

Expecting

By Chitra Ramaswamy

Saraband

Review by Kate Ashton

‘In woman’s womb word is made flesh [...] but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that does not pass away. This is the postcreation.’ So James Joyce delineates the true gravity of motherhood in Book Fourteen of *Ulysses*, Oxen of the Sun. His is a deeply loving portrayal of Mina Purefoy’s long and difficult labour while a crowd of impervious bawdy men pontificate in a nearby pub about women’s destiny, from contraception to Caesarean delivery.

Freshly pregnant, Chitra Ramaswamy is astonished at how little she knows about her new state, or about her own body. Meticulously she documents the changes: the way she is increasingly hi-jacked by the growing foetus during the first trimester, and an increasing sense of outraged alienation from it. Then, as pregnancy becomes visible, its appropriation by midwife, doctor, scans, and eventually the world at large. There is no turning back. As her pregnancy progresses, people around her begin to die. Her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer. Her partner’s father dies in a hospice. Ramaswamy becomes intensely sensitised to the polarity of life and death; their interdependence and inevitability. It terrifies her. She experiences previously unknown states of emotional vulnerability. Is this the ‘delicate condition’ spoken of by the Victorians? It is surely ‘the uncharted emotional hinterland and scarred bodyscape of women.’

Her baby begins to move, and these ‘Quickenings’ plunge her even more deeply into darkness: her mother’s grief-stricken return from India after her grandmother’s death. And the tragic mothers of cinema and literature – Scarlett O’Hara telling her labouring cousin to ‘put a knife under the bed, it cuts the pain in two’; a pregnant Anna Karenina recounting to her lover Vronsky her dread dream of death in giving birth to their child.

Ramaswamy now sometimes feels death ‘like a disease you could catch’, and she begins obsessively to wash her hands. She seems largely to have taken leave of her rational self, and she doesn’t care either. On her last journalistic assignment before the birth she interviews Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar, whose film *All About My Mother* epitomises for Ramaswamy the ‘supreme commitment involved in mothering’ from birth to

death and beyond the tomb. Never again will she be alone: 'pregnancy is the first manifestation of being two people.'

By now all her preconceptions are gone. She is a captive of the moon, her womb, the 'dark, hysterical, hyper-real...melodrama that is pregnancy.' And on a tiny island she finally experiences a moment of utter madness, an 'unmooring' that leaves her screaming, stamping, cursing this relentless fate that has overtaken her amid the bluebells and glory of Ulva in Spring.

Soon the longed-for baby son will arrive: pitched chaotically from carefully planned home delivery to Caesarean section by an NHS equally unable to cope with women's right to choose, train enough midwives, or to resist catastrophic medicalisation of a natural process traced so movingly, frankly and ultimately uncomplainingly here.

Kate Ashton's latest collection of poems, *Who By Water*, is published by Shearsman.