever you want. There are certain kinds of boating. Gull Lake’s close. We all drive.

A kind of self-governance evolves, a highly specific ecosystem, the beginnings of a kind of history: ‘Simmie, adjacent, was a town once. The little plank church/makes a good photograph. Someone’s junk is in it.’ It’s as perfect as a Walker Evans picture.

As Brodsky says, poets like Murray give you the living language, but you get the country thrown in, extra, no charge. It gets you thinking about the supposedly uninteresting condition of being Australian or being Canadian; of patterns of settlement in these supposedly uninteresting places without much history: that of Australia is peripheral, that of Canada (where 80 per cent of the population lives within a hundred miles of the US border) is south-heavy. If Australia’s a beach with a pretence of no hinterland (‘the bush, or as we now say the Land,/the three quarters of our continent/set aside for mystic poetry’, as Les Murray caustically remarks in ‘Louvres’), Canada’s a frontier, an enterprise zone that frays to the north, and very rapidly gets very thin on top. (Australia is afraid of what it contains, Canada of what it abuts on; both, setting more store by what’s underneath than what’s on the surface, have declared their entrails open for business.) There are edgeland atmospheres and experiences and conditions that you don’t find anywhere else, settled, unsettled, resettled, unsettling:
The store, next to the beverage room, sells smokes and low-end booze, rat traps, potato wedges, shampoo, Raid, ice cream, cribbage boards, Crazy Glue, buffalo wings, rubber gloves, line and lures, etc. Leeches can be purchased from the pop machine outside, a half-dozen for $1.25. A sweet life: Coke, Seven-Up, water, bait. You could walk from the lake but no one does.

‘Sweet’ there may look like irony, but it’s nothing of the kind. The higgledy-piggledy catalogue is notably unjudgmental: pure repertorial anthropology.

If I am allowed one more lamentoso description of an excluded poem, then perhaps the one called ‘Four Factories’ from Pigeon: one mystery software plant, one potato chip factory, one cement works, one abattoir. Each section is beautifully couched in its specific speak, with its individual lighting, its angle, aperture, exposure and problems. The high tech acquires a cloak of sumptuously neoteric blarney, ‘opportune spinoffs, low-slung/by-product support outfits named in functional/shorthand’. The potato chip factory is more honest, more straightforward, and is celebrated for its simple garishness: ‘It’s painted a bright and not entirely baffling/turquoise, for who would want/their snacks to issue from a dour scene?’ (The 18th-century reasonableness of tone here and elsewhere is one of Solie’s great inventions: a pained elevation.) The cement factory walks us through chemistry (‘Pity the diatoms, first to go, trout eggs/choked by sediment in gravelly streambeds,/ducks in chloride runoff. Pity us,/we’re all messed up about it’) to a rapturous upland vision of commerce, again in the necessary argot: ‘in condos, dude ranches,/four-season resorts, the demand for improved/infrastructure and amenities in the recreational/community of Lac des Arc’. The abattoir is described in fast cut-up, with slabs of critical and actual promotional language slid along on conveyors:

The Canadian Forces steps up its recruitment campaign. Our industry’s future remains secure. Additional openings in rendering and hides. Animals are not our friends. Sign on the highway, Always, 100 Jobs!
‘Four Factories’ reads almost like a dissident Russian poem (or dissident Sophoclean chorus): how tremendous all this exists – and how tremendously sad. ‘Pity us.’

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Solie is expert in mobility and cheap tenancy – perhaps these too are preconditions for the modern poet. One poem called ‘Drift’ ends: ‘This is him, going./This is her, gone.’ The poems seem to have been generated in dozens of places, and the distances between them: ‘Days Inn’, ‘Salmon River Motel’, ‘Java Shop, Fort Macleod’; ‘In Passing’, ‘Skid’, ‘Driving Alone’, ‘Rental Car’, ‘Medicine Hat Calgary One-Way’. Solie has measured out her life in motor vehicles: ‘an even-tempered ’68 Volvo’ and ‘a blue Mercury parked at the edge of the continent’; ‘the old Ford’ and ‘cursing ancestors and old Volkswagens’; a ‘mid-century Case’ and the titanic ‘Buhler Versatile 2360’, hero of the beautiful poem ‘Tractor’; the cute ‘freshly birthed Fusions’ outside a Ford plant and the ‘rows/of wrecked cars in the junkyards,/hoods open like a choir’. After Heaney and Murray, she is the great poet of driving, but she is more radical than they are. She is prey to a sort of nomadism that feels more like claustrophobia or serial eviction than tourism. She is equally adept at looking out or back, at looking and at imagining being seen. ‘In the language/of local economies you are table 12,/room 105,’ goes the passive version in ‘Driving Alone’, ‘Pure transaction./A sure thing of money changing hands.’ Against that, there are passages like this, from ‘Possibility’:

Motel the orange of an old rind, bud green and remaindered blue for trim. Some schemes shouldn’t work, but do. A square room with balcony two floors above the strip. Real keys.

The ‘real/keys’ are sublime. The poems show their familiarity with the short run, the short-term, the short straw. This is from ‘More Fun in the New World’:

Eight yards to the motel office, one more to ring the bell. The ice machine means well, a grey slab I attend with my bucket. I’ve been here before, paced it off and slept beneath a sheet forty feet from the highway
It’s not a complaint (it’s not a TripAdvisor review, or a slumming Baedeker), this is what there is, these are our tawdry surfaces and circumstances, this is what life has unexpectedly dished up (from ‘Conversion’):

A doorknob
came off in my hand like a joke prosthetic.
Rooms like this have followed me around
for 20 years. It’s as though I married into a bad
family of many cousins. I was the only one
who loved them. That’s what I thought

I like personal poems, and have mostly quoted from Solie’s. But the fact is that the individual ‘I’ and the dual ‘we’ are just three of the figures on her carousel. (It is striking that her work as a whole is as interesting and as intricately and cleverly put together as each individual poem – a case of those fractals that she also writes about, in action.) She has a gift for the plural, the collective scene – intelligent, ironic, scrutinised, as everything is with her – that is rare in good Western poetry. Her synoptics are wonderful, in ‘Alert Bay, Labor Day’, in ‘The Girls’, in ‘Erie’. She writes about moments when the individual docks or attempts to dock or fails to dock with what Heidegger called ‘das Man’ (the impersonal, collective ‘one’). The great poem, ‘Medicine Hat Calgary One-Way’ sets out with – how to describe that tone – meekness, po-faced sedition, sober hilarity: ‘The bus is a wreck, and passengers/respect that.’ I wonder idly how such respect might manifest itself. By sitting extra still, or spitting or smoking – perhaps as in that ‘family restaurant in which smoking,/active or passive, was unofficially/mandatory’ (‘Erie’). Or take ‘Prayers for the Sick’, where patients waiting in a Toronto emergency ward are unexpectedly taken out of themselves and given a common purpose by their fury at a short TV loop showing the detestable, record-breaking – and currently banned – Yankees’ baseball star and all-round bad hat Alex Rodriguez and his ‘dirty trick on our rookie’. There is a sense there of convergence, of fellowship offered and taken, of the warmth of the tribe; while in other poems like ‘Three in the Afternoon’ (‘Stalled hour. Hour/of chronics. Never/is anything not done/less so’) the speaker retains her unhappy separateness, ‘while across municipalities/workers stride the day toward/the dinners they deserve’. The becalmed artist of three o’clock is like a ‘parasite’ in a Soviet reality: doesn’t stride, deserves no dinner, is left like Edvard Munch (Solie’s fellow Norwegian) to stare into the blank eyes (‘as if recently brainwashed’, as Sylvia Plath wrote) of the crowd on Karl Johansgatan.
And then there are those other collectives that are deaf to the siren chant of the human. It is to them – ‘Sturgeon’, ‘Toad’, ‘Wild Horses’, ‘Pest Song’, ‘Mole’, ‘Thrasher’, ‘Gopher’ – that Solie’s special respect and admiration goes out (she once studied zoology): ‘We turn/our ankles where you’ve been and bust your heads/for fun.’ Creatures that don’t need us or undermine us, that live off us or against us, that are older than us, keener and subtler and better adapted. These are upsetting, gallant, Lawrentian poems:

A few hundred remain on grizzly lands below
hanging glaciers, among Engelmann spruce, fir,
lodgepole pine, foothills of aspen and balsam poplar
in the Siffleur, White Goat and Peace Wilderness
where they’re shot for sport, caught for rodeo stock,
sold for dog food at four hundred a head. Sixteen
left to rot in the forest northwest of Jasper,
two foals dumped at a gas well site by the only
animal who kills from a distance, noise for a voice
and noise for a home, for whom all places are alike.