



“There is an openness about Penelope Shuttle’s poems, a wish, a need to explore strong feelings which marks them out.”

Sandgrain and Hourglass follows on from *Redgrove’s Wife*, the book in which Penelope Shuttle began to express her grief and disorientation after the death of her husband, Peter Redgrove. This new collection travels widely both geographically and in subject matter which is often treated from an unusual angle. Although its central theme is a continuation, the poet has reached a point where she is able to look more directly at loss and to trace the stages of grief. In *The Keening* she visualizes the body of her husband, scans it as it was when he was young and healthy and faces the fact “we’re no longer one flesh”. She ends the poem: “This looking is what is called mourning, / and this is how I have learned to mourn.” There is a sense of ritual and the last part of the poem has a biblical note.

Shuttle writes both about the life the couple shared and her husband’s last days. In *Taking the Drip Out* she brings the two together. The poignant poem, addressed directly to her husband, weaves in glimpses of the past by imagining how he might be remembering it on the day the drip is taken out. The focus at the end of the poem changes to what is not known:

above all we don’t know,
Zoe and I,
how beautiful and welcoming
the sunlit sands of Maenporth will be

(o come unto these yellow sands)

nor how the equinoctial blue sky
will watch over us,
like a witty person struck silent,
as I scatter your ashes into the bright waves,
and the sea, nature’s perfectionist,
bears you away in triumph.

With its recall of Shakespeare, its surprising and very immediate image for the sky, this is potent writing, writing which heals both writer and reader. A number of poems depict the part grief is playing in the poet’s life. It is personified as “the keeper of my wardrobe” who “is strong enough / to lug my suitcase out to the car – / Surely he says / you will not go naked” (*Grief*). Here and elsewhere she conveys her need for it. However, its character varies. In *Like St. Agnes* it is almost unbearably painful even though wittily expressed: “I can’t get over myself / carrying my heart wrapped in newspaper / across Europe.” Sometimes it suddenly pulls her out of quieter feelings.

Often Shuttle expresses a longing to re-find her husband and in doing so goes over episodes or moments they shared in the past. Sometimes there is painful recognition that they can’t meet again but elsewhere there is a conviction that they will meet. *The Repose of Baghdad* suggests that it will be in a back street hostel in Andalusia, in the world of the imagination (*Mslexia* Issue 32 has an illuminating interview about this poem). There are beautiful lyrics in which Peter’s existence is affirmed as part of the natural world: “You are everywhere / as rain, ordinary as sunlight...” (*On the Patio*)

Towards the end of the book there is a sense not of grief ending but of coming through bereavement. The coda poem, *When Happiness Returns After a Long Absence* ends:

I don't ask for an outbreak of joy so major
the police are called in to quell it,
just your wren-song
drawing each no-longer-endless day to a close,
chanteuse of last light,
such modest happiness I think I can bear

In a moving sequence in memory of her father, Shuttle summons up the person he was and describes with great immediacy his experience as a prisoner of war in Japan. In doing so she looks widely at the effects war has. Other poems take on serious issues such as threat and loneliness imaginatively and with wit and irony. A purely enjoyable poem is the lively and tactile *London, Pregnant* in which London "is massive" and "every nubile woman / big and wise as an elephant, vastly expectant". *Old Explorer* is appealing too. It is written in the voice of a woman in a Picasso painting complaining about the way she has been flung on canvas and ends with her determination to slip from the artist's control and "crush you beneath my massive careless heel". The two poems are very different from one another but both present women as assertive. Both are life-affirming.

There is an openness about Penelope Shuttle's poems, a wish, a need to explore strong feelings which marks them out. In the main, British poets today are restrained, compressed and often oblique in their writing. There are of course exceptions. Pascale Petit and Stephen Watts immediately spring to mind. It's true that poems written in a tightly reined manner may be highly charged but they do not 'speak out'. Shuttle's poetry is a reminder of expansive American poetry but it is different from this too. Her voice with its mix of lyricism, humour, sudden shifts of tone, mood and imagery is unique. Her achievement in *Sandgrain and Hourglass* is the way in which she blends passionate feeling, observation, lyricism and wit.

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