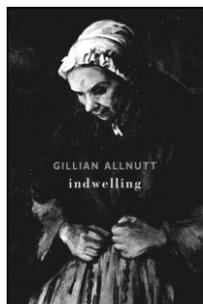


## REVIEWS: FLEUR ADCOCK, GILLIAN ALLNUTT AND MONIZA ALVI

*indwelling*, Gillian Allnutt, Bloodaxe Books, 2013. £9.95. ISBN 978-1-8522498-0-9



photo by Sarah Banks



*“Spiritual, fragile, sparse may all be applied to this volume, yet this is not a book that is purely ethereal.”*

### the quiet carousel of the snow

(now)

How often do we read in reviews that the poet under scrutiny is a confident poet in whom the reader can put his/her trust? Gillian Allnutt is not a confident poet. Each word is a hesitant step toward, not simply self-discovery – that bland delving into one’s psyche that a lesser, if more populist poet, may offer the reader – but rather a slight, almost imperceptible movement towards pure spirit – indeed one could say pure silence.

Her poems, over the years, have been a continuous journey toward this collection, with each previous volume contributing to the point of entry, to the admittance of *indwelling*. Spiritual, fragile, sparse may all be applied to this volume, yet this is not a book that is purely ethereal. Allnutt’s search is firmly rooted in the dust of life, the dust to which man himself will return: “Have you a word for me like a wheelbarrow handle?” (*Elsbeth*).

The journey has been long, involving many routes with different destinations yielding material for further exploration or, perhaps, excavation would be a truer word. The focus on the ultimate goal has never wavered and the journey has finally led Allnutt to her spiritual home, the cathedral city of Durham. However, her spirituality is firmly rooted in terra firma: *indwelling* is a constant juxtaposition of holiness and worldliness: “the nun at the gate / In her shadow the harlot” (*Stranger*); of familiar domesticity, global disturbance and acknowledged scripture: “the war gave way in my heart forever / as if we’d been on the road to Emmaus / as if we’d been on the bus” (*Conversation with a Woman from the Orthodox Jewish Community*).

This contiguity is one of the devices the poet utilises that ensures that the reader is continually encouraged to dwell upon connections between seemingly disparate events. Her utilisation of double-spacing as a minimum distance between lines reinforces this enhancement of attention that she desires to be accorded to each line. Punctuation is frequently reduced to simple line breaks or omitted entirely – the poem being one continual sentence without formal beginning or end. In a poem such as *shaman* this augments the subject matter – which is one that traces the customary world of Christianity back to its roots in shamanism. Again, the effect is to cause a definite pause within the reading – in direct contradiction to many poetry tutors’ admonitions to ensure that the poem should flow seamlessly. This does not appear to be within Allnutt’s remit as, on other occasions, she also employs short staccato lines, heavily punctuated, which, in addition to the white space, scream for attention to each phrase or indeed each word. Of such attention to our work most of us can only dream.

The language is as varied as the sentence structure, ranging from the vernacular to nursery rhymes to ‘hounsell’d’ (*my mother, her brother*) and includes seventeenth-century measures such as ‘pottle’ (*My Seventeenth-century Girlhood*) and the equally old ‘astonied’ (*Lyke-Wake*) that has all the resonance of astonished but, yet again, adds a further dimension to our reading. The use of rhyme to make connections, the employment of upper or lower case and drawing attention to the way in which the word’s physical construction is heightened by its sound (*Abut*) – and vice versa – plus the courage to allow a single line/image to occupy a whole page (as in *now*), are all part of the varied process by which Allnutt holds her audience in thrall.

Although Allnutt is not a confident poet insofar as she knows her journey is continuing and will lead her to further unexplored territory, she is a poet who has faith in the accretion of the knowledge she has gained on the way. She is not a confident poet yet she is one in whom we may confidently trust to be our guide if we seek true spirituality.

### Ruth O’Callaghan

*At the Time of Partition*, **Moniza Alvi**, Bloodaxe Books, 2013. £9. ISBN 978-1-8522497-8-7



“At the Time of Partition shows how a major political decision affected one family but the story is universal.”

Moniza Alvi’s outstanding book-length poem deals with a major political subject, the division of India and Pakistan in 1947, through family history. In the first section Alvi writes in the first person but at the beginning of the second section she places herself in her grandmother’s shoes and the rest of this narrative of forced exile is mainly in a mixture of her grandmother’s voice and a group voice. The theme, of course, continues to be very relevant. I found the book unputdownable and read it almost at one sitting.

The drama of the loss of Athar, Alvi’s uncle, her father’s brother, is a thread which binds the story together. This element is introduced at the beginning. Hit by a lorry as a child, Athar’s mind was damaged and we are told: “In an exodus, such a child / grown up and not grown up // was ripe for being lost.” Friends took Athar on an earlier bus to Lahore to help his mother but he was never seen again. The tragedy haunts the poem. It’s a symbol of the loss which is permanent when a person is driven to leave her/his home and birth country.

Athar’s mother is a heroic figure who endures hardship and grief and rises above them. The narrative follows the stages of her exile, the community’s exile: the shock of remote government forcing the families to uproot themselves, the journey, the total disorientation of living in a temporary camp, the heart-rending distress when Athar can’t be found, the gradual settling into a new home and the acceptance of life a different place in spite of the continuing sense of loss. I believe *At a Time of Partition* will be read by people who wouldn’t normally read poetry because it reads as a compelling story and yet it is very much a poem. How has Alvi made it work?

The writing in the twenty sections is pared, most of it in short-lined couplets with single lines used now and then either to make a link or underline a feeling or detail. The writing is never cluttered but the details used, often apparently simple, are very telling. Scenes, incidents, feelings are conjured up impressionistically and sometimes include a key image. Sometimes this is done with a few descriptive details. Section 6, *So They Took the Bus*, describes the journey across the newly made boundary to Pakistan and, with a few strokes, summons up pictures of the last moments before homes were abandoned, reminding the reader that the partition split families up:

The bus was packed with single  
and communal memories:

the unscrewing of a proud  
nameplate from the wall,

the scrabbling of a wire-haired dog  
on an empty porch,

the fervent embrace of an aunt  
left behind.

Sometimes the scene and its after-effect are created with fragments of dialogue and thoughtful detail or comment which subtly underlines the emotion, as when the offer is made to the mother to take Athar off her hands for the journey:

Ever after  
she heard it as an echo

in her inner ear, disembodied,  
as, in a sense, all voices are –

*We'll take him, Shakira.  
He can travel with us.*

*You've enough on your hands  
with the other four...*

At that swollen moment  
there was a shadowy unburdening

because at that time, perhaps  
any child was a burden.

The relatively few images Alvi uses can carry an extraordinary potency. A key image about the line drawn to divide Pakistan from India opens the poem: “It lies helplessly, wrong side up / like a turtle showing its underside”. The meaning of ‘The line’ underlies the poem and the last section is devoted to it: “A line so delicate a sparrow might have / picked it up with its beak.” Images as well as telling details are used to summon up life in the refugee camp: “A vast parody of a city...”; “The losses trickled out, // poured out, // in queues, in huddles / around the fire...”; “The multitudes to be settled / waited to pour themselves // from one vessel to another / to find their own level”.

Throughout the poem the haunting use of repeats heightens the rhythm and the intensity. After it has proved impossible to find Athar there is a section titled *Praying* which begins: “She would build her house / out of prayer”. The words ‘prayer’, ‘Allah’ and other repeats become a chant. Earlier, a very short section which conveys the state of mind of the people on the bus journey to Pakistan begins: “Not the thousand and one nights / but the thousand and one fears...” and the words ‘fear’ and

‘travellers’ are repeated in an image: “Fear stuck to the travellers / and the travellers stuck to each other.”

The poem has humorous touches. In Pakistan the children go to school where what they read is: ‘*Pride and Prejudice* / *Great Expectations* / and novels by Thomas Hardy / where everything seemed to be doomed.’ There is also irony. Part of Section 15 describes moving into an abandoned house:

They moved like trespassers  
through rooms of orphaned furniture  
  
claimed chests of drawers,  
the shelves of almirahs,  
  
removed saris and underskirts,  
sleeveless pullovers, shirts, salwars,  
  
and replaced them with their own,  
tried all the beds (were they softer, harder?)...  
  
and they noted in the darkened living-room  
the number and position of chairs.  
  
Everything as it was  
  
when a family, mirroring their own  
has grasped the future – and fled.

*At the Time of Partition* shows how a major political decision affected one family but the story is universal. The lucidity and lyricism of the writing carries a narrative which is totally compelling. I had almost finished it before I realized it was a Poetry Book Society Choice. The book fully deserves this recognition.

## Myra Schneider

*Glass Wings*, Fleur Adcock, Bloodaxe Books, 2013. £9.95. ISBN 978-1-8522497-3-1



“*Glass Wings strongly evidences ... Adcock’s ‘emotional intelligence’, her ability to tell us more than we know about our own weaknesses...*”

photo © Caroline Forbes

Adcock is having an Indian Summer: this collection comes three years after *Dragon Talk* (2010). Ten years before *Dragon Talk*, there was what might have seemed a summation, *Poems 1960-2000*, but, happily, after an interval, there was more to come for ‘Adcock addicts’, the many admirers of her versatility, accessibility, sharpness, wit and poignancy.

It's now fifty years since Adcock published *The Eye of the Hurricane* (Reed, New Zealand 1964), when she was thirty. In the UK she has been continuously published by Oxford University Press and Bloodaxe. She holds the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and counts as a significant figure in today's UK poetry scene. She was characterised by Fiona Sampson – perceptively, I think – as one of 'The Plain Dealers' amongst British poets (*Beyond the Lyric*, Chatto 2012).

To stay briefly with Sampson's analysis, *Beyond the Lyric* performs an invaluable role in helping us place contemporary poets within loose groupings and types of poetic. Sampson identifies more than ten groupings: for example, 'The Plain Dealers', 'The Dandies', 'The New Formalists'. It may be a little *ad hoc*, or even tongue in cheek, to put poets in boxes. We do not need to agree with Sampson's groupings or views. Her salutary effort, however, has helped focus reactions and reservations that, otherwise, might seem merely 'personal'. Poets like Adcock, who are almost institutions, cry out to be studied in an honest, systemic way. They are obviously influential and it's useful to know how their 'stance', their 'poetic', may affect us all as writers.

Sampson characterises 'plain dealers' including Adcock as having 'bread and butter diction and emotional intelligence', using 'familiar, lived-in language', being 'above all story-tellers'. The phrase 'lack of adventure' is clearly on the tip of the tongue and Sampson points to Adcock in particular as holding back: 'despite her portfolio of serious literary work ... Fleur Adcock can sometimes give the curious impression of just dipping a poetic toe in the water. It seems that nothing is to be pursued too strenuously ...' Sampson goes on to imply that some 'plain dealers' may deliberately fly under the radar, indulging in 'a willed dowdiness'.

Sampson juggles here with several contradictory ideas that seem highly relevant to *Glass Wings*: 'bread and butter diction' against 'emotional intelligence'; lack of ambition, and a tendency to repeat effects, against durability and high standing. If some of Sampson's strictures seem harsh, convinced advocates have shown reservations about the 'low key' of Adcock's poetic. Carol Ann Duffy mentions her laid-back tone but also speaks of the 'razor blade in a peach'. Andrew Motion praises Adcock for sometimes 'loosening her grip' on her normal virtues of 'orderliness and good clear sense' – which might suggest that 'good clear sense' is not always enough.

*Glass Wings* strongly evidences – in my view more so than *Dragon Talk* – Adcock's 'emotional intelligence', her ability to tell us more than we know about our own weaknesses. In *Having Sex with the Dead*, one of the book's more striking poems, having the somewhat 'louche' tone which sometimes crops up in Adcock's work, the poet succeeds in conveying both the strong physical excitement and the routine irresponsibility of what might have once been called 'free love': "They have all forgotten now: forgotten / you and their wives and other mermaids / who slithered in their beds and took their breath". The reason for forgetting is that the "one time flesh and pulsing blood" has "long been ash and dispersed chemicals".

This poem – title, visual impact, poetic imagery ("Let them float away, like Hylas after / the nymphs dragged him gurgling into the pool") – is strong. It is a poem about the past – the 1960s maybe – and aligns with many retrospective poems here. It also contains questions which seem a refrain for some 'plain dealers': 'Does it all matter?' 'Did we make too much fuss at the time?' 'Isn't it better to cut the cackle and just get on?' The poem is another example (a very lively one) of such under-cutting. In this case Adcock undercuts conventional 'luv-poetry'.

'Undercutting' is a considerable feature of Adcock's poetic diction. The use of colloquial phrases is endemic to the 'bread and butter' style. 'Colloquial' for the poet, however, may now be outdated for the younger reader. This is a basic problem with poetry which is formed in the spirit of, and using the language of, a particular era. Time runs out for language and also for attitudes, once mainstream, now the 'niche' of a particular generation. To retain its impact for rather longer, poetry may need what Larkin called 'the singing memorability of real poems'; also ambition qua subject-matter.

In some respects Adcock is a highly conscientious, accurate and historically aware writer. The three aspects come together in the blocks of poems here about old friendships and acquaintances (one of my favourites is *The Professor of Music*, which is brilliantly ‘period’) and family history. In the 13-page *Testators* section here, you feel the care with which the poet lets the ancestors speak for themselves, using ‘found’ language. To listen to our forebears’ assumptions, harsh prejudices and frustrated power is – as the poet no doubt felt – poignant. This is emotionally sensitive reconstruction, but can we call this section ‘poetry’? It’s a moot point whether we can be interested strongly enough in the fellow in the slashed doublet disposing of his second best bed ... What I feel about Adcock’s subject matter is that it does not always ‘free’ her, does not force her out of her comfort zone.

There is something of a contrast in Adcock’s poems about the natural world. This is a strong vein in her work. I recall, for instance her thoughtful and endearing poem *Toads* from *Time Zones* (OUP, 1991) and her much earlier, surely classical, *Regression*, which shows a strong (early) concern for the fate of the planet: “All the flowers have gone back into the ground. / We fell on them and they did not lie / crushed and crumpled, waiting to die / on the earth’s surface. No: they suddenly wound // the film of their growth backwards.”

Adcock, as Fiona Sampson implies, is not an ambitious *legislator* amongst poets. So often, when touching on issues beyond the struggles and spats of day-to-day existence, she retreats into the half-light of ‘l’homme moyen sensuel’. But in many of her poems about creatures she appears a free spirit. In the section here, *My Life with Arthropods*, wit rampages in poems such as *Dung-Beetle* and *Flea*. But, going beyond typical wry humour, her best ‘creature’ poems are bravely and indulgently descriptive in a way well beyond ‘dipping a toe in the water’.

A latent taste for extravagance is revealed: in *Bee’s Nest*

She’ll build in your compost heap; she’ll squat  
in a disused mouse-hole; or she’s

a cross noise buzzing inside the lawn  
so that you desist from using clippers,  
and an ever-larger moss-thatched skull  
rises from the earth like the Green Man,  
his head crowning, being slowly born

and in *Blowflies*, “ ... their neat trapezium shapes studding / the wall like a newly landed flight of jet / ornaments, the intensity of their black / gloss, with secret blues and greens half-glinting through, / and the glass wings, not so unlike those of bees – ” ... Adcock is, indeed, truly and effectively ‘plain-dealing’ when she lets no time-limited attitudes or assumptions stand between absorbed observer and fascinating object.

## **Dilys Wood**