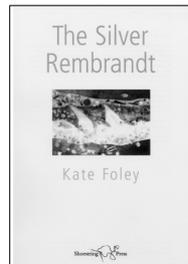


**from ARTEMISpoetry, Issue 1, November, 2008**  
**Penelope Shuttle, review of *The Silver Rembrandt*, by Kate Foley**

*The Silver Rembrandt*, Kate Foley, 2008, Shoestring Press. £8.95 ISBN 978-1-9048867-3-0



We learn, from the first of the two bracket sections which open and close Kate Foley's new collection, that the Silver Rembrandt of the title is a mime artist performing outside the Rijksmuseum, clad in silver lycra...

The mime

bows to the kids,  
conducts their mood with a shining brush,  
paints the gilded air as it streams past,

Rembrandt is also Muse to Lily, the tough yet vulnerable protagonist of this verse novella (which forms the major part of the collection). Lily first encounters the great artist himself when her teacher sends a postcard of his *Old Woman Reading* back to her class from Amsterdam.

The young Lily is bewitched by the picture and immediately makes an emotional connection between the old woman depicted by Rembrandt reading her bible and Lily's beloved grandmother –

it is a kind of photo of her gran.

Kate Foley uses a remarkable exactness and yet fluidity of language to depict Lily, whose story is one of damage and determination, brief joy, sorrow, beyond-sorrow; of the hard work of firstly claiming the self, and then mending the self.

But throughout her life journey, Lily is sustained by interior riches, by the depth and honesty of her sensibility.

We observe, with growing concern, would-be-artist Lily's struggle with her unsympathetic mother (who might very well be accurately described in this phrase from a very different sort of poem in Foley's 2004 collection, *Laughter in the Hive*) – "Don't think she belongs to a kinder / sex..."

Lily longs to become a realised painter. She fails. However, she fails creatively, learning by it.

Her lesbian identity is quietly revealed and explored with openness and a tender wit... we follow the darker unfoldings of her life, the birth (via "amateur conception") of a child with her partner Frances, and the end of that relationship under the pressure of coping with an autistic son, Tom.

But Tom, in his short life, with his rages and incomprehensions, has awoken maternal love, however briefly, in Lily's Mam, and she mourns his loss...

/...

You couldn't call Mam broken.  
Too solid to fracture she lets the weather  
of her pain wear her planes

to something more like a gesture than a face,

Descriptions of twelve Rembrandts are placed as bridge passages throughout the poem-novella, shaping and echoing Lily's story with beautifully-judged accuracy, releasing the reader briefly from the tensions of that story. As here, in this picture of Rembrandt's wife –

*Take paper imbued with ground bone  
in white gum and water;*

*let its aroma, faintly medicinal  
mysterious, drift in your nostrils.*

*While your eyes marry hers  
your hand*

*like a small animal with a life of its own  
lays down silver lines*

*becoming Saskia.*

I'm particularly struck by the emphasis on the creation of paints, reminding us that painters such as Rembrandt ground and made their own paints, and kept such processes secret.

*Dark, the alchemical brewing of light and all  
the snares of its entrapment, in pigment and paint,  
is Lily's study now –*

*bone burned black, ground fine, shadow source  
sea creatures oolith, coccolith, chalk  
flaked light to fatten shadow,*

In the closing bracket section, we see Lily claim her identity as 'a sort of painting-angel' outside the Rijksmuseum, clad in silver "her tall brush poised // as she juggles light."

Timothy Hyman, artist and commentator, rightly discerns in his prefatory note to *The Silver Rembrandt* that this is 'an elliptical novel – a kind of bildungsroman which includes all the material a novelist might engage with, yet shaped with the wrought intensity and resource of poetic language'.

Now I can't think of a poetic form more difficult to master than the novel or novella in verse! Yet here it is, ingeniously and scrupulously achieved. Like another Lily in literature, Foley's Lily has had her vision.

A further fourteen short poems complete this collection, each reflecting in its own individual way a constant and important theme in Foley's work, which is to investigate "the sort of love" which is "tough as a Kevlar vest."

**Penelope Shuttle**

**Copyright © of this work is reserved to the author.**