

The mysterious and the clear

One Evening in October I Rowed out on the Lake, **Tua Forsström**, (trans David McDuff), Bloodaxe Books, 2015. £9.95 ISBN 978-1-7803711-4-6

Salamander Sun & Other Poems, **Pia Tafdrup**, (trans David McDuff), Bloodaxe Books, 2015. £12 ISBN 978-1-7803715-0-4

Although the opening poem in *Salamander Sun & Other Poems* chimes eerily with the subject of **Tua Forsström's** collection – “I rowed the last part of the way / to an island / in the small lake in the garden” – these two Scandinavian collections are distances apart in scale and scope.

Forsström's poems frequently refer to a recognisably Finnish setting, yet simultaneously inhabit a non-specific dream-world. All eighty pages of title-less poems are part of a connected whole, where the first images introduced – “the darkness, the rain, the kindness” – linger as lodestones throughout. Everything stems from the main action of a solitary journey across a lake, poems rippling like passing thoughts from this symbolic centre. The poet masters the art of suggestion; a cryptic allusion is only resolved pages later, demonstrating the deep resonances sitting below the poetry's surface. Who is tenderly addressed in the storm? Why is the rower carrying fish to drown? Accidents and violence threaten murkily like “the lukewarm smell” of slaughter, delicate and ominous.

Forsström's language is highly visual, landscape and weather strikingly rendered as colourful pictures: fireworks are raining roses, a red cloud burns in watery reflection. This cleverly depicts how natural phenomena alter our ways of seeing, like when a snowstorm subsides “instilling a sense of space and giddiness”. They also affect the psychological – our internal weather:

... forgetting
Blows snow in the face
Blows away over the water feathers and rubbish
Wears out and splits apart snows on the water melts
water in water rain tears trickle along
the cheeks water along the neck Insomnia
glitter-storm hysteria

A characteristic mingling of unpunctuated phrases, dramatically irregular capitalisation, sound patterning and rhythm all evoke the incessant motion of this noumenal maelstrom. Indeed, the collection itself is a moodscape attempting to chart our human sorrows and joys and, above all, find comfort despite everyday fear, chaos and vulnerability:

And then I hear again that voice,
mysterious and clear
You are old now little child
don't be afraid little hare

Salamander Sun & Other Poems brings the last two books of **Pia Tafdrup's** epic *The Salamander Quartet* together (the first two published in English in 2010). The blurb helpfully outlines her mythic structure, Joycean in scale: ‘Each part portrays an element ... represented by a creature’ with a ‘key figure’. The unifying theme is travel, far beyond a lake in October. Home is not a place to be cherished, but defiantly escaped from, to explore the ‘if’ her mother and grandmother were never allowed to realise. Where Forsström craves attachment and solidarity – “all those shining points were us / and the reflections of one another” – Tafdrup finds energy within, journeying as an independent nomad: “I want to be like the wind / without limit”, a force that can conquer boundaries and time zones.

Whereas her third book seems to circle round its themes a bit repetitively (and, at times, indulgently), the fourth has a pleasing chronology, focusing on a newborn self as it grows and learns. There is a vibrancy of language and image, whether when writing about “the smallest words” or world disasters and revolutions, and Tafdrup’s philosophical pronouncements are arresting and elucidating:

No matter where on the globe
I settle,
I live in the language
I was born into.
No storm of other languages
capsizes mine.

Gloriously fierce, this also highlights the compromise faced when accessing her poetry in translation without the accompanying Danish (Forsström’s is a bilingual edition). And yet we can’t help sensing that, through cultivated skill and determination, language’s transformative power is achieved: like the salamander which survives the fire wielding powers of regeneration, it “stays alive” becoming “new spaces to move into” – ever moving forward and burning with intensity.

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