

*The Weather Wheel*, Mimi Khalvati, Carcanet, 2014. ISBN 978-1-8477725-8-9.



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What is the archetypal goal for a poet writing today? Is it something like, ‘By referring to the outer world in the most accurate, naturalistic, realistic way, to illustrate the inner world in the fullest degree possible’?

This description is at least a stab at what Khalvati is about in this book – or, rather, a little earlier, as *The Weather Wheel* incorporates her ground-breaking Smith/Doorstop pamphlet *Earthshine* (2013). The thirty poems in *Earthshine* and the later poems are all written in eight couplets (sixteen lines). The format is one poem per page. There is no variation in the number of lines but some in line-length. Pitched against the neat, ‘square’ effect of presentation is the way *outer* and *inner* worlds are seen to react on each other in the poems.

Does this imply that Khalvati has found a formula? Emphatically not. If Khalvati was an athlete, we would call her ‘world-class’. She has deep reservoirs of skill and knowledge and is an innovator. The decision to work within a line limit seems to inspire new, exciting ways of constructing the approach to each poem.

It’s a tough assignment to say what’s included in any Khalvati poem in this phase of her work. Her approach is sophisticated, subtle, sometimes indirect. Moods overlap. Formality and informality are made to work in harness. A typical poem involves ramifications of subject matter and variations in the emotional intensity of the poem. The poems ‘morph’ under our gaze. If we seek labels for her work – ‘serious’, ‘sad’, ‘ironic’, ‘visionary’, ‘light-hearted’, ‘playful’, ‘rueful’, ‘reflective’, ‘philosophical’, ‘needle-sharp’, ‘challenging’ – we can’t make one epithet stick. These elements, and others, crop up in new combinations.

A few poems are single-focus and these include, for example, *Tears*, about grieving for her mother, where the relatively unshifting gaze of the poem is obviously appropriate. Tender, questioning poems about the relationship and about her mother’s death are a strength of the book, as are poems about her daughter and grand-children. Moving, evocative, intimate, none of these are especially ambiguous or difficult to unpack. These, and also some poems focussed on exotic locations, off-set the more occlusive, multi-stranded poems.

Khalvati’s technical accomplishment, and the fact that, even amongst poets, her awareness of language (play on words, ambiguities) is quite exceptional, may make it harder to see beyond the scintillating surface. The notion prevails that Khalvati writes attractive, allusive, deft, moving, lyric poems but, as readers and critics, we need to persist with ‘and, and ...’, recognising her range and ‘cutting edge’. Her views about politics, society, personal fulfilment and the survival of mankind on the planet can be stark.

Though no one actually denies that 'lyric' poets have the capacity for experiment and innovation, commentators sometimes fail to recognise degrees of urgency and, in Khalvati's case, the drive to break new ground. From the first, each new book has been a leap – it would be easy to say 'further away from pretty poetry', but this is not quite it (she has, in any case, always been a probing writer). There is still a big place in this collection for the appreciation of beauty in nature (and people and cities and man-made things); also for celebrating pleasure, affection, and for viewing existence from a whimsical or teasing angle. These elements have been in her work from *In White Ink* (Carcenet, 1991).

If one of the yardsticks by which we judge poetry is accuracy of description, details here (some almost clinical) pile up: "Pricked on her shadow, her ear and fur stood sharp as grass / but her real ear was soft, thin, pliable, faint as a sweetpea petal // and her shut eye a tiny arc like the hilum of a broad bean" (*House Mouse*); "little living furry torch, eyes two headlamp luminaries, front / a bib of chamois ..." (*Madame Berthe's Mouse Lemur*); "a human hare, grey on grey, white gloves, white hind paws, / is shadowboxing while their trainer, red on grey, holds up // focus mitts for a second sparring jackrabbit, black on grey ..." (*Statham Grove Surgery*); "the air's so still not even the cellophane of my cigarette packet / blows out of the ash-tray" (*Marrakesh I*).

In these poems we often pause to dwell on the fascination of change and movement: "raindrops ... are spheres and only tear-shaped when they fall" (*Rain Stories*); "a dribble of water crossing a barrier // of sun and shade gleams like oil" (*Marrakesh I*); "I long to see the rain in massive drifts / open its fan, lay fan upon fan above the road to Buenavista // so that even the petrol-station's blinded" (*Finca El Tejado*). Khalvati is also interested in the dynamic of works of art as in her responses to Klimt (*On the Occasion of his 150th Anniversary*) and her exploration of Matisse's approach to representation (*Marrakesh III, IV, V*), "The floral motif is the initial cell from which the pattern / spreads to the edge of the cloth, canvas, the material world // which is drained of meaning and hierarchy."

Illumination of the natural world and man-made world, lovingly detailed, in movement or in stasis, might be called (but not to play down the little marvels offered) the *bread and butter* of Khalvati's art from early on. Readers who know her early work well will want to consider whether there's now been an intensification of this element too? Or is it the sense of *contrast* in so many of the poems in this collection that points up the descriptive passages?

At the risk of over-simplification, the *concrete* now seems defined in counterpoint with *fragility*, *expendability* – of the flora and fauna of the planet, of relationships, of moments of relaxation and enjoyment set against the erosions of time. This effect must be seen also in the context of the poems' construction: her capacity, now so highly developed, to hold several elements – some opposites – in suspension.

It's hard to categorise many of these poems and to take their emotional temperature, as (changing the metaphor) the grain simply does not run in a predictable way. The poet knows what she's after, of course, and I imagine that most readers distinguish instinctually (as I try to do) those poems which are particularly dark in mood and content and those where the overall effect is some degrees lighter and more playful.

The poem *Snow Is*, for example, signals 'dark' from the first couplet, "Snow is a rubbing of sorts, a wax heelball on ground, / an impress of ribs – exoskeletons in high and low relief". Though the first six couplets might appear only an exhaustive description of what we see and how snowfall can affect us ("Acquires an air / of sanctity in repose but in action earns oaths and profanities") the poem builds hints of death, disaster, and anger leading to the final picture of refugee children "housed in sheep sheds, chicken coops, tents, // dressed in cut-up blankets, seeing things that aren't there in forests, / snow is the devil they know."

Another poem about refugees, *The Blanket*, starts with cossetting on a cold day ("there's this shawl to wear and tea with Manuka honey"), then dwells on the much less fortunate ("how many / have even a

striped hemp blanket?”), going on to imagine how a wood-worker might sculpt the blanket, using sharp tools to transform this humble thing into a work of art. Two subjects are interwoven: the evil effects of conflict and the way we try to cope (adequately, or not?) through art. The opening gives no inkling of the way the poem will develop.

Some challenging poems seem to explore the workings of the imagination. Through the book there are allusions to being a writer: “I’d give anything for a glyph from the star nib of her pen” (*Sun in the Window*). *The Swarm*, about watching snowflakes, appears a finely etched description of texture, shape and movement. The last couplet, however – “I could have watched for hours and seen nothing more than I do now, / an image, metaphor, but not the blind imperative that drove them” – suggests that the poem may relate to creative process (“looming close / but disappearing, like flakes on the tongue, at the point of recognition”).

*Model for a Timeless Garden*, ostensibly about creatures preserved in ice (“crystal wasps in the long black coffin”), abounds in double meanings about the way creative art extends and ‘preserves’ the moment – “everything that runs in lines will run / into fountain, the beauty of the arc against the formality of line”.

These are inferences, of course, about poems that are actually quite mysterious and suggest many possible interpretations. There is so much to discover and dwell on in this infinitely rich book which easily matches the best collections of the decade on both sides of the Atlantic.

**Dilys Wood**