

*Bucking the Trend*

Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There*. Carcanet, £6.95 (pbk)

Sinéad Morrissey's poetry is, for the most part, formally elegant and full of clear, crisp imagery. In poems such as "In Need of a Funeral": "Even though death is not where I wish to go/ down the wet green road through the straight black gate", Morrissey sometimes makes us almost forget that we are reading poetry at all, because we are so busy seeing what she wants us to see. However, everything she touches doesn't quite turn to gold. "Before and After", the second in a sequence of fourteen poems inspired by her time in Japan, is in every sense a poem of two halves. Whereas the first half is a razor-sharp, ironic description of the students at the school where Morrissey taught, the second sees a disappointing descent into sentimentality. And the opening poem, "In Belfast", in which Morrissey describes being back home after ten years away, is a decidedly pedestrian affair. In her other Belfast poem, however, she brilliantly describes the feeling of being back in her home city and realising that, not very far below its shiny new surface, it's essentially the same place it always was:

Next, fearing summary,  
we buy them a pint with a Bushmills chaser  
and then on to the festering gap in the shipyard  
the Titanic made when it sank.

Our talent for holes that are bigger  
than the things themselves  
resurfaces at Stormont, our weak-kneed parliament,

which, unlike Rome, we gained in a day  
and then lost, spectacularly, several days later

in a shower of badly played cards. Another instance, we say,  
of our off-beat, headstrong, suicidal charm.

(“Tourism”)

Earlier in the same poem Morrissey talks about Northerners acting as though the Troubles are over and “safe behind bus glass/ like a staked African wasp.” Her hunch, one gets the feeling, is that it’s probably not quite so cut and dried.

Reviewing her first collection (in *Metre* 3), Tim Kendall described Morrissey’s poetry as being tinged with a “scary [religious] fundamentalism”. Although this time she’s certainly more oblique about it, if the reader digs around a bit, he’ll still find it there. In the title poem, another from her Japanese sequence, she tells us how Nagasawa leaves at the door: “his rockhard atheism/ and slips onto the tatami of the prayer room/ as the man who can chant any you-name-it soul/ between here and Ogaki to paradise”. In “Darwin Man” she conjures up an environmental apocalypse in which the weather becomes “a creature” and gives the aforementioned “Darwin Man” his comeuppance. In Morrissey’s poetry the modern rational man or woman who thinks he or she can fully understand the world is always likely to come off second best. And in “Sea Stones” we are treated to a strong dose of good old fashioned Catholic masochism, the narrator realising that her partner was “never... so vivid/ or so huge” as the time he first slapped her in public.

Despite her obvious interest in some aspects of Buddhism, it seems that Morrissey has decided to stick with the religion she knows best. In “To Imagine an Alphabet”, we meet “a terrible stag, flames shooting from his heart, as he prepares to walk and preach”. The sermon which this “terrible stag” is about to preach will probably have a decidedly fundamentalist edge to it. Now, some readers might find this sort of thing disconcerting. But the qualities, which again and again allow Morrissey’s poetry to prevail, are its powerful imagery and strong rhythmical language. A poem such as “The Inheriting Meek”—about an American lake being choked by *algæ*—shows her at her best:

This could mean a green, undrinkable eye in the face  
of the forest, the irreversible failure of the water supply,  
whilst the language of the luminous *algæ*  
is murmurous, like intestines, and quaintly victorious.

Stars miss themselves in the eye, but keep their trajectory.  
*How neat*, you say, and mean it, abhorring stasis,  
*all change is good. We are piling into a future*  
*we will not escape from easily, if ever,*  
*for we have eaten time.* The algæ gather.

(“The Inheriting Meek”)

It is Morrissey’s clever use of near, half and internal rhymes which gives this poem its rough music: “language”, “algæ”, “stasis”, “gather”. And though the tone she strikes is, once again, an unfashionably apocalyptic one, this is the very sort of thing which, for me, makes her one of the most interesting of the new generation of rising Irish poets.