

DAWN GORMAN: REVIEW

Mountains for Breakfast by Geraldine Mitchell. Arlen House. 80pp; €13. ISBN 978-1-85132-164-3

There Are No Foreign Lands by Mark Holihan. Cultured Llama Publishing. 77pp; £10. ISBN 978-0-9932119-8-0

We can learn much about a poetry collection before we read the poems. Typographical details such as font style and size, the length of both the book and individual poems, even the titles on the contents page, can all draw us in – or not. Flick through *Mountains for Breakfast* and you notice the spaces – blank pages, many short poems, short lines, four clear sections – there is a sense of breathing here, an opportunity to take stock. The titles, too, suggest meditated economy, most being just one or two intriguing words – *Sneak*, *Conundrum*, *Ghost Moth*. And so we are hooked, begin.

The five-part poem *Landfall*, meeting the gaze like a series of abstract paintings, is typical of Mitchell's work – the reader is not coerced or directed; we can take from this what we will. The first part, *Stop*, considers silence without naming it, and introduces us to a sense of loss which comes gradually into focus as we read on.

Bluebottles bounce
words from room to room,
old women's conversations
from the dead.

Mitchell has lived on the Co. Mayo coast since 2000, and that landscape inhabits her poems, going beyond metaphor to provide an ever-present, vivid chorus of sea, sky, hills, rain, wind. *Stay*, the fifth part of *Landfall*, gives a glimpse of an external world we will soon know well, beginning gorgeously with: 'The islands are sucked dim this morning'.

Lisa Molina's cover illustration, an abstract blown tree, mountains, bird and water, is perfect, and the poet herself observes the natural world with a painterly – and unsentimental – eye. I particularly like the raw, Ted Hughes-like *Roadkill*, which begins:

There's a hare on the road, its belly
soft as bilge, an eye already skewered,
crows impatient on the wire.

Nature is here not simply for its own sake, but helps poet – and reader – grapple with personal struggles, and the book inches us towards the agony at its heart with confident subtlety. There are, for instance, poems about childhood memories – I like the sisters and cousin on the beach, who 'lurch towards the camera's timeless eye' in *Remote Capture* – and about human vulnerability, such as in the single-sentenced prose poem *Before & After*, where a journey is interrupted when the STOP light comes on in the car, and we consider our own unexpected endings – endings before which we too might have been 'sailing along the may-bedazzled road between Claremorris and Ballyhaunis as if we were immortal'.

But the identity of quite what is ending here is – fittingly, as it happens – a vague presence in the first half of the book. The diary-style, *Discredited Form*, *Discredited Subject Matter* offers a sense of internal claustrophobia as the poet gazes at the external landscape through January 2015: the 'veiled and misty hill', with 'the trees' skinny bones'. And so we wonder. And then, in *Named*, we have: 'Once the word was out it hung / between us, drifted / into boots and shoes, half-opened drawers'. What word? We are kept in suspense until the end of the poem, when nature itself intervenes on our behalf. 'Tell it, / tell it, a curlew cried. / Alzheimer's I replied.'

From here, the poems deliver heartbreak in simple truths. *Conundrum* ends

I am lost
for words and you
have lost your words
and I cannot step inside your head
to help you find them.

Another prose poem, *Burrow*, is an unforgettably powerful, bleak poem about the condition. It begins ‘All I see is the entrance to the burrow of your skull: two dark moons defined by absence, desolate as rock pools brimming on the ebb tide of blind night.’ In *Threshold*, Mitchell waits for the end with her interpreter, nature, at her side. She says: ‘Beside your bed oxygen bubbles, / your breath is like wind in a hedge.’

The final section examines the process of grief, where ‘Days pay out / thin as string’ in *Ebb*, itself a spare, spindly poem, with just 34 words arranged in six couplets, powerful in their fragility. In ‘The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge’, Rilke lists the things a writer must have done ‘For the sake of a few lines’ – among which are ‘to think back to days in rooms withdrawn and quiet and to mornings by the sea, to the sea itself’, and to have ‘been beside the dying’. Mitchell’s ‘few lines’, few words, pack in the heft of all this, and more, with extraordinary subtlety and grace. This is a powerful, insightful and moving collection. The sound of the wind is in my ears still.

The wind and the sea are also leitmotifs in this, Mark Holihan’s first collection. But a quick flick reveals a contrasting wall of print – to accommodate his long-of-line poems, the font size has been knocked down to ‘challenging’ for this pair of eyes, and there are no section breaks, or other stopping-off points. There is, however, a certain aptness to all this. The collection’s title is taken from a quote from *The Silverado Squatters* by R L Stevenson: ‘There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign’ and many of Holihan’s poems here are memories of, and reflections on, years of relentless world-wandering: traveller’s tales told in the easy, conversational style of a barroom raconteur. That form reflects the poet’s Californian roots – there is something identifiably American about the expansive texture here – in spite of a home, now, in the UK.

Independence day pins down his ex-pat feelings of loss – ‘America and I don’t talk any more’ he muses, and, as he drives between England’s ‘dripping hedgerows’ he sings along to Willie Nelson and remembers a different homeland:

... there are sailboats on San Francisco bay
and the fog drips off the redwoods
in the Santa Cruz mountains
in a tiny patter
of profound silence.

That silence is a strong presence in Holihan’s work. We meet it again in *An unknown loss*, in which a woman is checked into an unspecified institution ‘not long after the baby came’. Ambiguity creates a powerfully disturbing poem, in which ‘she’

...could hear the watching workmen
across the road hammer in time with
her footsteps – bang, bang, bang – and silence.

When she glances at the bathrobe ‘with the belt tied in a careful slipknot / hanging in the open closet’, we know what that might mean, but no more is said, leaving us with the kind of unnerving sense of potential harm which chips away at us throughout this collection. In *Orange blossoms*, we are in ‘my father’s garage’, where we learn ‘*Black widow’s silk is used for the crosshairs in riflescopes*’ – itself

presaging events in *Magnolia grandiflora*, in which the protagonist is ‘in the cupboard with the coats’, while ‘she’, with ‘a .38 Magnum Buntline’, says ‘I know you’re in there’, and he wonders ‘is she drunk enough to pull the trigger?’

The narrative nature of the poems packs in a satisfying measure of psychological insight, but things do also rise above the prosaic. In that latter poem, I particularly like the magnolia, ‘a bud bigger than hands folded in prayer’. But often, it seems overt beauty is consciously overridden. *The sow* describes with graphic intensity the killing of a pig on Antiparos, an island more usually known for its loveliness: ‘Cycladic sunlight reflects off bright stones around us all. / She screams and she screams and she screams’, before the sound is cut, literally, mid-breath, ‘to a warm bubbling sigh’.

The travels shared with us, then, are unlikely to ever be the happy holiday snaps variety, that is not the lens Holihan uses – from the White Nile ‘black as blood’ in *Night in El Sid*, to ‘the sun’s heat’ in St Pardoux, Limousin ‘heavy as baggage’ in the multi-sensory *A quiet escape*, the edge is always sharp. It is testament to the power of these poems that their impact is strong, in spite of their meanderings, but I did wonder if the poet might pour some of this, instead, into a memoir – and some poems, such as *Madame Suzie and the road to Jerusalem*, are veritable short stories. With one or two, I longed to get out my secateurs. *One last time*, for instance, in which the speaker thinks he catches a glimpse of someone in a car after they have died, could, I feel, lose the whole of its middle section – 12 lines – and be a stronger poem for it.

But I wonder if what comes after these memoir-esque poems might be even better. My favourite here is *Broadstairs, UK, 11/11/08*, which has predictable undertones of violence – ‘My brother once shot the fridge while explaining a deer hunt’ – but comes into the present (‘We have no guns in this house’), slips travels into the background with the ‘old carving from Kenya’, and brings forward world and family politics. The resulting, complex tapestry, where his young guitar-playing son’s sheets of lyrics are ‘scattered and curled, / like scribbled treasure maps’, is hugely rewarding. As with the boy, so with Holihan’s poetry: there are hints of much to come.