Seductive Amnesia

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Emma Lew
ANYTHING THE LANDLORD TOUCHES
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mma Lew’s poetic covenant is with a poetics that has as its chief enterprise the music of diction, syntax and structure, a poetry whose message is often elusive, whose tones and pitches are constantly relocating and resettling in lines that resist explanation or sustained meaning. Her lines are always fleeing a centre, yet I found myself reading this book again and again, captivated by its beauty and music — not just captured, but actively seduced — and this is a book, I believe, whose prime intention is seduction.

Lew writes the most extraordinary lines. The poems constantly dissolve, slip away; the voices are as ungraspable as scents. The lines are so tantalising because they hint yet never resolve, give then take away. You can feel yourself giving over to the sway of their manipulations: ‘You seemed a little wanton. / Thistledown, someone said. / And all were weeping, men with white beards. / The dog / You seemed a little wanton. / Thistledown, someone said. / And all were weeping, men with white beards. / The dog /You had perhaps been noble and faithful’ (Light Tasks).

As in Lew’s previous book, The Wild Reply, the poems in this second volume are mostly dramatic monologues, or portraits set within apocryphal dramas or narratives. Generally, the locations seem European, other-time and other-wordly, and the speaking voices are innocent, violated, astonished, ravished, passionate and occult:

What will memory do to us?
We loved the nights and were taken,
all in our velvet dresses, to grind
stardom down to its dusty elements.
Or worse, the way we moved,
flashing like trout. We were nymphs
trespassing in the twiggy depths,
and the certainty that we would float
was absolute.

‘Loquax Ludi’


However, in some poems, too much work has gone into polishing the topmost surfaces, so that the histories of the speakers and their grim tales remain buried and unexcavated. Because the poems’ verbal structures are given precedence over their existential sources (as in ‘Light Tasks’, ‘Aurora Exit’, ‘Cornfield School’, ‘Plantain’, ‘Flourish’, ‘Another King Tide’, ‘Prey’, ‘Theory of the Leash’, ‘Sheraton Evening’), lines can seem interchangeable. Too prepossessing, too intent on pursuing cadences that seem to have nothing to do with content other than to be pleasing in themselves, too transparent in their drive for the reader’s attentions through seduction and pleasure, these poems lack emotional schema, psychological correspondence or impulse towards moral recovery.

Lew’s poetry certainly gives pleasure and delivers exquisite beauty (which you could argue is a moral position), and Lew has undoubtedly worked hard on making her language achieve the condition of music. However, the poetic imagination has to deliver more than just exceptional parts; the psychic filaments that join lines and stanzas together, though invisible, need to have an organic, imperative feel. A poem must be more than just an assemblage of syntactical processes; there needs to be a coherent principle, even a sense of a sharing of meaning and contexts, a discernible lyrical or moral centre through which a work can be read, through which the world can (albeit, temporarily) be anchored. In Lew’s work, so much is a disjunctive compilation of nuance and chance, which entices but doesn’t ultimately reconcile or acknowledge what it energises, as the emotions are constantly circumvented. As a result, the reader can feel quite a level of frustration.

This aside, Lew’s book, taken on its syntactical templates and on the basis that ‘its making is its meaning’, is full of rewards. Many poems are noteworthy for the movement of their cadences and rhythms across the stanzas, for the remarkable sense of lineation, for the persuasions and nuances of tone and pitch across the signatures of time and voice. Most rewarding of all are the pantoums (‘Kind of a Golden Girl’, ‘Anything the Landlord Touches’, ‘Pali’), to which I believe Lew’s poetry is especially suited because the formal requirements play off against the consecutive caprice of the lines: the repetitions holding in check the poems’ impulses towards diffusion. For a poetry of such tenuous associative links, formal constructions are a way of grounding the work and avoiding the problems that a too-arbitrary or imperial sense of beauty can impose when there is no counterbalancing latency of meaning.

Anything the Landlord Touches, beautiful as it is elusive, will have you admiring and pursuing it. Its emotional and verbal vaporencence may also leave you unsure as to how memorable its poetry makes that which deserves to be remembered.

Essentially, it’s a collection of escapes and seductions, of ravishing trances, amnesias and fugues.