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SUMMON

Elizabeth Ridout, *Summon* (Myriad Editions, 2020)

Ridout's epigraph from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* - 'But it's no use now,' thought poor Alice, 'to pretend to be two people! Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!' – is a clever introduction to this fine young poet. Reading English Language and Literature at Oxford and exploring the experience of living with bipolar disorder, Ridout's *Summon* shares something of Dodgson's scary uneasiness with the high and low voices of her own culture. 'I always listen to music when I write,' she has told us, the imagery and rhythms of David Bowie, Kate Bush and Patti Smith informing her work, the

ghosts of Sylvia Plath, Leonora Carrington and the Beats waiting in the shadows of her imagination.

Mention of a ‘bell jar’ and ‘Daddy’ have to raise the ghost of Sylvia Plath, and talk of Ridout’s bipolar disorder clearly suggests the confessional – or the currently fashionable auto-fictive – mode. But in her use of metaphor Ridout makes the personal experience also political, as in ‘Wall’ with its ‘Bipolar bear of Berlin,/waking up in the morning one side or the other,’ the bear of course being both comic and symbol of endurance as well as the Russian bear of history. In this, the alliterative ‘Bipolar bear of Berlin’ manages to both emphasise and somehow take control of the subjects of the metaphor.

As Coleridge argued, the gift of metaphor is the mark of the true poet, and with both metaphor and simile Ridout has a surreal skill, talking of her dreams as ‘Slightly green around the edges,’ the recurring ones tending ‘to be a little bitter, like an angry olive or a piece of Christmas coal,’ and those of childhood having ‘a creamy/phlegm over them, like custard/ or banana yoghurt.’ The buried ‘hurt’ is wonderful. In ‘Bluebird,’ an unpleasant sexual encounter is somehow reduced to the ridiculous with ‘He had a soft belly/and careful hair and tasted beige’; in ‘Ariadne,’ the narrator with hairy legs and six eyes triumphs over the Ariadne of Greek Mythology and the insect community because ‘I always bungee-jump back/on my unbreakable spirit/and satin suspender strings’; one senses a lively poetic persona in ‘Nine Pints’ with her ‘Kali in tight trousers/with rictus lipstick and kitten tongue,’ surviving the worst that experience can throw at her.

With her technical skills and cultural range, Ridout has the ‘mastery’ and the ‘mystery’ of the authentic poetic imagination, my ‘mystery’ acknowledging both feminism and the old magics of poetry. With its ‘Eyes squeezed joyfully/against the flare of flash and flame of roses,’ ‘A Photograph of My Mother, 18, in August 1977’ shows a firm grasp of the English alliterative tradition. Metaphoric density enriches every page. Figures from contemporary culture - Madonna, Nabokov, Monroe, Eve, Aslan, Fabergé, Jim Morrison, Noddy and Big Ears and royal wedding mugs – bring a deepening and excitement to the textual density which acknowledges the influence of the American Beats. In a single quatrain – here from ‘Inked’ - Ridout manages to gesture to the tradition and ignore it in ways that seem casual but can only be deliberate:

Across from him lies the dragon

a Chinese-restaurant-menu beast,

violently blue, goggle eyes

green as a beetle’s backside.

The use she makes of her allusions may be a good way to try and capture Ridout’s exciting originality. ‘Runaways in the Woods’ makes an obvious reference to Grimm’s fairy tales to tell her story. The influence of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* is here, but not quite. ‘It was the winter we spent without/clean underwear/that made me realise it was going to be a disaster’ gives the poem an adult consciousness, and the ‘Frozen cat turds/curled up like soft-scoop by the van’ might be Leonora Carrington before Carter. Fagin’s children also make an appearance here, something Carter doesn’t do, ‘taking handkerchiefs/from the pockets of the homed.’ These are children lost in an age of austerity. ‘The Taxidermist’ gives us the taxidermist’s view of things, ‘your paw-pink rawness/pickled, like an eyeball/for a

blindfolded Halloween game,' a kind of horror story where 'you' are dressed up in 'the bonnet of a mouse/on the Havisham cake,' while the taxidermist 'has Growltiger's eyepatch/and Algernon's flowers.' Growltiger of course is a visitor from Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*,' and *Flowers of Algernon* is a novel banned all over the USA due to its sexually explicit language. And bringing all of this together, in 'One Night' we have another sexual encounter, 'Damply fizzing with lust,' 'stained nylon sheets/and the smell of transience' and 'You … saying things to me/I wouldn't like my mother to hear.' But 'the aftermath' has a nod to Cinderella and the night outside 'where my rancid pumpkin awaits/at the street corner.' It is a joy to welcome a new talent who has all the gifts you could begin to imagine.

BROKEN VOICES

David Pollard, *Broken Voices* (Waterloo Press, 2019)

In 2011, a reviewer of David Pollard's *On Risk of Skin* suggested that 'any one of these poems merit the attention of at least six hundred words.' The challenge then was to do with an immensely ambitious protean diversity, taking in Keats, Blake, Hölderlin, Celan, Mallarmé, Oppen and philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche to Heidegger. The simplest way to understand what is going on in the five parts of *Broken Voices* is to look at the language of the poems.

In the first part, 'The chisel chases down the letter's edge/dispelling chaos' 'The Tombstone' tells us, quoting Bunting's *Briggflatts* to emphasise its point that 'Pens are too light/Take a chisel to write.' The 'chaos' here might be the distracting 'fragments and white dust' of daily life. Answering Zeno's puzzle – 'how to lead the best life' – in 'The Colour of the Dead,' we are told 'this is the lesson:/forfeit the body that demands its rights // exile yourself from the lost multitude', though Pollard is too complex a writer to ignore paradoxes. If 'you want the real,' as in 'The Real World,' find the truth of Stalingrad in the detail: 'seek out/pine needles, any greenness, rats, bark,/insects, dogs now breathless, puddle slime,/maggots scooped from toilet rims/and then/o yes/each other.' And again, in a Note to '1543,' Hans Holbein - 'He who, with care, saved the appearances' - left us his 'observations without attempting to suggest a physical explanation for them'. Yet always, Pollard is aware that poets work in the most complex and vulnerable of all creative genres, languages which can be lost. This is beautifully expressed in 'Eyak,' an elegy for Mary Smith Jones, the last speaker of a language once spoken around the Copper River Delta in Alaska:

For you have taken with you

the subtle system of its sources

in the blue copper ice and waters

round the canoeing whaling salmon

mouth of Copper River

and the sandpiper's crying in another language

as yours

falling over the icescape

of the mind.

Music is the dominant metaphor in the second part. In 'The Dark Fiddler,' Delius returns to Florida to find the child he had fathered with a black slave. 'Back again/into the ever glad and dancing/sun's dark love among the oranges,' he fails to find his daughter, and his 'little sad mulatto of recall' is transformed into the 'too rich harmonies of horn/bassoon, flute, strings,/their chordal lush/backing away/into the orchestration of my life's/chromatics'. 'Rodrigo at the Keyboard' has the blind composer finding the 'polyphony/he knew and

simply,/quietly,/in the distance of its loneliness,/drew forth' through his fingertips, 'tender as creation,' roaming 'along the curves and dips' of the keyboard. In the eponymous 'Britten,' the composer was never influenced by the 12-tone revolution but chose to walk 'at my own pace,' in 'Bach 'Cello Suite No 6' describing the Prelude as 'the tightening wind/blown into tears and loss', the Courante 'Rising on wingbeats/of the autumn leaf', the Gavotte 'a looping, low and swallow's flight' and the Gigue as 'the skin's ghosts/that come and go/among the nerves' bare winter/branches of the tongue'. At the end of this part, the eponymous 'Final notes' are indeed 'the art of final things,' captured superbly in a handful of poems.

Part three consists of twelve 'Odes' using Keats's rhymed, ten-line iambic pentameter stanza form, each 'Ode' being a single stanza. The imagery and metaphors remain as powerful as ever: 'Thus the wood blows its candles as it blanches' in 'Ode 1'; 'Honey can poison for its colour's sake' in 'Ode 2'; 'There are still ghosts invisible in waters/cradled under a cobbled ancient moon' in 'Ode 3'; 'High on the bell tower sudden sparks of fire' send 'cold vibrations echoing // to us as crows of circling thunder' in 'Ode 6.' Two Odes in particular seem to predict a future Nietzsche predicted. From 'Ode 4':

stone only stone and angels soulless gazing

at Pluto's spinning, ever circling moons

and ever black beyonds among the points

of silent stars between dark matter blazing.

And in 'Ode 9', speaking directly to Keats: 'The power you laid to rest yet hardly knew it/was the withdrawing language that you heard.' I'm not entirely convinced that the homage to the Keatsian stanza adds anything to what is being said, but the language sustains Pollard's themes.

In the fourth part, the memories – if that is what these poems are - are more personal. 'Canticles for Ana' – 'a poem about fatherhood' - tells us 'Fatherhood is a strange nakedness // a bird caressed in cupped hands/with the offer of flight.' Here, 'Words lose their meanings/between I and she', and 'can I call it a love' this 'slow loss that fatherhood entails?' Interestingly, the best poems in this part return to Keats, perhaps obsessed with death. In 'Autumn', the 'half expected touch of rain on cheek/from the threat of endings/and no new days'; in 'Melancholy,' our 'sudden soul's approaching/twilight fills our ears with the small sounds/and our eyes with drowning'; and perhaps most powerfully 'Your song is haunted by impossibilities' in 'Notes for a Nightingale,' and 'death of song' in 'To a Caged Nightingale.'

In the final fifth part, the last line of 'Ayesha,' the *Vulgate*'s '*vox clamantis in deserto* – 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness' – takes us to Plato and Aquinas, Oedipus and Cain, Byzantium and Classical Greece, Christianity and Gods much older than Christianity. But in all of this, the poet reminds us in 'Ayesha,' 'Words are the only curse we have' with our 'venerable language/that has lost the intonations to decipher them'. As *Broken Voices* has reminded us, and specifically in 'Expository,' 'there is nothing intellectual/which has not cried out to us first/in sight and taste,/in the five senses of our covering skin

WE WERE NOT THERE

Jordi Doce, *We Were Not There* (Shearsman Books, 2019)

The Spanish poet and translator Jordi Doce has himself translated Auden, Burnside, Carson, Simic and Tomlinson, and been compared to Blake, Rilke and Eliot. Ian Seed in *PN Review* noted that '"Doce's work is threaded through with the kind of agnostic faith that the theologian Paul Tillich described as 'ultimate concern,'" a perceptive judgement going to the heart of Doce's work.

Doce's 'ultimate concerns' are with the *anomie* and sense of exile in modern life. 'We were not there when it happened' in 'Incident,' but the 'plains of Europe are our witnesses./They also know that something happened,/although we never saw it' (ibid). In 'Wide Awake on the Edge of the World,' 'Everyone came out with suitcases,/we were in transit' but 'in no mood for travel'. Seagulls rummage 'in the trash' while children play in 'Then,' but as 'Without Title' tells us, 'the 'world slipped away outside the camp/but no watch realized.' 'Welcome to the sadness/of warehouses' 'Landscape' concludes, a sadness that seems to infect even the natural world in 'Unknown Quantity' where 'The colour of the birches/is the colour of loss' and 'You don't know where you are,/by what path you arrived' in 'Here.' The ghost of Beckett lurks in these poems, with ironies Beckett might have enjoyed in 'Seasons,' where we hear 'the voice of a girl/in the flat upstairs // and the milk that a moment ago you placed on the stove/burns'.

Doce also has things to say about poetry. 'Words move, music moves' as in Eliot's *Burnt Norton*. In 'Guest,' Doce tells us 'Words stopped helping me long ago', but in 'Heavy Weather' admits 'It's late to mend one's ways' and 'After going in circles for so long, all that's left is/to re-arm the troops with lucidity'. And later, in 'Fiction,' 'I didn't want to open the door/nor ask that it be opened -/beyond it I write, I've died,/I'm still living'. And living indeed to write several wonderful prose poems, and moments of lyric beauty, as in 'A Life' with the 'accordion of sex enlivening the hours,' or in 'In the Park' where 'It's/just the leaves falling,/this incandescent dying of the leaves,' or in 'Guest' 'From the door I watch the suspended dust,/the late light in the curtains // the difficult music of the bones.' One of my favourites in the whole collection is 'The Visitor,' too long to quote in full, but where the narrator 'moved among the tombs of the old churchyard/searching for an inscription, a familiar name // like someone fulfilling an old promise,/to kneel slowly,/and clean with his hands a timeworn stone,/the irrevocable signature that justifies a journey:/his own name'.

It is the uncertainties explored in *We Were Not There* which disturb and fascinate. In 'A Life,' 'He celebrated his coming of age watching the clouds pass by. He was unable to distinguish any shapes' and 'What use imagination. The monsters become too real', and most paradoxically 'Nothing happened. Nothing ever stopped happening.' That could almost have come from *Alice in Wonderland.* We are 'neither here nor there' in 'A Page, A Garden'; 'pursue answers/but live without cause' in 'Here, Now, Nowhere,' and 'want a life/but life is where it flees from us' (ibid). I'm don't know whether this is mysticism, or Wittgenstein, or the plain truths of childhood where in 'Seasons' 'The things they tell you/are very sensible, but/they don't interest you.' Certainly, we are most likely to meet the 'taxi driver who doesn't know the way' as in 'Mexico City' than anyone who can help us, so that in Seasons' again 'all day/you come and go wavering/upon the balance of yourself,/trying not to drown.' It is an alienated but immediately recognizable world that Doce has created in *We Were Not There*, and yet in 'Counterpoint' the moment of consolation is utterly believable:

Only at night, sometimes, our bodies

cross the lines furtively

to sign a perplexed, difficult

truce,

this armistice that is now our life.

There is philosophical abstraction in *We Were Not There*, but in his translation Lawrence Schimel has managed to achieve a powerful sense of the emotional range and depth of this widely known European master John Burnside has welcomed as ‘one of the three or four living European poets whose work I most treasure.’

A KINGDOM OF LOVE

Rachel Mann, *A Kingdom of Love* (Carcanet, 2019)

As an Anglican priest, Rachel Mann is clearly familiar with the dilemma Geoffrey Hill's essay 'Redeeming the Time' (*The Lords of Limit*) describes when he talks of the rhythms of the liturgy 'telling of a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties and obligations from which an individual severs himself at great cost and peril'. The loss of those familiar consolations threatens the Church at the moment, and is at the heart of *A Kingdom of Love*.

The collection has three sequences. In the first, 'A Kingdom of Love,' the imagery and lexical field is of Anglican piety. Titles of individual poems speak of the daily life of a priest: 'Collect for Purity,' 'Fides Quaerens,' 'Ubi Caritas,' 'Extreme Unction,' 'Compline,' 'Credo,' 'Gloria,' 'Catechesis,' 'Corpus Christi' and so on. But this language is embodied in the reality of 'mucus and awe,' 'love and drool and sweet milk,' 'Mouth, skin, bone,' 'Dental trills, the Spirit chewed by teeth,/Ejected from lungs'. 'Extreme Unction' is of course 'smeared oil/On the book of human skin,' reminding us 'we're written in/Creases, scars, scabs'. Even prayer is given a physical form: 'I was taught to steeple my fingers/As a child, form a spire, *Like This!*' 'Corpus Christi,' after all, is the Body of Christ. The sequence also has deep philosophical roots, Wittgenstein's 'of that which we cannot speak' and 'the world is all that is the case' reminding us of a kind of mysticism, the 'Fides Quaerens' of Anselm's prayer, roughly translated as 'faith seeking understanding' or 'faith seeking intelligence'. Intelligence is demanded on this journey, but to help us 'Mystery is laid in syllables, syntax, // Miracle a kind of grammar,/Milk to train the tongue' (ibid). The deep question in 'A Kingdom of Love (2)' remains 'What matter is it if there is no god' to validate our physical experience, the theme of the second sequence.

This second sequence, 'Mythologies,' seems to me to take its theme from the opening words of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*: 'Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future.' In 'Chaucer on Eccles New Road' shopping malls 'are relics/swarmed with pilgrims' and the 'Pardoner is a court, prefab walls,/*Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones*.' 'Reading Ovid on the Underground' names a dozen Underground stations and has Lear staring at girls while a busker sings '*Michelle, ma belle*,' 'Time present and time past' indeed all around us. 'Lex Orandi' emphases the point that Prayer and Theology are one, and in 'Christening' a present-day baptism asks, 'Was it thus when He took His turn/at Jordan'. The Christian point in 'Book of Ezekiel' is that '*You make all things new*,' so that the Greek goddess Persephone can quite happily appear in Kingsway in 'Persephone on Kingsway.' There is even a lovely domestic touch in 'Joseph and the Angel' when a carpenter encounters the divine, insisting again and again '*Do you understand*?' No doubt he was as irritated as confused. There are also passages in 'Mythologies' which remind me of Geoffrey Hill's lyric gift, especially in 'Pilgrims at Luke Copse':

Till then, sleepers, dream ever. A cornfield

at Ampney Crucis as May turns gold, green shoots

quicken to the swallows' dance. It might be England.

The third sequence, ‘A Lesson in Evolution,’ draws the first two parts together, reminding us from ‘Lex Orandi’ in ‘A Kingdom of Love’ that ‘It’s the inner eye that sees,’ and from ‘Qui Habet Aures’ in ‘Mythologies’ that ‘He that has ears to hear, let him hear.’ ‘The Risen Life’ is the first poem here, and we appear to be in a hospital, for ‘There is a nurse, she could be a nurse, someone who smiles’. Immediately, in ‘Awake at Three A.M. What is Known’, ‘a wolf howls its own heartbreak’ and ‘by a lake, a shivering child skims stones.’ ‘High Dependency’ tells us ‘We are where/miracles hide in curtain folds’ and in the thematic ‘A Lesson in Evolution’ a ‘specialist wants to try seaweed,’ something from nature now frequently used for healing wounds. Much of this could be metaphorical, but the philosophical argument ‘We know many things without proof’ from ‘Vespers’ is not metaphorical. The liturgical ‘*O God make speed to save us’* comes with ‘Compline,’ and with ‘Mattins’ poetry rising to a fine music:

Perhaps there is only hymnal

And end of winter, and psalm –

Charms of finches, herd of wrens,

Blackbird, robin, thrush,

Beyond windows, surely trees,

Stripped and boned, perhaps

They’ll wake, spit out shoots,

Perhaps, I’ll draw up blinds.

The sequence ends with the poem ‘Evensong,’ where though ‘it is late, late, late, oh priest’ we know ‘He reapeth where he doth not sow.’

There are poems throughout *A Kingdom of Love* that bring past and present together in a profoundly religious and philosophical encounter. Whether they are influences or not, Eliot and Hill are present throughout this imaginative reworking of old truths, both individual and communal, once sent to comfort us. A surprising talent alive and flourishing in our secular world.

Martyn Crucefix

Rilke in Paris, Rainer Maria Rilke & Maurice Betz, tr. **Will Stone** (French original 1941; Pushkin Press, 2019).

Duino Elegies, Rainer Maria Rilke, tr. **Matthew Barton** (Shoestring Press, 2019).

The argument of Maurice Betz's memoir on Rilke's various residencies in Paris between 1902 and 1914 is that the young poet's experience of the French capital is what turned him into a great poet. Betz worked closely with Rilke on French translations of his work (particularly his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). Will Stone's excellent translation of Betz's 1941 book, *Rilke à Paris*, elegantly encompasses its wide range of tones from biographical precision, to gossipy excitement and critical analysis. The book particularly focuses on Rilke's struggle over a period of eight years to complete the novel which is autobiographical in so many ways or, as Betz puts it, "in effect a transcription of his own private journal or of certain letters".

Rilke first arrived in Paris from Worpswede in northern Germany, a community of artists where he had met and married Clara Westhoff. But never one truly to reconcile himself either to community or intimacy, he had already left his wife to travel to Paris. Yet the anonymity, bustling energy and inequalities of the French capital appalled him. In letters to his wife and many others it became clear that, as Stone's Introduction argues, Paris had "unceremoniously torn Rilke out of his safe, somewhat fey nineteenth-century draped musings". In ways reminiscent of Keats' observations about feeling himself extinguished on entering a room full of people, Rilke would later recall how the city's "grandeur, its near infinity" would annihilate his own sense of himself. Living at No.11, Rue Touillier, these initial impressions form the opening pages of *The Notebooks.*

But there were also more positive Parisian experiences, particularly in his meetings with Rodin who he was soon addressing as "most revered master". Famously, Rodin advised the young poet, "You must work. You must have patience. Look neither right nor left. Lead your whole life in this cycle and look for nothing beyond this life". In terms of his patience and willingness to play the long game, not only with his novel but also with the slow completion of *Duino Elegies* (1922), Rilke clearly took on this advice. Interestingly, Betz characterises Rilke's methods of working on the novel, creating letters, notes, journal pages over a number of years, as "like sketches, studies of hands or torsos which the sculptor uses to prefigure a group work".

Betz suggests that the traumatic impact of Paris was the making of Rilke as an artist because, between 1899 and 1903, Rilke had been working on *The Book of Hours*, representing a "religious and mystical phase".* In contrast, Paris presented the poet with an often brutal but more "human landscape". He also discovered this was reflected in the French capital's painters and poets. Baudelaire in particular was important. In personal letters (as well as in his finished novel) Rilke identifies the poem 'Une Carogne' ('A Carcass') as critical in "the whole development of 'objective' language, such as we now think to see in the works of Cézanne". Baudelaire's portrayal of a rotting body seems to have taught Rilke that "the creator has no more right to turn away from any existence [. . .] if he refuses life in a certain object, he loses in one blow a state of grace".

But it took Rilke a long time to arrive at the kind of inclusivity of vision he expresses in *Duino Elegies* (1922). That sequence opens with a despairing existential cry ("Who if I cried out would heed me anyway / in all the hierarchies of angels?"), but by the seventh poem Rilke can express a more affirmative view: "Being here is miraculous." I'm quoting from the new Shoestring Press translation of the *Elegies.* Its translator, Matthew Barton, himself raises the question as to whether anything could "possibly justify *yet another* English version" of those poems. As someone who has contributed his own translation of the work (published by Enitharmon Press in 2006), I know the feeling of throwing a pebble into a landslide. But Barton has produced a lively, English version which reads well (one of his aims). Apart from a brief Introduction and a few end notes on translation issues, the poems stand on their own here – there is no parallel German text. To see the German facing Barton's text would be interesting for most readers, even without much facility in the source language, because he does make changes to the form of the poems. It's true Rilke's original plays pretty fast and loose with formal metre but the changes he rings are significant and Barton has a tendency to flatten out these differences by making firm (modern-looking) stanza breaks where Rilke often continues the flow of his argument.

To be fair, Barton often does unfold the sequential argument. He's well aware of the issue as he talks in the Introduction of coming across "knots" in the grain of the work which do not easily yield up their meaning. His solution was "not to translate them literally and hope for the best, but to live with them until I found a way through them that seemed, at least, to resonate with their larger context". To translation purists this may sound a bit 'version-y' and Barton does indeed declare this book a series of "versions", thanking Don Paterson for his thoughts on translation v versioning in his *Orpheus* (Faber, 2006). But Barton's approach here is rather like Paterson's in his version of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, in that the results mostly read as translation, but with the English granting itself the occasional liberty to paraphrase, extend or even substitute for the original. For me, a version would depart much further from the original than Barton does; so I'd call these translations because Barton is approaching the original with great respect. There is the sense of a service to the original being provided here and the point is that such a service must (without the need for too much arguing about it) *include* the re-ordering of syntax, an Englishing of rhythms, an aiming at contemporary accessibility without denaturing the flavour of Rilke's original distinctiveness.

And as I've said, Barton's English poems are good. Rilke is really communing with himself in these poems, but he does tend to use the impersonal 'you'. Barton often converts this to 'I' which skews the impact of many lines to the lyric. This fits contemporary taste perhaps – it deflates the rhetorical feel of these poems – but can be risky. As referred to above, in the opening lines of the sequence, Rilke acknowledges that crying out to angels for help in our existential darkness is largely futile (they'd not listen) but also dangerous because if an angel

did approach us we'd be fried by the intensity of their existence. The opening verse paragraph ends abruptly with, "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich". Stephen Mitchell rendered this as "Every angel is terrifying". Barton has "I dread every angel". This seems wrong, making a psychological point from an individual perspective when Rilke's line is more about the different natures of humans and angels (if the latter existed, which they don't).

Barton is also liable on occasions to shift into an overly contemporary register (Rilke doesn't adopt 1920s speech patterns but rather a Classically influenced idiolect of his own). He replaces Rilke's "wehe" which really is 'alas' with phrases like "god help me" or "heaven help us" which again propel the tone towards the personal (a rather English, bourgeois personal). In the ninth *Elegy*, Rilke is disparaging about the thin gruel of conventional human happiness in the face of death: "dieser voreilige Vorteil eines nahen Verlusts". Mitchell translates this as "that too-hasty profit snatched from impending loss". Barton tries a bit too hard with, "[this] is merely / easy credit with a looming payback date". But elsewhere Barton's rendering of Rilke's satirical portrait of the "City of Hurt" ("der Leid-Stadt") is enjoyably lively, serving to remind us of the reasons for Maurice Betz's palpable admiration for the poet in *Rilke in Paris.* He praises the poet as one who matured through "solitude and lucid contemplation of the loftiest problems of life", but also one who never failed in patience or effort to express "in poetic terms the fruit of that inner quest". In a concluding paean, he rises to even greater heights: "In seeking to express in his own way the world we thought we knew, Rilke helps us to hear more clearly what already belongs to us and permits us access to the most sinuous and iridescent forms, to profound emotive states and to that strange melody of the interior life". This is marvellously put (and marvellously translated by Will Stone).

Elizabeth Ridout

Birnam Wood / El Bosque de Birnam, **José Manuel Cardona**, translated from the Spanish by **Hélène Cardona** (Salmon Poetry, 2018)

No Far Shore : Charting Unknown Waters, **Anne-Marie Fyfe** (Seren, 2019)

Blazons : New and Selected Poems, 2000-2018, **Marilyn Hacker** (Carcanet, 2019)

Miracle of Mexico, Alfonso Reyes, translated by **Timothy Adès** (Shearsman, 2019)

The act of translation is one of metamorphosis. Poetry in itself is a translative art, transmuting the ineffable into the effable. The translator shares the role of the traveller in re-speaking the old to new, the ineffable to the effable.

In *Birnam Wood*, the translating impulse of the poet is, like the titular conceit, the making of the landscape into a moving, linguistic play point. The mover, the traveller, is the poetic impulse made flesh. If, as Cardona's opening Shelley epigraph states, language is a 'perpetual Orphic song', the act of the traveller is to be eternally translating through seeing the new or the to them exotic – the vision and the language gaps of the traveller translates the Other's everyday into the remarkable. Cardona's pieces are indeed Orphic lyres.

Birnam Wood's first pieces, focusing on the erotic celebration of Circe, begin the collection with a series of sensual translations. Circe, with her obvious links to the traveller as well as the metamorphic and the Joycean sensuality of linguistic play, functions as both a lover and a celebration of language, a pearl for any translator. Circe is transported and transmogrified throughout the ten pieces; sung, lyricised and translated into being by the loving traveller, the travel of love. She is moved into being without possessiveness, as an ideal of the loved on and a representative of the universality of the mystical experience in the foreign land:

I will not explain the clamor of drums,

The clamor of the jungle when the blind

traveler passes between the lindens

and the silence spreads out and never ends.

She is sounded out like an experience, "I scream, until hoarse, your beloved name", the magic of the naming word creating and recreating her: "hope is your name, because a name/has meanings only love knows", by the one who "love the land that is not theirs." Circe is the new land to the traveller – she is "flesh, fertile land", remade constantly - "love/ is that language of fire or scattered/Universe in vine everywhere." The translating experience of love morphs with a natural traveller's/translators urge towards a universal language or at least a universality of language informs Cardona's work:

Oddly it's on this island, Circe,

I have the strength to live.

Here humanity is embraced and screams

mixing laughter with its colors,

speaking the same language with varied

accents.

Cardona uses images of land, the island and images of topography initially to show the metamorphic qualities of both Circe herself and her linguistic transformations (“exalted were you in my dreams,/Almost inaccessible like an island”), and, as the collection moves on, to the Heraclitan mode of the traveller, translating all experiences to the universal, never stepping twice in the same river, or moving the same way through the labyrinth:

I kept the secret of the voices,

Ariadne, I say Circe, I say island,

speaking cosmically

Cardona, indeed, specifically references Heraclitus in his Neruda-like ‘Inhabited Elegy’, as a kind of traveller-poet, who serves to translate the landscape into the experience and back again:

Traveler, you carry on your shoulders

this light knapsack, trace

at last of a nightingale alien to sacrifice.

The shadows like woods under your spell

fill with trees and the inhabited

faces of Hölderin and Heraclitus

appear and the rose

of that epitaph which since Duino

forever seals the grave of the poet passing on Earth.

The Rilkean reference is perfectly placed here – the search for the unifying, untranslatable experience which is the goal of the poet to pin into the struggling butterfly of expression, which Cardona gracefully achieves.

The Heraclitan translating of the river, of the crosser of the water, of the traveller – the washing away and the sea change of the traveller’s experience of re-speaking the new frames the fascinating memoir-collection *No Far Shore: Charting Unknown Waters* from Anne-Marie Fyfe. Fyfe focuses on liminality of the sea-edge, the appeal of the horizon, in her own narrative and in literary sensibilities. For Fyfe, the sea and the island translate the land and sky where they meet, and the horizon-viewer, the traveller and the translator bring themselves to the translating or writing experience. The collection is pleasingly spaced out with the literal image of guidance beyond the liminal, the lighthouse. The work functions neatly as a kind of cartography, a map or guide to the traveller or translator of the edge-space, occupying a strange place which neatly translates the memoir to the research, the poem to the biography. This map of memory shows the difference between the traveller and the journeyer – and explores without clumsily summarising the draw of the natural abyss, the false oasis of the horizon:

When you reach the horizon

rest oars, check watch,

to the second, complete the log.

Lean back, look out to sea.

Is that the horizon of home?

A straight empty line like this.

To which you can never return.

Fyfe's interest in the literary island dweller or horizon explorer spans Elizabeth Bishop, Woolf, Conrad, and Melville, and takes her to Nantucket, Novia Scotia, Orkney and her native Antrim Coast. The space where the sky and the sea meet create a false space which can be translated by the artist – or, indeed, is perhaps one of the only "true places that aren't on any map". This space can be occupied by the hope of Montgomery (her exploration of the essential hopefulness of Prince Edward Island is beautifully evoked in the Green Gables-esque description of its "endless fertile rich red soil", so different to Cape Cod's "drizzled, foggy" disappointment similar to the bitterness of Woolf's thwarted lighthouse. Her passage on Melville uses the gap between the plot points of locations and the translation of the location into our mind's eye – the magical prose of 'Moby Dick's articulation of the search for the ineffable might of the abyss is utterly distinct from the "Nantucket (41.28^{o} N 70.10^{o} W)" she travels to. The translation of the location and the journey is made through the waves of language, the traveller's movement through language and experience.

The ancient idea of the North is similarly explored by Fyfe in a particularly affective piece, 'A Northern Litany':

North is tundra. Unpopulated. Places where nothing

grows. A permafrost wilderness.

North is choppy waters. Extremes. Tempestuous seas.

North is provincial Sundays, reading

Jane Eyre in the rain as the light goes.

Vilhelm Hammershøi's mute interiors.

The North, like the horizon, is a psycho-geographical site as well as a symbolic one for Fyfe. The space or gap translated by the traveller or the journeyer is dependent on not just universal ideas about what the North can mean, but the personal experience. In a similar perception, Fyfe links the radio waves of the ship, of the lighthouse, of words, to the waves of the shore – the eternal patterns and vibrations which both change and communicate:

Manageable words were four letters.

Wave. Tide. Calm. Land.

Later words were unintelligible.

Multitudinous phonemes, sibilants.

Complete sentences, every day a dizzying

battle of submerged syllables.

Oystercatcher. Jellyfish. Sea-anemone.

Bladderwrack. Archipelago.

Ultimately, in a moving piece, these waves of language and of change are translated into Fyfe, the traveller's, personal experience of her mother's ECT experience:

Calculated to numb the past,

my mother's sine-wave ECT sessions

at Holywell Hospital failed to obliterate

the ache for those lost parents,

the sadness that trailed her

through the family seashore years,

caught up in the end, found her again.

Keep running, my gentle mother,

I hear myself whisper, *Stay ahead.*

But waves are lapping at her heels,

overtaking her.

my gentle mother.

Fyfe merges the personal experience to the symbolic language and back again – the act of any fine translator.

The spectacular collection *Blazons* from Marilyn Hacker is a rich seam of this use of translation to unite the personal and the political. The literal translation of images and sources from French, Francophone and Arabic poets serves Hacker's elegant fusion of the contemporary, the colloquial and the precise, spare form, to create new communications of the experiences of the refugee and the bilingual, the world citizen. Translated forms give rise to the morphic quality of Hacker's language, whilst still maintaining the truth of her subject; for instance, her translation of the stunning 'Laurel', by the Syrian poet Fadwa Suleiman:

I'm sitting alone in my room

My clothes scattered around me,

And the suitcase that took to the road with me when I fled

I keep telling it about our return, soon

When we go back, you'll carry my clothes that crossed the border

inside you

We'll pass through the cities, walk in their streets once more

We'll write in the dust with our own ink

and our ink to us will be attar and laurel.

This translation from the Arabic of this wonderful piece does justice to the experience of Suleiman, and serves to draw together the strings of Hacker's approach – the traveller, the refugee, translates their experience both in their own language, and then into the linguistic and experiential lens of their new space.

The translative experience of moving between spaces and languages to create the world anew whilst paying homage to past experiences is captured within Hacker's 'Calligraphies' series. They paint a transformative picture of multicultural Paris, a site of both linguistic and political tension and of necessary internationalism:

The war before this,

who were the invaders, what

language did they speak?

Were we killed by the known or

the incomprehensible?

Were we familiar

as their brothers and mothers

or calligraphy

In a book they could not read?

When is murder literate?

The restriction of translation, of acquiring and using a second language, is politicised without being commodified – the journeyer's translation of experience is both positive ("all the horses, learned when / she was younger, hoped / to ride away on this new / alphabet") and despairing ("shred the silken shroud of language").

Hacker's translations and her original work demonstrate a considered desire for Whitman's 'internationality' of poetic language. Her use of form including the ghazal and canzone show a true desire to translate structure. Her work makes the poetic personal and the poetic

personal political, encapsulated in the deeply felt translation of Yasser Khanjer's 'Between Two Cells':

How does he shift the letters on his lips

without one of the two 'enemy' languages breaking

– a language in despair since its creation,

gloomy since infancy, lame

oblique

deceitful

On a more optimistic note about the role of translation in communication of the universality of the human journey, Timothy Adès' joyful new translation of Alfonso Reyes' *Miracle of Mexico* truly captures the essentially celebratory impulse of the translator-traveller. Capturing beautifully in each piece the innate pleasure of the meta-reading of the translator, another layer of playfulness is added to the intertextual nature of Reyes' work. The cheering appeal of the language choices for Reyes' reflection of classical readings shows the skill of Adès deft modernisation, such as his pieces 'On My Translation':

In war that Greeks and Trojans wage

I see what isn't on the page:

I see beyond the wondrous verse,

beyond the slow lines I rehearse…

Weeping the tears of others would be a pointless labour,

with sorrows enough of our own to spare us that deceit:

and I make the story mine without fear of my daring,

that it may live inside me, never to be erased.

The 'own-making' of the translator and the traveller is beautifully achieved by Adès, with the density of Reyes' work rendered imaginable in not just English terms, but specifically modern and appealing imagery – the "lounge-lizard" Paris, Death's "chill perturbing puffery", "home-happiness". In this way, Adès charming easing of the poems into jewels of articulacy ("the common speech fused / with the speech of rare metal") represents the skill of the translator at their most profound – the skill of remaking the experience whilst capturing the journey.

Patricia McCarthy

Singing Lines

Jean Atkin: *How Time is in Fields* (Indigo Dreams Publishing 2019)

Robert Hamberger: *Blue Wallpaper* (Waterloo Press 2019)

Janet Montefiore: *Disposing of the Clothes and other poems* (Shoestring Press 2019)

How *Time is in the Fields* is a song of a book, a paean to the natural world. Jean Atkin's poems attest to the importance of our human connection to nature; they seem to grow from the page, with their flora and fauna on a land that is timeless and layered with history. The language too is timeless as she weaves Old English, old place names which have a music of their own into her own unadorned language, usually omitting the definite and indefinite articles which seems to enhance the elemental feel of the verse.

Distant echoes of the work of Kathleen Raine, and R S Thomas haunt her lines, as does the ancient bard Taliesin, for example in describing a horse in the poem 'Breaker':

He was drizzle off the fell and frayed rope halters.

He was a comfrey poultice and strong tea.

He was the running horse under the hill.

Indeed, horses run through these pages, and Jean Atkin is obviously very familiar with them and knowledgeable about them. There is the wonderfully uplifting 'How we rode after haymaking' (in *Agenda*) with its exhilarating pace and verbal energy, the detail so accurate with 'the ponies wiry-lipped at pockets', and the alliteration that catches the sound and movement: 'the calling and the catching', then when they 'slid the slippery shine of bareback' until on the stubble they held 'the yaw/ and flare of ponies in their weaving line'.

'The Horseman's Word' is another horse poem, this time referring to a secret initiation ceremony in nineteenth century Scotland, one of many examples where the poet takes the reader not only to remote districts in Scotland, the Lake District, Cumbria, the Fells, Shropshire, Orkney, the island of Lewis, where place names are like spells and she penetrates 'the meaning of names/ Breakheart Hill and Killhorse Lane' – but also to timeless times typified by four 'Almanack' poems shaped by the Old English months.An impersonal walker strides through the poems and the poet herself is a walker, observing minute details of which Dorothy Wordsworth would have been proud. Maps, routes, tracks take us through the landscapes which seem, like organic matter, to grow from the pages. In the snow, the sheep have to be taken into shelter:

The winter you walked the length of their hunger,

the width of their wolf-bond.

One old tree is personified in 'Walker by Uley': it 'is pulling up its roots/.has started moving'. In this poem as in many others, Atkin uses musical patterns with old and

contemporary language like little refrains interjected every so often between the lines which adds to the timeless haunting effect and pattern of the whole.

The poem ‘this netted house’ reminds in its verbal strength and vision of Ted Hughes’ poem ‘Wind’ (from *The Hawk in the Rain*). The house here is also in a storm but it is no ordinary dwelling; it is a derelict cottage, so the note tells us, wrapped in fishing nets on the island of Lewis. It is ‘leaning galedrunk on the singletrack’…‘part-boarded windows flash fish-eyed’.

Elsewhere, birds, bees, nettles, toadflax, docks, hogweed, a wren ‘like a dead leaf’, ‘snowdrops/ spread like tablecloths’, apples that ‘mumble’ and ‘whimper’ in the press, the Hopkins-style of hitched-together words ‘ all-night/gutter-beck-bubble’– all are as if painted alive onto the land’s canvas as the poet takes the reader on ‘a long, green ride’, a ride very well worth going on, resonating with Gerard Manley Hopkins’ plea: ‘Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet’.

Atkin’s androgynous voice which attests to humans’ belonging in a living landscape contrasts with Robert Hamberger. The latter is very gender-aware in his strikingly moving collection, *Blue Wallpaper*, which focuses mainly on loss: the loss of his mother who had dementia, a childhood friend, a colleague; the loss of youth, of an old life with a wife and children, and the celebratory embrace of the new; the loss of his conventional masculine identity and his coming out as a gay man. Love is always there, and tenderness musically conveyed often in perfectly crafted sonnets whose frames contain the strong emotions. In fact, the musicality in this collection is most impressive.

Hamberger is very clever with his focus: for example his mother blends into Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis who is ‘years out of date’ stalks ‘like a sulky duchess along the planks’ of Brighton pier, past all the slot-machines, and rides the carousel horses before mounting the black horses of the sea into which she disappears. The images are vivid and redolent of a bygone era, like many of his poems, typified by old songs, jazz, the Supremes, the radiogram whose ‘Gold mesh over the speaker hums like heat’, by doors of a new home that ‘sing on their hinges’; by a young man with HIV whose tongue sings ‘each sentence’, ‘the bugle’s final note/ fades to silence blue as omega’ in the Rimbaud variations; as a young poet in ‘My Bohemia’ he ‘tugged’ his ‘laces/ tighter than strings on a lyre’.

Individual poems haunt the reader and spark off in the reader similar, in this case, childhood memories, as all good poems should do – such as the poem ‘Camel’. This concerns a brown jumper hand-knitted by his mother for him, ‘with a yellow camel across the chest’. A double knitting is here: the knitted image itself, and the way Hamberger knits the different images of the jumper and the personification of the camel into the integral meaning of the poem: about his father leaving. The innocent child, proud of the jumper, creates such an innocent image which is upturned, when, after nine months when he ‘outgrew him’ (the camel), his father went/ the way of camels and palm trees and I/ forgot my jumper when we were sent/ packing to our new flat, where other/ shapes filled the gap of a camel, a father’. This sonnet is just as moving and well-wrought as Heaney’s sonnets to his mother, and as Heaney’s ‘Mid-term Break’. A charming childhood vignette which also stands out is another sonnet ‘Strawberry and Lime’. Here the mother takes the boy/poet and his brother to ‘Pelliccis, Bethnal Green Road’ for milkshakes. The sensitive awareness of the boy is delicately shown when an unknown ‘dark-haired man’ at another table orders two more milkshakes for the children upon seeing their glasses empty. Referring to his mother, the poet says:

I sensed her secret thrill that he’d bother

to notice her. When I sucked my straw

pink bubbles popped, one after another.

These living moments with his mother encapsulate how all the more harrowing becomes her plight i with dementia – in further sonnets which suit the subject matter. For example, he tries to get her to recognise who he is. The syllables of his name that she 'knows familiar as a prayer' he utters 'like a stone/ dropped into her lake to test the water'. But nothing happens, and the silence darkens 'like a bruise'. Her bewilderment is graphically depicted: 'She left/ her past like clothes on a beach'. As the reader progresses through this cluster of sonnets, sand images recur to demonstrate the progress of her confused decline, until she dies and, a month later, on 'Mother's Day', 'mothers are everywhere', he sings her songs 'to keep me company' and hopes 'you've slipped your illness like a skin,/ free from it at last, young again'…He worries, as many bereaved people do, that he might lose her memory as life relentlessly goes on 'while the weeks and the waves continue'. In 'Ash' he scatters her ashes on water and she becomes part of everywhere, of every image he lists, in a beautiful eternity.

Even when young we see his tentative attraction to the same sex. In 'An interest in musicals', for example, at the intermission when he and his mother have been watching 'The Sound of Music', a man draws close to him, the sexual attraction is there, but his mother arrives 'like a guard dog' to take him back in time for 'Julie/ climbing every mountain'. And the sonnet rounds off with: 'He left me songs/ in the dark about my favourite things'. How cleverly here, just as with the 'camel' image in the first described poem, Hamburger weaves in songs from the musical so that they become an intrinsic part of the particular experience. Another sonnet, a haunting elegy to a friend, ' Twenty, thirty years ago', demonstrates this same-sex closeness, more personalised this time: when he had to watch his young close friend die whereas they'd been 'two grown men/ swapping silly voices, giggling like schoolgirls' and time goes back on itself near his friend's end, as 'I'd read to him as I read his favourite/ pages from *The Waves* when we were boys, believing/ we'd ride against death, unvanquished, unyielding'. And the reader is left comforted that he, like 'Some people dance forever through your skin'.

The next two groups of poems that, in particular, take the breath away, are entitled 'Husbands' and 'Being the Sea'. Here the poet, somewhat like Cavafy, bravely and sensitively expounds on his acknowledged homosexuality through which he finds true (and erotic) love. This is forbidden man-to-man love: 'The slope of his shoulders became my prayer', and even after death this love continues: 'By walking and speaking/ he altered the colour of words'. In this poem, 'Moment' John Donne comes to mind, for 'his bed had become the world's axis'. The first verse here is completely upturned and reads just as well backwards, enhanced by the repetition of the dawning acknowledgement '*he's gone*'. The poet seems to physically feel the beloved dead person in dreams and waking dreams and he recalls a time when the loved man was late for a meeting with him: 'You were later than magnolias in July,/ cherries in autumn' and he felt lost and bereft:

Since your fingers sparked the strike

of flames across my skin, what's holier

than that? What's more welcome than seeing

your face in a crowd, with blackbirds singing?

Hamberger always manages light touches of the lyrical no matter how dark or difficult his theme so that beauty is always resurrected. He understands the complexity of having a male husband, having been a husband to a wife. In 'Husbands': 'Husband – a language of echoes for me/ having loosened the ropes from that name/ before we met'.

Could we live in this title like a home

with its glass roof and windows,

or is the word a coracle, tilting the weight

of both syllables, balanced by shadows,

dipping oars with a coastline in sight?'

This is brave, carefully honed writing on a subject surely almost untouched before now.

In this last section, the poet takes the reader through the process of establishing a new home. Unpacking the books assumes a special significance, until the house and the male lover/husband become indistinguishable. – 'where fear of him disappearing / mixes with wonder at him staying'; 'Do we build a marriage/ from each other, commit ourselves to cornices, key-holes and dado-rails?'… Hope and joy increase as the two husbands assume their rituals ''dipping our heads under a lilac branch/ as it leans over a fence into the street'.

His penultimate poem on the AIDS memorial recalls two friends who died, one who taught him 'to pluck happiness like a harebell/ from the nettles'. And this is precisely what Robert Hamberger teaches all of us in *Blue Wallpaper*.

In such a tiny pamphlet, it is a wonder to find such a major voice as Janet Montefiore's. In terms of subject matter, these are not easy poems. However, like Hamberger's, they are so finely crafted that their music sings out over and above the sadnesses and traumas so poignantly outlined. Like the previous two collections discussed, this is timeless poetry, the natural world woven into the lines suggestive of romantic poetry, even of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson, such as the poem 'Winter Flowering', the different forms, so fitting of each poem's content, like different movements in a word concerto.

Here are loved ones who lose their language, the dying and dead, yet nothing is morbid; the rhythms prevail and linger on after each poem's end. The line between dream and reality is thin in many of the poems and ghosts often prevail for example the 'dear ghost' of her grandfather 'with hooded eyes' when she was giving birth. They are interchangeable with 'convivial spirits' in 'Can I get there by candlelight?', with her 'lost mother/ shelling peas in the kitchen almost like herself' and Elizabeth Bishop 'waiting for a boat to bring her to the party'. Different ghostly echoes in language also persist such as the '*in another time'* in a poem of that name that contrasts the mother's words that are gone 'vanished in the dark of her skull as if they never were' to the other'times' when she was vibrant and savouring life. The poet gives a lyrical list of what she loved such as 'finches and brindled cows, the burning tiger, the water-snakes'… , the special crocus that 'smelt of honey' – all of which poignantly contrast with the frustration now of not being able to communicate: 'In another time/ lost now beneath the white lines of her hair/ combed by kindly nurses'. The whole poem hauntingly sits on its last line with the 'another time' being twisted in meaning into a shut time, with her mother's 'truth lost in another time' and unreachable.

A particularly memorable poem, ‘Going (1)’focuses on the daughter/poet being asked which of her dead mother’s clothes hanging in the wardrobe she would like to take to wear. It does indirectly remind of Heaney’s poem ‘The Butts’ (that first appeared in *Agenda*) where the empty coat on a hanger is his father’s suit jacket whose pockets, while the father was fully alive, were raided for their loose tobacco, but in his ailing health held ‘nothing but chaff cocoons’, showing the frailty of the father’s body. It also has overtones, conscious or not, of Yeats’ late poem ‘The Apparitions’ where the end of each stanza concludes with the refrain ‘*Fifteen apparitions have I seen/ The worst a coat upon a coat hanger’*.

Here, there is also a verbal echo (typical of Montefiore) that runs through the poem as it haunts the poet, of her mother tragically chanting ‘under her breath’ while she still could, between the grinding of her teeth, ‘*O, let me go, let me go*’. This universalises the poem as surely all of us who dread dementia would utter the same desperate plea; the poem is also universal in that it analyses how most of us try to deal with death with often mixed emotions of guilt, horror, grief. The poet/persona can with ease wear her dead mother-in-law’s clothes, presumably because she was not so close to her when she was living, but the thought of wearing her mother’s ‘tweed coat,/ her gloves and shawls – even the thought of them/ gives me gooseflesh’, ‘because they’re her and not her’. This wanting to let go of the dead person, yet not wanting to is also illustrated in the poem ‘Disposing of the Clothes’ about a bishop, presumably the poet’s father, whose wonderfully embossed vestments were given away, yet the poet/persona asks the furniture removers ‘to leave Pa’s anorak hanging by the stairs/ ready for one more walk on Wandsworth Common’.

All is not doom and gloom. Another little touch that reminds this reviewer of one of Heaney’s sonnets to his mother when their two heads were bent over the basin as they peeled potatoes and the poet’s moving comment ‘never closer the whole rest of our lives’. A domestic detail such as this is echoed in Montefiore’s beautifully handled poem ‘The Wolf’s Leap’ which does concern fear for the fragility of life as the poet/mother walks with her young son by a stream that seems to chatter: ‘*You’ll die if you fall there’*, ‘there’ being a small gap where a wolf leapt a hollow rock that formed a bridge over a raging torrent. The last stanza, ‘years later’ shows the older boy ‘slumped’ with ‘unwashed hair’ at the kitchen table, yet his’ scratched warm fingers’ hold hers in ‘a natural bridge’. And across the repeated echo of the stream ‘our hands speak in silence’. Hence the external image of the rock bridge metamorphoses into the internal one of a very special human bridge.

Most of the poems in this pamphlet I could hand-pick but I will just touch upon two more that stay with me long after my reading of them: the haunting villanelle ‘The mistress to her Lover’, steeped in a powerful forbidden love, with the memorable refrain: ‘The word I say is not the word I mean./ The air is empty where our speech has been’. Then there is the wonderful spell of ‘Feathered the Bed of Nightmare’ (which first appeared in *Agenda*) with its catchy pattern influenced by the nursery rhyme ‘This is the house that Jack built’.

All three poets have singing lines indeed.

W S Milne

Two Voices

Mimi Khalvati: *Afterwardness* (Carcanet Press, 2019)

Naomi Foyle: *Adamantine* (Pighog Press, 2019)

Mimi Kalvati's fine sonnet sequence is concerned with childhood memories ('vanishing points that memory dictates' she says, memory 'fogged with the condensation of old age', friends and relatives who 'came to visit me again in dream/or did I visit them?'). The title poem, 'Afterwardness', gives us an indication of this theme. 'Where do memories hide?' she asks, and answers, 'In language, of course', 'some imaginary homeland', not 'an abstract universe' such as one discovers in logic or mathematics ('symmetries/inherent in physics'). This theme broadens out to the questing for cultural roots ('the stillborn questions never to be answered'), the early burden of learning languages ('first languages', 'English was still a mystery', a 'conundrum', 'the scaffolding and ark of broken speech,/a chapel in which psalms and hymns become…strange idioms'), learning English diction from the King James Bible and from Inspector Morse on the television.

The sequence reads at times like a confessional diary, recording 'frozen griefs no trauma ever thawed', her 'abandonment', the 'day's debris' of her 'life of shadows'. The 'sonnet diary' if we can call it that, rather like Robert Lowell's confessional ones, tells us of abiding concerns such as her attraction to Sufism, and her inner religious conflicts (seemingly resolved at one point externally in the observed objective juxtaposition of 'the Aziziyeh Mosque sitting next door/to the Baptist Church in quiet contentment'). She records daily events with an acute eye, telling us of schooldays on the Isle of Wight, going over 'Old Stamping Grounds', her artist mother, her cleaner, and of 'parents, grandparents, lineages'.

Recalling the past can be painful for her ('underlying ruptures' she calls the effect) but the painfulness is resolved in the act of writing: 'Everything that happens must happen here/…within the confines of the page'. The writing of poetry came early to her it seems. We have vignettes of her coming to grips with language and poetry at an early age, the revelation that 'Like guardian angels,/adjectives, adverbs, standing side by side//with lone words that might otherwise conceal/the very nature of their joys and troubles,/could qualify the world and make it real'. She writes later in the sequence of 'the prefatory glow of a poem', of 'Poetry startling her awake at night', of reading Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, and of her 'cross-pollinating' Iranian and British cultures, but wondering 'What if a heritage were lost en route? She writes of the feeling of liberty and freedom in writing poetry, of the imagination's 'wild parabolas' and 'pilgrimages', of all those ghostly 'tutelary spirits/who…conduct our souls to Hades'.

She is very good at noting those intuitions that grasp us unconsciously: of strangers' faces recalling those of friends, of that familiar experience of 'Sometimes you hear of someone dying when/you thought they'd died already years ago'. There is a touch of mysticism at the end of the volume ('a lyric void beyond the finite, and knowable, a via negativa/cruising at altitude on plumes of breath') but in general terms the sequence is very much grounded in worldly matters.

I have only one quibble with the book, and that is that the blurb tells us the sonnet sequence is Petrarchan. It is not. It is Shakespearean in its rhyme scheme (but not strictly so), and

although she rightly praises the Sicilian poet de Lentino as the first writer of the sonnet (in the poem ‘In Praise of the Sestet’) in actuality it is very difficult to distinguish the sestet from the octet in any of the poems in the sequence. The form here is not conventional then, but takes on a new life of its own, of contemporary discovery. This modernity distances the sequence from the formalities of the Renaissance which the term ‘Petrarchan’ suggests. The usual ‘inwardness’ of the sonnet form is retained alongside the necessary ability to dramatize a situation, but Kalvati’s method is never formulaic, and is always open to experience.

The ‘Adamantine’ of Naomi Foyle’s title suggests the durability of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘diamond’, a quality that is going to last, and I have a feeling that this will be true of the book of poems under review here.

The volume comprises two sequences, ‘Adamantine’ and ‘The Cancer Breakthrough’, the first about the First Peoples of North West Canada, the second about her experiencing of surviving cancer. The structure is well-founded, providing a balance between the public and private spheres of life. (One feels perhaps that in poetry today there is too much emphasis on the latter.)

‘Two Emilys’, the opening poem is ekphrastic. It is based on an original prose text and transformed into verse in the manner that Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop sometimes employed to make the experience their own. The poem is in the New England Transcendental, Pantheistic tradition and is concerned with totemism and animism (what Foyle calls ‘infinite kinship’), the death of native languages (‘broken/like salamander bones’), and her own childhood when ‘fear twitched like a fish in my belly’. In effect the poem could best be described as ‘a docu-poem’ really, both anthropological and autobiographical (we are told of ‘the cedar ribs/of their ancestral longhouse’, of native traditions including the famous ‘potlach’, that is the giving and receiving of gifts, the imperialist control over the Indian nations, and of her own experiences of living with them). The poem is set out visually on the page in the manner of totem poles, as if carved in space, providing us with a pantheon of the Indian gods with some Henri Rousseau-type effects (‘eyes glinting/like gold planets’), paeans to old skills such as the ‘baskets woven so tightly/they could carry water’. The poems in the first part of the book are ecological in theme, but this is perhaps to simplify the much more complex effect the poetry has on the reader. Here are ‘a people who know/that no-one owns the Earth’, who know that ‘we are here/to kiss the Earth’, and that ‘trees stand/for the lungs of the world’. They certainly don’t need committees and conferences to tell them of these facts. The theme of the sequence is E.M. Forster’s ‘only connect’; that we need to heal the split or division between cultures (evident pictorially in the way the poems are set out on the page), a recognition of the terrors of imperialism, ‘of the stranglehold/ your language imposes/on indigenous throats’, of the ban on speaking native languages, the Nations’ ‘shucked and scattered histories’. The sequence is as much a confession of her own ‘failures and foolishness and vanities’, as much as anything else, and of the foolishness of ‘raking over her own past.’ Resistance, she tells us, lies not only in political action but in the possibilities of poetry: ‘if you write enough poems,/you can just about breathe into the pain’. She writes also of how the world manages to ignore pain and suffering, with faux celebrity winning out over genuine (and usually anonymous) acts of rebellion. The sequence is concerned then with oppressed peoples (it is definitely a poetry of causes), of Palestinian freedom and of Irish Republicanism, as much as with the natives of North West Canada.

The blurb talks casually of ‘odes’, but to my mind these poems are more elegiac than that, with images of shocking horror: the young female suicide bomber whose head is ‘still wrapped in its scarf, shot off in an arc down the street’, of ‘bullets and bulldozers gouging out her streets,/soldiers, politicians, stamping down her dreams’.

The poem entitled ‘The Book of Wives’ is too derivate of Carol Ann Duffy to my liking but there are some fine lines in it, such as ‘to simmer his heart/in the warm oil of my beauty’ which reminds one of the poetry of the *Song of Solomon*, and some poems (e.g. ‘The Purse’) are too close to journalism, without the needful tact of art. Not all the poems are pessimistic. Hope appears in ‘the bare elms… their long exhalation/into spring’, and the female defiance demonstrated throughout is summarised as ‘a spring epiphany’. I like these ardent, vigorous political poems, especially the one concerning Grenfell Tower, ‘Britain’s black omphalos,/the navel of our failure/to take care of each other’ (quoting Ben Okri as a refrain throughout, ‘*If you want to see how the poor die, come to Grenfell Tower*’). I also like her poem in praise of the new technology (paeans to her laptop, her tablet, Playbook, desktop and Kindle, ‘the magnetic heart and guts and flux of the whole insoluble world’), and I especially enjoyed her elegy on the German singer-songwriter, Nico (best known perhaps as a member of Andy Warhol’s Velvet Underground). The best line in this sequence to my mind is the timely warning that the barbarians are at the gates: ‘wild boars on the outskirts snuffle in the ditches’.

Public resistance becomes private resistance in the second part of the book, ‘The Cancer Breakthrough’. Here we have a journey from terror to relief, tactfully told in verse. At first the poet feels her tumour as an ‘iron pea’, a ‘mushrooming marble’, a ‘trespasser acorn, ‘this bullet embedded/in a clutch of blubber’. ‘What my fingers have found/ is the nub/of my days here on Earth—a dark maternal pearl/secreted/by my oyster breast’; the effect of the diagnosis ‘lost/in the freak summer avalanche/of all I should have known’, and her fear of having a mastectomy. We are given details of the horrors of the MRI scan (its dreadful noise), and the results of the liver scan, and we follow all of this in narrative detail, in what she calls ‘the glistening bones of the opening act’, the drama of her life. It is a kind of war, she admits, thinking sardonically of ‘The War on Cancer’ campaign, but futilely

> The war on cancer is waged by athletic baristas,
>
> Weekend cyclists, half-marathon runners, hill climbers,
>
> Cake-bakers, crochet vest-makers…

whilst ‘everyone knows/the war on cancer will be won by the dead: their anonymous names engraved on brass plaques/screwed to ice-cap machines and hospital walls…’ She writes of the tedium of hospital television (‘soft viewing’ is recommended for her nerves, nothing about ‘the blood-soaked children’ of Syria). At this point she contrasts the meanings of ‘Western Intervention’ in the political sense with the medical sense (in her case), noting the awful irony between the public and private spheres of life. We are told of her getting better (‘a mid-chemo MRI scan revealed her tumour had disappeared’, objectifying herself in the third person, in a prose-poem) almost miraculously it seems, in almost comic terms (‘I did it! I vanished the fucker!’), relieved that the ordeal is now over (at times so tired from the chemotherapy that ‘just looking at pyjamas exhausts me’), the ‘months/of steroidal insomnia’ (a kind of contemporary hell) finished. She can look back on the days she managed to stumble outside, her hair falling out, how her friends looked after her throughout, describing this in the most tender and appreciative of terms; of gifts received, of comfort from relatives,

‘thankfully received/medication apps… homeopathy pills… a hypnotherapy CD/I played night after night’, an anthem of love for her carers:

the curing of cancer

may be a chemical boon,

but it was you, my family

of family and friends,

who gave me my life back,

gave me back to the world…

I am not brave.

All I have done is submit

to the will of the seasons, embrace

an untranslatable change.

Defiance and resistance (‘a burning, hungry, million-star-strong will to live’) in both the public and private spheres wins through at the last.

M.C. Caseley

WIDER HORIZONS

Gallop: *Selected Poems* by **Alison Backenbury** (Carcanet, 2019)

At first sight, Alison Brackenbury's verse can seem very conventional, formally conservative and prone to a rather unexamined sentimentalism, especially in her nature poems. Her career-spanning selected poems, *Gallop*, however, suggests this could be a rather reductive, misleading judgement: recent work sees her locate a strong sense of Englishness, exploring tradition and ranging widely in terms of subject-matter.

Dreams of Power, her first Carcanet collection, appeared in 1981. The title sequence reanimates Tudor history to give a voice to Arbella Stuart, witness to the power games surrounding her aunt, Mary Stuart, who eventually died in the Tower in 1615 after refusing food. The milieu is carefully researched and recreated, and Arbella's subtle manoeuvrings make the claustrophobic court intrigues vivid. A briefer poem from this collection, 'Summer in the Country', however, introduced themes which would recur, primarily the ambiguous joys of the natural world. This is more than just bucolic impressionism, however:

….In harvest fields

drivers wear masks – cough dust; hear grain

hiss profit; loss.

The poem ends not with predicable images of glut or waste, but balanced on a knife-edge of the vagaries of natural power and potentiality. The tensions surrounding these perceptions can be found echoed in later poems, as Brackenbury ranges over sometimes surprising historical territory.

After the 1995 collection *1829* there is a perceptible widening of range: *After Beethoven* and *Bricks and Ballads*, from 2000 and 2004 respectively, see a more robust handling of personal lyric and a more fully-integrated poetic voice emerging. As proof of the former, a poem like 'March Pigeons' begins with the brutal statement, 'I have wasted ten years.' Rather than linger over this sense of wastage, however, Brackenbury finds a correlative in a pair of preening pigeons, then circles back to the painful opening thus: 'The ten years are/ heavy as the feather's drifting star', which moults to the ground, like lost hopes. Here, the ordinariness of the pigeons somehow reflects hopes and love which is quotidian, rather than extraordinary. 'Linum' examines a crop of flax, the startling blue flowers it produces - 'they are mouths' - and notes with some precision the colour-changes beneath a cloudy sky. The flowers are implicitly linked in an ecosystem with the climatic changes and the reflections caused by the cloudscape, so that when Brackenbury concludes the poem with an image of running 'through the sky', the effect is created without a sense of strain or abstraction. The quality of observation of the natural world has here become more precise, too, recalling the Georgian nature essays of Hudson and Edward Thomas. Brackenbury shares some of the latter's preoccupations with mortality, too. In 'All', the dead are reanimated 'just out of touch' but waiting quietly, 'in rooms, without a fire/ with tea uncleared, without a fuss'. The nice domestic touch of the uncleared tea is part of a strain of domestic, interior imagery which Brackenbury uses with increased confidence when writing of quiet, uncelebrated lives.

In these later poems, the natural world remains a preoccupation. There are many horses, moons and notations of seasonal flora, but Brackenbury refuses to sentimentalise: writing of the quiet desperation of farming lives in 'Woods', she notes the suicides and broken marriages. The toughness of the recurring crocuses outlive the relationships, their 'startling purple throats' reappearing, even in the harshest conditions. 'Webs' celebrates a similar toughness in the setting free of gossamer spiders' silk, 'One acre shimmered open, miles on miles', a living system, alien to human experience. This questioning and estranging works well in later pieces, providing vivid glimmers: the ventriloquial starling 'holds in his throat/ the many colours of his oily coat' ('On the Aerial'), a buzzard's cry is 'a languorous whistle over the wood' (High Notes'), the cries of lapwings are raw and dizzying, 'as though you cracked the dark and found the sun'. The notion of Thomas as a tutelary spirit becomes much less fanciful in this context after reading 'Edward Thomas's Daughter', a tender poem of encounter and admiration.

Poems from Brackenbury's two most recent collections, *Then* (2013) and *Skies* (2016) find her uncovering intriguing new areas of subject-matter from within the mainstream patchwork of English culture. Finding something new to say about The Beatles is not easy, but a poem celebrating the toughness of their early Hamburg years tackles part of their story. Just as there is a school of thought that Elvis died when he went into the army, many believe that when they agreed to Brian Epstein's plan to tidy them up and put them in suits for mass consumption, something vital about them evaporated, never to return. Brackenbury describes the early, leather-clad Beatles as 'Beautiful Boys' (in a nod to John Lennon's later song) but they become tamed and domesticated. A later knowing comment by Lennon leads to a re-evaluation of the trade-off involved, and the aural evidence of this earlier incarnation in the form of one song, 'I saw her standing there', the only Beatles song Lennon played in his final live performance in Madison Square Garden. In another poem, another lost boy, Wilfred Owen, speaks from his letters, exultant in his final days, all shell-shock and uncertainty gone, intoxicated by the adrenalin of mere survival. Like many English poets, Brackenbury is haunted by the doomed generation of WWI poets, but when she comes to address the carnage and waste, she finds another angle of approach: 'Vesta Tilley' recounts a brief biography of the eponymous music-hall star, a rival to the more celebrated Marie Lloyd, but also caught up in recruitment drives:

> What swelled her ruined throat with pride?
>
> Her dearest trousered stunt,
>
> the night she sent three hundred boys
>
> straight to the Western Front.

The innocuous quatrain form hides the barbs of 'stunt' and 'boys' here, but the implications (and the guilt) are plain to the reader. A following poem, 'Told', cheerfully admits that years later, truth is a casualty, but a glancing reference to 'the football in the mud' acquieses in all-too-obvious mythmaking and the shorthand of mud, mules and axles creates all the necessary misery behind the familiar trope of family tales handed down, without indulging in sentimentality.

As these examples make clear, Brackenbury's range as a poet continues to grow, just as her stanza forms become simpler and more pared-down. A growing engagement with inherited English culture allows her to question unspoken and given assumptions. Additionally, an

ecological awareness permeates recent poems such as ‘The Elms’ and ‘Species’ and speaks to our current concerns, but she has always explored the more glancing, sophisticated, unspoken assumptions surrounding encounters with the natural world. Her questions grow, along with the vistas in her poems.

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