

*Seeing Sideways*

Vona Groarke, *Flight*. Gallery Books, € 10.00 (pbk), € 17.50 (hbk)

*Flight* is Vona Groarke's third collection, and in contrast to the five-year gap between her debut, *Shale* (1994), and her second collection, *Other People's Houses* (1999), *Flight*, appropriately for its title, would seem to have been rapidly composed. Here is a poet, one suspects, for whom writing has never been as effortless, or as effective: the obvious spirit of exhilaration in which these poems have been created is matched by excitement in the reader at encountering a voice that has come entirely into its own. Vona Groarke has taken off.

*Other People's Houses* was close work. Its opening poem, "Indoors", is a sewing poem, and the book maintains a tight sense of formal organisation and restriction throughout. It deals, almost exclusively, with houses, with what they contain and fail to contain, and if this results in a degree of rigidity, the discipline of Groarke's single-minded application to her theme has paid off in her subsequent writing. *Flight* would not have been possible without her stooping "as I did, row on row, / in my small, careful and remunerated way" ("Thistles") beforehand. The honing of her craft in evidence throughout her second book has enabled the daring of what was to follow.

*Flight* is both broad in its concerns and assured in its techniques. A deliberately elusive sequence of poems called "The Bower" is structured around the names of trees—"Poplar", "Willow", "Elm"—but deals instead with the painful interiors of human relationships, touching down gently, at one point, on domestic violence. "The Bower" is accompanied by a couple of witty fantasies. In "Family", the speaker is supplanted in her mother's affections by a piglet with "a voice too like my own" who is "courtly, thoughtful, easy to amuse"; in "World Music" Elvis is intercepted on his solo drive through Tubberclair for an

autograph (“Nothing surprises Elvis”). The collection is punctuated with three award-winners, “Or to Come”, “The Way it Goes” and “Imperial Measure”. These are ambitious poems, distinguished without reference to the acknowledgements by the impressive way in which their difficult territories are re-negotiated.

Groarke excels at looking at subjects from unexpected angles. Her rendering of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 through the story of a failing supply of foodstuffs is extraordinary; and she anticipates the unstoppable tide of Irish nationalism in the bottles of spirits in the Four Courts that “kept their heady confidence” despite the bombardment (“Imperial Measure”). Resisting the linear at every possible juncture, but drawn, over and over, to be a storyteller nevertheless, Groarke resolves the tensions between these two positions by throwing light into odd corners of narratives, seemingly picked at random, and by trusting her reader to fill in the necessary connections. At times, I confess, I found myself credited with too much intelligence: there are puzzles at the centre of some of these poems I find impossible to unravel. Mostly, though, this doesn’t matter. Strangeness dominates: a boy dies and lies unburied, “ashen with soil and recompense”, (“The Way it Goes”). A bottle hangs on a red rope strung from a tree (“An Own Way”). Ominous details are sewn into the fabric of *Flight*, connected by the finest of threads, if connected at all. Groarke’s lightness of touch carefully sets them speaking, and no more, allowing them to resonate with cumulative power.

Groarke is attracted to aimlessness, but just as attracted to patterning, and this paradox informs all her work. She abhors the rigour, and the deception, of “a landscape/ wasted by the fervour of clean lines” (“The Way it Goes”). This is linked, in turn—as many images are in these poems—to narrative itself. The image of the landscape abused by linearity is used to debunk orthodox stories “that end in silent death and someone/ obvious to blame”, and to privilege instead poetry’s prerogative of selective explication. So we have tentative beginnings, roads that swoop back on themselves, circles, dead ends. The image that pulls her material together, and organises it, but in a gratifyingly lateral way, is the herringbone pattern: “The Verb ‘to herringbone’” is the title of the first poem of *Flight*. In the herringbone, pairs of parallel lines are thwarted by adjacent sets of lines veering off in the opposite direction. Such a pattern allows Groarke the freedom she desires

to follow “happenstance”, “tern prints on snow/ that almost lead somewhere,/ but then break off and stutter underground”, whilst creating, nevertheless, “a thinning fiction keen to aspire/ to a sequence of hard words laid/ one on the other and back again/ like a schoolgirl’s braid,/ chaotic and restrained” (“Flight”). Chaos and restraint are magically held together by such a pattern, and Groarke, satisfied that her mutually exclusive demands for randomness and cohesion are met, finally settles down to “find a place” where she “might rightfully begin”.

Understating her own intentions for what is to follow, Groarke makes a typically muted entrance on the opening page: “Something beginning with slightness/ and possibly taken from there”. She declares herself “currently unsure how to proceed/ or to convince” and, in a way, such deference becomes Groarke’s greatest sleight of hand. This book’s flight-path is carefully plotted and there is a confidence in her rhythms and a vibrancy to the language that belie the dithering approach she appears to favour out of respect for the wayward nature of experience. The sheer control required to pull off the best poems in this collection—“Or to Come”, “The Way it Goes”, “Coming To”, “Yew”, “Imperial Measure”, “Pop”—reveals a poet who knows exactly what effects to play when, and exactly how to achieve them. It would be unfair to call Groarke a poet at the height of her powers, without knowing where she is going to take us to next; that *Flight* is her best book yet is beyond dispute.