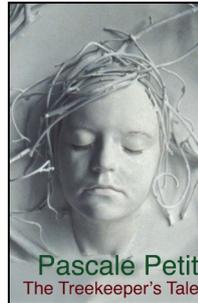


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Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, review of *The Treekeeper's Tale*, by Pascale Petit

The Treekeeper's Tale, Pascale Petit, 2008, Seren. £7.99 ISBN 978-1-8541147-1-6



“Here in this new volume Pascale the poet/shaman returns to the upper world with a new strength and a different vitality.”

Pascale Petit is a far-travelled poet: already by the time her first collection of poems was published in 1998 she'd twice visited the Amazon basin, and this latest collection contains poems from California, Nepal, China, France... but her journeys are inward as well as outward: she is a seasoned traveller of the imagination and has like Orpheus and the Sumerian Goddess Inanna journeyed to the underworld and returned to tell the tale.

This collection confirms her as a major force in current British poetry: both intensely mythical and intensely autobiographical, and now moving out into a wider world carrying the fruits of those inner explorations. In fact I'd see this volume as a transitional one: my guess is that her forthcoming work will continue the outer focus that is begun here.

For the literal-minded reader, Pascale Petit is not the most accessible of poets. She creates and writes from a mythological and metaphorical landscape, and the poems need to be read on at least two levels at once, demanding a holistic and integrative approach that's alive to the multiple nuances of metaphor. This can make the poems hard-going, especially taken too many at a time. She is a poet who needs to be approached a little warily and in small stages. Helpfully, this collection is divided into several short sections as if to encourage this method of reading.

In her celebrated earlier volumes *The Zoo Father* (2001) and *The Huntress* (2005) she explored the dark territory haunted by images of her parents, using symbolic imagery that was often savage and frightening, sometimes beautiful, and always powerful. Here in this new volume Pascale the poet/shaman returns to the upper world with a new strength and a different vitality. While losing none of their imaginal potency, these poems have emerged from the shadows. They are more celebratory, of the natural world and of human love and creativity. The central poems in the book, that describe the process that brought about this new perspective, are the first four poems in the section *Afterlives*. These are poems of transformation and rebirth; but characteristically this is no facile deliverance, but is full of images of ice, entombment in permafrost, wild animals of the tundra, savage rites of horse burial. The lover who enables the soul's retrieval is imaged variously as an archaeologist with a pickaxe (*Frozen Horse*, *Siberian Ice Maiden*), a falconer (*Two Golden Eagles*), a Bronze Age chieftain buried with his horses (*The Second Husband*), a leaping salmon (*Salmon*), and an eagle dragging her up into the sky (*Two Golden Eagles* again). In other hands these analogies might seem melodramatic, but Pascale Petit gets away with it; her extraordinary mythic imagery is weirdly convincing.

The ghosts of her parents still visit these pages: *Escape* describes her birth as an escape from “the nine circles of your cervix” (reminiscent of the nine circles of hell that Inanna had to pass through to gain

the upper world) and ends uncompromisingly: “The moment my feet left you / I started to worship the world”. Yet even in her anger there is something new, a manifest desire for some resolution, to make peace at last. In the wonderful *The Bee Mother*, although she describes her mother as a bee who stung her daughter “because she’s a rival” and is “still pumping venom into her”, she confesses that she wants this mother to see her now, happy and triumphant “on this, my wedding day”:

With all the love I now know
I want to touch the halo of your hair
and mend the delicate rays of your wings... (*The Bee Mother*)

The abusive father is still a baleful presence, but a sleeping one: Magritte’s *Restless Sleeper*, and a dead vulture. One senses she is laying him to rest, before taking flight herself.

One important current that runs through Pascale Petit’s work is that of ecology, plant biology, and the study of forest environments. In this collection she visits California and the giant redwood forests, now of course under threat from ever-encroaching development. The opening sequence of the book celebrates not only these incredible trees, but the human beings who care about them and live and work among them. There is the ‘Treekeeper’ who guards them, the students who study them, the ‘Treesitter’ who protests against their destruction, the ‘Nature Singer’ who creates sounds inspired by them, the explorer of the canopy who swings among them as on a trapeze. People (apart from her internalised parents) don’t normally feature much in this poet’s work, so it’s refreshing and (I think) rather encouraging to see actual flesh and blood humans here. This I see as another sign of a necessary transformation and perhaps a new engagement with the human world ‘out there’.

Pascale Petit is a sculptor, and all her poems have a strong visual and tactile quality. She is drawn to artists with strong symbolic imagery in their work, and there is a short sequence here inspired by the paintings of German Expressionist Franz Marc, as highly coloured as his horses and forests. The painter was killed in the First World War, and the poems combine the elegiac with images of battle and destruction, in a conflict between innocence and violence that never seems resolved. These poems are all right, and full of striking images of course, but to me they don’t really get anywhere. I think this is a common problem with poems about pictures: I’d rather just look at the pictures. There are rarely any insights beyond that of the paintings themselves, and this is the case here, in my opinion.

Least successful for me are the poems in the final section, the translations from the Chinese, or inspired by Chinese poems – it’s never clear whether these are fairly close translations or loosely based on the originals. Again, they are image-packed and beautifully wrought, but with one or two exceptions they seem curiously lacking in feeling or conviction. The poems after Yang Lian are particularly dense and surreal and have a certain dark energy, but nothing to hold onto or care about. The *Chrysanthemum Lantern* poem after Zhai Yongming is like a beautiful dream, but amorphous and dissolving. The two poems after Zhou Zan are the most concrete and at least there is some emotional impact, grim though it is. I’m not saying these are poor translations – they may be very sensitive – but as poems I find them a good deal less satisfying than Pascale Petit’s own work from her heart.

To conclude with that, what a powerful achievement is *My Larzac Childhood*, and how moving the evocation of love in the Altai poems. Something as simple and as clear as this:

When you ask me to stay
I know this is the afterlife. (*The Second Husband*)

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams

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