

# A breathtaking valedictory collection

**S**EBASTIAN BARKER was one of our very best poets. His last collection, *The Land Of Gold* (Enitharmon, £9.99) was published just before he died in January.

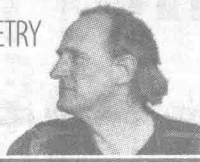
Written when Barker knew he was dying, it is a book about mortality and loss ("Life is a radiant highway rippling through flowers, a patina of gold — over an earthquake territory").

But it would be hard to find a more beautiful and rapturous celebration of living and loving, the natural world and the human body: "When the sun came over the mountains, / I rose from the sheets and threw open the shutters / On the four corners of the world of your body."

It is at times a hard book to read ("Never to look on the clouds again, / Never the flowers, nor seas, / Never to look on the sparkling rain, / Nor Easter in the trees.")

But Barker's wonderful lyrical talent prevents the poems becoming sentimental or self-pitying ("What

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goes, returns, like water, / Falling from the sky / Out of the heavens, here after / We live, we dream, and we die.")

The book concludes with a breathtaking long sequence *A Monastery Of Light* in which Barker says goodbye to the Greek village where he lived for 30 years.

"The walnut tree is laughing in a spectacle of bliss, The builder's hammers chip the stone walls. The fig tree gives praise. By a table on the mountainside the valley cups the sun. Death is the vision of losing this, made for everyone."

Dinah Livingstone's *The Vision Splendid* (Katabasis, £7.95) also ends

with a vision of mortality and continuity.

Her new book is a celebration of London and Londoners, from its radical past to the multicultural present.

For her, London is an "untidy city" of muddled stories, where at the school gates you can hear the "babble of English accented in a hundred/ different voices, the non-native speakers/ from many a mother tongue, / this proper London mixture."

On a demonstration in Hyde Park against the Israeli occupation of Palestine she hears "Old Left grannies," young Muslim girls and "all the birds of the air a-sighing and a sobbing, / appalled humanity crying."

Although Livingstone knows that "two toads squat in Downing Street... poisoning the body politic/ and spitting in the faces of the needy," London is still a "City of voices/ thronging the air over centuries, / Rainsborough, Winstanley, Milton, Blake."

The climax of the book is in two



long utopian celebrations of London's contribution to the Good Old Cause, No Mean City and the extraordinary Epic.

"Primrose and Parliament Hill, St Pancras International, / she shines as a city of social joys, / where communal comfort and kindness reign, / a human habitat, here on this planet."

In 2011 the poet Paul Summers moved with his wife and their two young children from Tyneside to Queensland, Australia.

Exchanging the cold north-east for bougainvillea, kookaburras and cane toads, Summers started mapping the emotional geography of his new world.

The result is *Primitive Cartography* (Smokestack Books, £7.95), a book about living under strange stars and learning the language of sunlight.

Summers may have shifted hemispheres but he is still a deft and faithful documentarist of people and place.

These poems are dispatches from a new continent, fierce, tender and always with a healthy nod to history. At Barcaldine (the centre of the 1891 shearer's strike) the famous Tree of Knowledge has died.

"The tree is dead; long blighted by some liberal spore, / knowledge spurned, the fruit has withered on the vine, / proud banners shelved; stakanovic become a whore."