

*Nothing as Dark
as This Deep Water*

Lavinia Greenlaw, *Minsk*. Faber & Faber, £12.99

Lavinia Greenlaw's new collection brings us on a compelling journey from the landscape of her formative years in London and Essex to the Arctic. She is a gracefully detached observer who weighs every word carefully, describing every apprehended thing with a deft tender clarity as she seeks to capture the fleeting, the lost, to record and commemorate; the motif of photography featuring across her poetry collections, as does the act of mapping. This impulse to order the ungraspable, the transient, to somehow make sense of an unknowable world of flux and indeterminacy lies behind Greenlaw's work. Here there is the most delicate sensitivity towards language, its nuances and cadences, its sound and sense, words weaving patterns, as they reverberate throughout. It is intelligent poetry in the deepest and best sense: it probes the activity of the mind, the nature of perception, the imagination, experience and memory; and it explores the scope of human knowledge with a relentless, lively curiosity.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with the past, as the poet negotiates the years of her childhood and adolescence. Opening with "The Spirit of the Staircase", this launches into an account of a childhood game played by the young poet and her siblings; a "game of flight" that sets up the book's preoccupation with travel, with getting over and above the earthly level, though here "half-way down/ was as near mid-air as it got". This memory leads seamlessly into another, one that has the poet and her brother awakening one night to find themselves "finishing/ a conversation begun in a dream". Marked out as "the simplest exchange,/ one I'd give much to return to" it is *esprit d'escalier* indeed, uncovering perhaps the

impulse that lies at the very heart of this collection, that is, the desire to return to some moment or place from the past that threatens to remain forever lost.

“The Falling City” which follows develops this theme of flight, where the poet who is “more than willing to take to the air” strives to break through a world that to her child’s eye seems “locked and clear”. The poem’s final stanza is a fine example of the poet’s ear for the music of language. Here, the softly falling “ee” rhymes (me, absolutely, loved me, gently) create a hypnotically reassuring effect, capturing exactly that split second before the rapid fall to earth where, suspended in air before gravity takes hold, it seems that flight is possible, that all shall be well:

For a moment the glass forgave me,
curved like a hand that absolutely
loved me, let me down so gently...

Never giving way to the sentiment or nostalgic excess that often typifies such recollections of an artist’s youth, Greenlaw casts a detached, controlled eye over her past.

We are alerted to the influence of Robert Lowell on Greenlaw when one poem quotes a line from his “Waking Early Sunday Morning”. But more generally, the affinity with Lowell, and indeed with Plath and others, also exists in the way that Greenlaw has certain resonant words and images repeated throughout her poems to create a sense of continuity, of sequential order. The word “glass”, for example, haunts almost all of the poems of this first section and many of the subsequent poems. As the mesmerising journey unfolds, these recurring words and images ultimately serve to link the landscape of the past firmly to the region of the present, as the distances of time and space are drawn together. In section III for example, the radio of “Boat Back into the Dark” recalls the brutal police of rural Essex in “Foxtrot” as they “croon into their cold radio” in the first section. A delight in the multiplicity and possibilities of language is also at work in “Lupins” where the cry of the (lupine) wolves is transformed imaginatively into those spiked, tall flowers.

The unloving landscape of the poet’s formative years, of Essex, dominates the first section. “Blackwater” is a powerfully visual description of the region of the Blackwater Estuary in Essex, a site here presided over by such gods as Inertia, Stasis and

Moribund. Each stanza begins relentlessly with “Where”, while the poem’s opening lines “Where the coastline doubles up on itself/ as if punched in the gut by the god Meander” is echoed later on in the collection’s third section. Years later, in the Nordic town of “Ibsen” and far from the bleak landscape of the poet’s youth we get an all too similar depiction of the people of that town, who “doubled over by high summer/ had passed a vote to punch out the light”. In “Zombies” the persistent “ice” of “Blackwater” is replaced by something new it seems as the alcohol sets about “melting the ice between us”.

The second section of the volume sees Greenlaw leave her personal history as she turns to such diverse persons as Dante, Otis Blackwell, Lord Yarborough (his legal testimony), Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Malevich, P.G. Wodehouse and, perhaps most interestingly of all, Philip Ball. His *Bright Earth* is a study of the symbiotic relationship between science and art; it must have appealed to Greenlaw’s proclivity for interrogating and understanding both the world around us and the words we use. “Ergot” is surely based on Greenlaw’s libretto for the opera *Hamelin* while “What Makes for the Fullness and Perfection of Life” (taking its title I presume from a 1999 art exhibition by Christine Borland), is a glittering treasure, magically describing the tantalising, fleeting nature of a thought that passes through the mind and then vanishes, transient as a dream. The title-poem of the collection “Minsk” appears here, the city itself becoming a symbol for the lost land that, as the jacket of the edition helpfully informs us, we “believe to be missing from our lives”. A primal, idealised realm where “beekeepers grind stone to brick” (recalling the children of the “Spirit of the Staircase” “grinding the carpet to glass”), it is the place we can never return to, the loss of which we feel in our every-day lives, though it probably never actually existed as we conceived of it.

The third and final section brings us to the Arctic—a stark, uncompromising landscape—and the most arresting poems of the collection. It is here that the powerful impact of landscape on an individual consciousness is laid bare: “Arctic winter has set in my body/ like a drink of glass”. Everything here is subjective in the extreme, the poet entirely given up to the landscape and conditions of this region, displaying a meticulous, heightened awareness of its shade, texture and colours which so impose on her: “My eyes hurt to have to see the earth curve so” (“Vaerøy”).

“Sisu” lists the symptoms of the Arctic personality disorder caused by over-exposure to light, further emphasising the powerful effect of the natural world on the human psyche. The use of imagery and metaphor throughout this section is captivating, clean and exact: the beach is a “ledge of pulverised light” and “my thoughts are as careful and stiff as the tick of my pulse”. “Blue Field” is a defiant resistance of analogy, describing the colour “blue”, the “blue moment” of the Arctic twilight in terms of what it isn’t. Plath is here also as the poem closes with what must be an echo of the “substanceless blue pour of tor and distances” from “Ariel”.

The past however is still with us, even in this distant extreme of the world, as words and images from earlier poems in the collection resound here. The following line from “Kaamos”, for example, “Wherever you go is south, where nothing will rise or set”, recalls “Essex Rag” of section I, where, as the poet complains, therein “wherever/ you get to is not far, still nowhere” while the “gods locked in the earth” of “Steam” bring to mind the gods of estuarine Essex in “Blackwater”. Indeed, as in the poetry of Plath, words such as “bloom”, “heart”, “blood” and “cell” reverberate too. “Vaerøy” reminds us of the poet’s compulsion to map and record as “The man filming a map of the islands does not look up”. Throughout this section, as the rest of the book, words such as “edge”, “ice”, “glass”, “light” “air” “blue” resonate with a keen shimmer, and the connections drawn are many and various.

The last poem of the collection “Boat Back into the Dark” has the poet travelling “home”, bringing us too back to the beginning, back to “The Spirit of the Staircase” where the poet and her brother set off “back into the dark”. So we have travelled full circle it seems—past and present ultimately inseparable, irrevocably bound. There is, as “Essex Rag” has it “nothing for it but to head home” and although one cannot actually return there—“The last bus has not gone/ It never comes”—there are ways of looking backward and forward through the powers of the creative imagination, to revisit, remake and reclaim. Home, as Minsk, exists in the mind after all. This is contemporary poetry at its best, a poetry that needs no gimmicks, political or social agendas to make itself heard—intelligent, compelling and beautifully crafted, full of wisdom and delight.