

REVIEW: DILYS WOOD ON PAULINE STAINER

Tiger Facing the Mist, Pauline Stainer, Bloodaxe Books, 2013. £8.95, ISBN 978-1-8522495-4-0



“The blurb on the back cover focusses on the eternal Stainer... But there is a restiveness in this new collection...a taste of further, different riches to come?”

Spiritual, though not abstract? Lean but not mean? I'm not sure why this collection invoked for me, at least tangentially, a spiritually-battling George Herbert. I was not surprised to find here a mysterious, evocative poem referring to the seventeenth century poet (*George Herbert plays the lute*). While not implying that there is solely a Christian theology or formal religious practice behind Stainer's visions (the spiritual traditions of the East also provide colouring), the overwhelming impression is that, like Herbert, her home-ground is a Catholic not a Calvinist mentality. Church music plays, the stained glass is not smashed, 'graven images' and symbols are important. Stainer reaches out beyond but through sensual experience: "...the vanishing point / a wave of cherry blossom / moving through memory / until we are dazed / by the slow pollen / the gradual dazzle" (*Overwintering*).

With her spare (but rich), consistent style and dense language, her unfailing interest in depth not surface, Stainer's work is normally the opposite of 'streetwise' or the lighter kind of personal/confessional poetry. However, the range here is wide. Some poems here touch on events in the poet's life; others touch on conflict between nations ("muffled depth charges"), our interference with the planet ("...how the atolls / glow with pollution / and perfect vaccines"), the salient facts of modern cities (...high rise / silicon and glass, the hum of refrigeration / delicatessens").

While previous work has often locked onto landscape and seascape in the British Isles, and the North has been her lodestone, this book travels the world to connect spiritual yearnings (or the lack of them) with exotic or extreme settings. References to foreign (also ancient) cultures include China, India, Japanese hot springs (*Onsen*), *The wedding at Valletta*, *Rimbaud in Zanzibar*, the *Peregrini*, monks seeking out isolated places, "... knowing patience is deeper / over great moss."

While not absolutely new – and possibly indicative that Stainer has travelled widely in recent years – poems here explore novel imagery; also alienation from what we are seeing – climate and culture sometimes outside the comfort zone. Like Caliban in her poem, *Caliban and the blue moon*, the poet conveys a new dislocation

Perhaps it was the second
full moon in one month
that unsettled me,
for I began to dream
of forsaking the island.

In fact, one poem is called *The dislocation*.

In the main, Stainer reaches out to encompass moments of intensity, both to record and to question such moments, and – in this new work, contrasting perhaps with most earlier work – to suggest barriers, frustrations, immortal longings bounced back.

In these poems, Nature, fine artefacts, sacred places, opportunities for reflection and meditation, the intense concentration of creative artists are all seen as possible entry-points to a desired state: “one of those landscapes / seething with soft fire / against the principle of darkness...” (*The mole-catcher’s cottage*). Fragments of a visionary, transformed world are here in virtually every poem, including those which make reference to today’s life-style. However, a key poem, *The elephants of Atlantis*, is an unusual departure for Stainer, listing what she desires but can’t have: “If only I could hear / the elephants of Atlantis / trumpet / through their forests / of liquidambar.”

The island of Atlantis is a figment of imagination. The poem’s nine stanzas, all begin with “If only...” and all make reference to the unattainable. Even when a miracle (in another poem, *Conjuration*) causes Lazarus to rise from the dead, the poet is wary: “...and Lazarus? / To what voltage // will the five wits lodge / in their living dead?” In Stainer’s work the visitation of the numinous, the spirit, has almost been a given. The language of these poems constantly returns to the imaginary of transformation, whether by light, by snow, by the appearance of rainbows. Doubt, questioning pervade all Stainer’s work (inevitable on any spiritual path towards Nirvana) but a plaintive note is more frequent here, struck harder: “We neither come nor depart”, *The dislocation*.

Stainer has always been in tight control of language, has always written in a vivid, densely metaphorical, minimalist way. There is no great change – certainly no lapse – except that there is a touch here and there of a new wittiness, a combination of the daring with the laid back. In the same poem (*Reading by snowlight*) where she says “I want to take the weight / out of language”, I felt a slight jolt at the witty use of ‘moccasin’ as a verb: “...outside, / everything is moccasined...”.

Amongst other things, Stainer seems to be opening up (occasionally, not often) to a quirkier angle (one that is at the heart of contemporary style, though she will, inevitably, handle this in her own way). Pictures, mundane by her standards but also endearing, emerge: “Three soldiers / in light khaki and white helmets / trot out, like little goats...” (*The wedding at Valletta*); “beer in frosted glasses, / a three-coloured cat / bringing happiness” (*The dislocation*); “the electric queen / wearing gold-foil triangles / in the foxy dark” (*The Queen of Sutton Hoo*).

The blurb on the back cover focusses on the eternal Stainer: ‘working at the margins of the sacred’, ‘Her territory is predominantly that of legend...’ But there’s a restiveness in these poems that could be – this is a poet who has taught us to trust her – an taste of further and different riches to come?

Dilys Wood