

SMALL CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

Not all poetry books require hours to be set aside in order to follow a poet's work over months and years. There are books – pamphlet length, often involving a sequence of poems – which can be read in an hour, though perhaps reflected on much longer. The unity of such books is a plus, though they often embrace diversity and development. The poet has walked through a certain landscape of the mind and this surrounds the reader with a welcome enclosing ambience: we are glancing here and there – as you do – but it's good to be in one place for a while. [editors]

Small Grass, **Jacqueline Gabbitas** with **Frances Barry**, Stonewood Press, 2014. £7.99
ISBN 978-1-9104130-0-5

The poems in Gabbitas' chapbook (which was created to help raise funds for Stonewood Press) are accompanied by ink and crayon drawings and collages by Frances Barry. The book is small (less than a woman's hand-span in height, the cover is dark green with gold and pale green brush lines of grass; these material factors and the drawings create a holistic experience for the reader. The collection is a quiet and profound meditation on a single element of the natural world, in the voices of the grasses themselves. In *Grass sings to her roots* for example,

Man thinks these are the colours
of air and water, of light and freeing,
but before this they were ours:

Here, Nature speaks back about how we humans see the natural world either as resource or decoration:

And man that was woman saw me, stooped
and broke a single stem.

She was pleased with herself,
pleased with the way she made me fetish.

The finding and losing of grass

This small book demonstrates, in my view, a practice of poetry which fulfils 'certain standards', as Rob Lewis puts it in his article *No Nature Poems, Please* in *Dark Mountain* 10, that is to say 'a deeper intensity of observation, the freedom to see the sacred anywhere and everywhere, the courage of heart-seeing, the determination to make words meet their subjects with fidelity and power.'

Kay Syrad

ju ju baby, **Caroline Carver**, Indigo Pamphlets, 2016. £6 ISBN 978-1-9108342-5-1

The feat – and it is a dazzling feat – that Caroline Carver performs in these thirty pages is to put herself into the mind of a child, 'ju ju baby', part goblin-child, part recognisable infant prodigy. This preternaturally percipient baby grows up before our eyes, commenting on present ("he can ... put things in his mouth, / grab a nipple and squeeze it", *touching the ground*), the past ("men who ride on the prairies / counting clouds watching caribou", *looking for the wind*), and the future ("he sees his parents age / retreat from this woodland home," *saw-whet owl*). The location, Canadian open spaces (ecology, history, traditions and recent changes), competes to be the main focus of these poems. The honours seem about equal, the subjects of the child's development and the surrounding landscape subtly but effectively entwined. The child's growing awareness makes play things of an authentic way of life that Carver appears to know well. Ju ju

32

baby apprehends vividly: “round, star-flecked eyes / stare out of a cat-like face” (*saw-whet owl*). In the same poem, the child foresees urbanisation, “sees street-lamps taking away the night”. Carver’s concern about the fate of the planet fuels some of these poems’ ‘wilder shores’, including the lovely sea-imagery of *why a whistle not a sword*. The final two poems here (*Yukon Territory* and *that Tempus fugit boy*) are about contrasting attitudes to respecting Nature. The book ends on a note of pessimism, as *Tempus fugit boy*, perhaps an alter ego of *ju ju baby*, “doesn’t give a toss about bears”.

Dilys Wood

Under A Spell Place, **Paula Jennings**, HappenStance, 2015. £5 ISBN 978-1-9101311-6-9

This sequence of twenty-five poems is a compelling record of the thoughts of ‘Jean’, a nursing home resident with severe Alzheimer’s. Paula Jennings uses only Jean’s own words and phrases, but the poet’s sense of how language communicates (not by logic alone), her sense of form, and her understanding of Jean’s ultimate meanings were needed to shape this material into poems. Jean has important things to tell us about her state of mind (“My mind’s gone all middling in the centre”, *Over the years*), also emerging as a personality with the determination to be articulate, a sense of humour, an empathy with animals: “It goes out there, / its nose, its knees, / the whole flipping lot” – description of a dog in *Animals on the playing field*. These poems hold good *qua* poems partly by posing the very questions which an imaginative writer would ask; partly by recording an experimental language – in this case, Jean’s experiment in communication, but not so different from other kinds of ‘advanced’ poetic language. Questions are posed about belonging and not belonging (“You are you / and you are all pulled round / (that’s what you look like)”, *Home*); about what landscape can mean to us (“It’s something I did find power in. It had its own movement”, *The lost hills*); about the possibility of communicating at different levels (“There’s no difficulty between us, / you and me, / we’ve seen ourselves at different points”, *Two of us*). Such ‘rescued’ poems do what we want poems to do, go deep. The exploration of Alzheimer’s is, as ever, important.

Dilys Wood
