

Thin Ice, Elisabeth Rowe, Oversteps Books, 2010. £8 ISBN 978-1-9068561-5-1



“Restrained and thoughtful, her poems often convey the transient nature of our key experiences.”

This poet is a safe pair of hands, and if she takes few big risks with language her poems possess unmistakable authenticity of experience. Her themes are somewhat darker than the rather misleadingly upbeat comments found on the cover of her collection. This ability to address troubling subject material is both admirable and courageous, as we see in *Bequest*, a sombre warning –

I never thought to warn my children
to be childless:
I would rather point them to the orchard,
tell them to lie under the cherry blossom,
guarding the spirit while the flesh
makes flesh.

and in such poems as *Disillusion* where the poet recalls a father coming home after the war and the child’s inability to accept him as her father... “I found a strange man in the front room, / hugging my mother and laughing; / he held out his hand / but I ran away, // went back down the lane / to look for my father who was coming / home from the war.”

These clear and poignant lines point up the harsh reality-gap between the idealised father and the actual returning soldier-father.

Restrained and thoughtful, her poems often convey the transient nature of our key experiences. I was particularly drawn to these lovely poems of the liminal, such as *Casting Off*, *Shadow Selves*, *There Be Dragons* and *Dusk* where “Light ebbs with the tide; / a serpent river uncoils / from the mud-flats.” And I much recommend the classy and accomplished sonnet *Love Letters*: “They smell of things that have been kept too long.” Likewise the tender and measured *Several kinds of ordinary happiness*.

However, a few poems (*Admonition*, *Going to School*, *Big Girl*) are weakened by an inclination to travel a well-trodden path of English life – childhood, teenage awkwardness, couple-dom... maybe we feel we’ve been here, seen that, read it. For me the heart of this book resides in the strong poems that leave English watercolour experience behind, occupying other landscapes, moods and lives with resonant insight and presence .

Having myself had the exhilarating pleasure of a midnight snowmobile trip in Swedish Lapland – (I will never forget hanging-on pillion to the tour leader as we shot along the frozen-solid Torne River with snow shards flying up into our faces, nor the sight of the Northern Lights glimpsed through the forest trees, nor the Elk Stew waiting for us on the stove in the forest hut!) – Elisabeth Rowe’s poem on this theme, *Nightriders*, brings it all back vividly.

Hardangervidda midnight:
glittering stars ghosted the smooth brow
of the mountain; pale ice muscled and creaked
beneath our sledge as we rode bucking

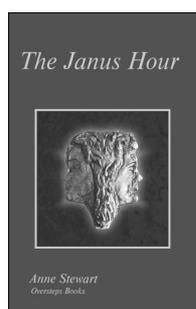
and swerving over the lake,
cold to the very bone.

Nightriders is part of a wonderful run of poems such as *Ice Queen in the Sauna*, *Koikkala Summer Market*, *Äkäsmylly*, *Shadows*, *Wilderness Looms*, *The Clearances* where this poet comes into her own; her imagination flies, released from the trap of over-familiarity (however well-delineated) and we are ourselves freed from the quotidian, brought to a place where experience sharpens, can be felt, “...in perfect poise, / all held in one sacred point of stillness / in the flow of things” (*Äkäsmylly*). These poems of Scandinavia and other regions of the North are the major poems of the book. We see the Ice Queen as “She steps in / tall and firm as a birch, / not young but glassy / beautiful.” And in the splendid *Koikkala Summer Market* “He fetches shoes crafted from ribbons of bark / peeled from the silver birch when sap is lively: / underneath lies a silky cinnamon lining / to cut and fold into origami footwear. / He probably wore shoes like this as a child”, the poet conveys the beauty and the sadness of this glimpsed way of life, as “Next year there may not be a summer market / in Koikkala: even here things are changing.”

This is an accomplished and thoughtful collection, another bull’s-eye from the excellent Oversteps Books.

Penelope Shuttle

The Janus Hour, Anne Stewart, Oversteps Books, 2010. £8 ISBN 978-1-9068561-6-8



“She incorporates the bodily senses into her work fearlessly but with great tact and openness.”

There’s a Finnish proverb that says ‘Better a bitter truth than a sweet lie’ – (*Parempi pyy pivossa, kuin kymmenen oksalla*) and the poems in Anne Stewart’s debut collection bear this out. Stewart does not flinch from the bitterness of the truth; her poems are fearless, muscular, flexible, staunch. They look at scenes and events from the past that are still raw; other poems move forward to whatever might lie ahead, with equal courage. Janus indeed presides over this striking collection.

Her language is always clear and controlled, vivid, grounded, and yet impassioned. Ambitious in scope and realisation, her collection is distinguished throughout by a feisty grace, a poet at the top of her game. Indeed, sometimes this reader felt she was on a hurricane deck as the voyage of this book pitched through stormy waters. This creates an exhilarating read, where tensions are explored and superbly maintained.

The bitter truth is present to us in the sequence *In the Still of the Night* where the dynamics of a love affair move unflinchingly through layers and qualifications of memory that never lose the piercing thread of revelation...we see how “... he would calm, / the look of a man on borrowed time / and take her hand and talk of love;” In poem 4 the metaphor of paper and its potential to become correspondence, communication, is subtly portrayed: “Once it was a tree. Or rather a forest. / It was harvested, measured and cut / then stripped of bark, chipped into inches, / pressure-cooked with water and acid. / Ripped down to its DNA.”

So paper becomes a letter ... “A letter. It could have told anything. / How keenly its ancestors leapt, trusting, / into the wind.” The letter reaches someone...

Here in his cell he knows it must come.
How it will lie spent, crumpled crushes scattering
those deeper blues, those measured ribbons,
looped and laid to tell of change. How
it will etch into his skin.

She incorporates the bodily senses into her work fearlessly but with great tact and openness. For Stewart, the physical is part of the writing, she doesn't get stuck in the over-cerebral or abstract. This is a world of rendered realities. In the sisterly *Breasts* "What exciting lives they've led! / Hers have four children between them. Her twin / has four daughters and they have six children between them. / So many breasts and kisses! Such kisses. / All the love, and the years flown and I still don't know... / How they keep safe? Where they go?"

In *Two-Killer Scenario* we are introduced to ... "The dangerous auntie / sits on the corner couch." Auntie has a malevolent and disturbing presence. In presenting familial wounds, misunderstandings, mis-steps, or in confronting the vexed and jagged question of forgiveness, this poet masters difficult material in telling and engrossing ways. Stewart is in command of 'dangerous hints'. Her humour is often black. She makes us feel we wouldn't like to meet the dangerous aunt down a deserted lane on a dark night.

I was particularly engaged by her formal triptych *Tomorrow*. These three poems, each 18 lines long and set in three line stanzas, scrutinise the Janus theme most intently. The first poem tells us the dangerous auntie is coming on a visit, opening deep wounds of the past, and this introductory crisis leads on to the most stringent examination of emotional power-play and its concomitant distress. Yet at no time does this poet indulge in self pity. Stewart writes from deep within the dark zones of human experiences, of love's dangers, risks and losses. There is throughout an atmosphere of tough vulnerability, and the triptych concludes...

There will be wings across water. There will be
doors broken down and glass doors and doors
eternally slammed shut ...

yet, here at the archway, nothing is truly
certain. We march, blind and foolish, and only
the god sees both ways;

sees but will not tell how long the battle or how
it will go; whether, finally, you may be strong enough
to allow the doors to close.

Tomorrow is the keynote piece in a collection of outstanding interest and range.

Many readers of ARTEMISpoetry and members of Second Light will know Anne for her tireless work for the organisation and for poets and poetry via her website. How good then to see Anne's first collection arrive with such a strong impact. I am sure it will carry her voice to the wide audience it merits.

For Anne Stewart writes like the lovechild of Dorothy Parker and Louis MacNeice. She possesses a wry and humane wit modulated by illuminating and synaesthetic insights that draw the reader in. If hers is a harsh enchantment, it is nonetheless true enchantment.

Penelope Shuttle