

## Poetry Reviews by Charlie Gracie

Lesley Glaister's pamphlet *Visiting the Animal* (Mariscat Press, 2015) presents poetry full of clear observation and steadiness. Much of the focus is domestic, and her voice carries throughout a sense of honouring each moment and each person and each thing she brings to the page. *Tulip* is typical, with its humour and tight hold on the imagery: 'slim virgins, hipless / prim-lipped. Inside the window's / heat, a vase of harlots / bloused back to flaunt / their stamens'. The short sequence of nine poems from *Olive, Arthur and Me* (it is not clear if this is a larger piece of work in progress) has an autobiographical feel: the child's perspective is maintained, and the adults emerge as almost tangible, Olive grittily so. Glaister weaves images and ideas about the space left by things once there. This is the case with the final *Olive* poem and in *The Piano Once Removed*, where she brings layer upon layer of meaning: 'Tempted by the emptied stretch of floor / I do the downward dog, sacrum / shoved through sombre timber.' Space is where she ends this collection, the space left by the death of a parent and that left by the growing up of children: 'Our gasp is in the wind that strokes the faces / of those who walk or run or ride right through our traces.' This is an accessible and enjoyable collection.

*Searching for Franklin* by Joanna Ramsay (Galdragon Press, 2015) reflects on the search for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Arctic explorers lost with John Franklin. It is one of those publications that promise much in the visual aesthetic (the layout, the cover art, the feel of the paper) then deliver completely in the words. The title poem (one of five in this small pamphlet) gives the whole sequence its voice, particularly in the forcefully rhythmic second stanza: '... and death / an outcome not to be discarded / until the far white core of truth, / the thirst of not-knowing quenched.' Two of the poems take the reader back to a wife at home 'in this wilderness of waiting'. Ramsay's touch throughout is light, and she gives voice to the inner world of fear and hope and wonder. The only words spoken aloud in the entire sequence are the names of the lost ships, by a young member of an expedition 'troubled in his dreams, / over and over murmuring, / as ghosts rise up around him.' This work touches something in all who have lost or feared loss.

Tom Bryan's *Missing Presumed Unread* (Indigo Dreams, 2015) is his seventh poetry collection and is divided into five distinctly thematic parts. American-focussed narrative poems in the first section are bursting with beautifully drawn characters, and Bryan pulls on memories with such clarity that I nearly felt that they were my own. The eclectic second part twists and turns and is funny, and punchy. *Winter It Is Past* is typical, with its assertion that 'silence is not what poets do'. The short third part focusses on the narrator's experience of a partner's multiple sclerosis. From the loneliness of *First Signs* to the metaphors for MS (rat, cuckold, bureaucrat), this is a personal response to illness that retains enough poetic distance to be beautiful. The fourth part is another eclectic mix, with humour and rhythm and a great grasp of metaphor throughout. Part five has poems with a broadly Scottish theme. Part Two of Bryan's ten-part (he loves his parts this fella!) meditative poem *Wolf Dream* is engaging, with a poetic voice that reminded me of Golding's novel 'Pincher Martin'. Many of the poems in this section are historical, and the poet is engaged, in among the action, rather than simply describing. It is the poet's own future he finishes with, in a reflection on where, around Scotland, his ashes might be scattered from a pepper mill: a great way to finish a collection that has many interesting wee corners to sit in.

*Breath of Dragons* by Andy Allan (Indigo Dreams, 2015) is a pamphlet filled with poems about the Scottish countryside. At their best, they are contained and the poet often links mythology to the reality of the natural beauty. Allan makes real connections with his subject when he does this, such as in *The Pool of All Knowledge*: 'The pool's heart is shattered / in a flash of feathery blue. / The salmon, knowing all there is, / says nothing.' These poems, and those where Allan brings the reader directly in to the heart of the writing, work very well. Other poems, whose perspectives are more distant, have less focus, but still draw the landscape well. What is clear throughout is that this is a poet for whom landscape and all the things alive within in (animal or vegetable) are not simply bit players, but central to his, and our, experience of the places he takes us.

*The Wilderness Party* by A. B. Jackson (Bloodaxe, 2015) requires the reader to munch on meaty poems and meaty ideas. While sometimes challenging, you will be well-fed on this collection. Images are sewn together with words that often bite back. This works well with the spare, rhythmic impressionism of some of the work, such as the *The Godwit*: 'good

creature, / mudfrequenter, / your downward prayers / go rightly answered'. It works well, too, in the harsh clarity of others. In *Inexpressible Island*, about Campbell's Arctic expedition of 1912, he writes of 'six grease-phantoms who shat / continually, their blubber diet / ruinous on morale and gut': beautiful words on what was a hellish experience. Jackson is equally at ease with Pliny the Elder and children's television. (His assertion in *Camberwick Green* that 'Elsewhere, off camera, / the goodmorning Green / continues' made me laugh.) The *Apocrypha* sequence that finishes the collection with twenty-one imaginings of Biblical characters in modern, often surreal, settings, is superb. In *XVIII*, 'Jezebel tuned her acoustic, / sighed, away in a wee dwam. / Strings whinged or grew sweet. / This was Brixton not Babylon.' There is an intellectual rigour in this collection, but this should not distance the reader, simply give pause for a little chew.

*Fios* (Tapsalteerie, 2015) is Stewart Sanderson's first poetry pamphlet. Many of the poems are free flowing, with clever use of repetition and a conversational style that engages the reader. Others have more traditional structures and rhyme patterns. There are surprises: only a poet could give away a mountain in one poem, then almost, but not quite, give away an island in another. The several poems based on van Eyck's paintings are intriguing and reflect the sumptuousness of the art. Sanderson avoids heaviness in the words, despite his interpretive approach; it is the conversational style that works so well here. He has a great feel for the poetic power of the moment, as seen in *Lost in the Louvre*, where he brings into play lizards on windowsills alongside the essential philosophy of art: good stuff. I particularly enjoyed the earlier poems, where words are used more sparingly. *Hare*, with its two-line stanzas, is controlled and forceful: 'Eyes which bore / to the quick of you'. *Tradition Bearer* has such a span in so few, well-worked lines: 'my first hot meal was given me / on a horn spoon ground / from duelling bone'. This is an interesting and thought-provoking collection.

**Charlie Gracie's** poetry and fiction have featured in a range of literary publications. His poetry collection, *Good Morning*, was published by *diehard* in 2011.