

Out of Nature

Robert Minhinnick, *Selected Poems*. Carcanet, £6.95

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Besides writing eight books of poetry (including his new *Selected*), Robert Minhinnick has been an energetic traveller and travel writer, covering (among other locales) Brazil, Albania, western Canada and the United States; he remains active in Welsh environmental movements, and as the editor of *Poetry Wales*. While his work as essayist and editor have given him some prominence, his poetic achievements have taken longer to emerge. Minhinnick began, and for almost two decades remained, a gifted but derivative poet of local colour and nostalgia, often simply plugging his life's or his region's details into pre-existing models (especially those of the early Heaney). *After the Hurricane*, however, finds Minhinnick doing something new. And while his international travels may have catalysed his recent discoveries, they are not what makes the book important: Minhinnick's innovations are not geographical but formal. Most of his best poems rely on careful similes, and most of those poems comprise strings of lyric or epigram, coral-reef or mosaic-like agglomerations of very short segments which reinforce and inform one another without sticking to one story or one voice. Where Minhinnick's earlier poetry (though deeply felt) may not stand up on re-reading, his strange new works repay all the attention a reader can give.

Minhinnick's first published poems, from the late 1970s, attend to the industry and the seaside, the forests and shipyards, around him, often in serious, slow-moving stanzas: some recall Heaney, others Louis MacNeice, who saved for his own Belfast and Carrickfergus the half-admiring, half-distasteful attention Minhinnick gave his "rust-coloured lagoons". "Salvage" starts out exceptional in its mimetic cadence:

Children of ten or twelve
Transfer a traditional skill with horses
To ancient lorries and cars. They go jousting
Over the Tremorfa moorland...

Like so many early poems, however, this one ends with a thud: “there is/ No shaking off one’s own defeat”. The young Minhinnick tended to conclude his poems by explaining just what they had meant: “On a Portrait of John Dee” (the Elizabethan magus) ends “Your life suggests the real, essential irony/ Our flatter lives conceal”. Elsewhere Minhinnick was simply trying to be Heaney: in “Eels at Night”

Into my own shadow I can plunge my hand
And feel the slippery texture of congealing eels
Like a wound opened in myself, our common skin.

“Digging was always my worst work”, Minhinnick explains in “Grandfather in the Garden”, borrowing Heaney’s famous spade. As late as *Hey Fatman* (1994) Minhinnick let himself write a Heaney-style bog poem: “He lies where/ He buried himself, // Bones laid out like a toolset”. Earlier poems about fish and wildlife place Minhinnick between Heaney and Ted Hughes stylistically as well as geographically: “1921: the Grandfather’s Story” evokes

the
Extraordinary voices of dying trout,
Like the mewling of newborn kittens,
Their shrill tumult shocking his mind
As he ladled fish from a shrinking pool,
Twenty-two thin and mottled bodies
Like half-opened jack-knives in the dry grass...

What set Minhinnick apart, even this early, were not the heartfelt evocations of his late grandfather, shipyards, shores or streams, nor the ecological awareness; Minhinnick distinguished his poems from their models, sometimes, by his consistent attention to spoilage, waste, to people, plants, and objects who appear discarded, rejected, or about to be. “The Coast” becomes one of Minhinnick’s better rewrites of Heaney’s archæology, because Minhinnick can focus on the garbage:

Down a hundred feet, or one, the fields
Are ready for the plough. The plastics lie
Not quite as deep, are dimly mauve and cream

Like winter bulbs.

Minhinnick's simile insists not (as would Heaney, Hughes, or Gary Snyder) on our status as part of nature, but on our fallen separation from nature: in Minhinnick, we explain the world we have made for ourselves by drawing (helplessly, dimly, bitterly) comparisons between the natural and the manmade, so that everything in either realm has a counterpart (ennobling or parodic) in the other.

In order to focus on these comparisons, Minhinnick had to moderate his desire to make poems tell stories about his own life, and to stop trying to drive his points home with a trowel. He chose to do both by focusing on things, scenes, people he saw only briefly, from afar. "The Looters" considers an entire region paralysed by chill weather, humanising what the poet has seen on TV:

The stranded drivers sleep in schools,
Their groups determined to uphold
The constitution of the snow.
Families smile through thermos-steam,
A child with her kitten, blue
As a cinder, sucking a blanket:
The usual cast of winter's news
As the commentary runs its snowplough
Through the annihilating white.

Such lines work not because they ask us for compassion (though they do) nor because they depict it (though they do that too), but because they use their similes (constitution, cinder, snowplough) to place people and ideas amid non-human nature without insisting that these three realms are one. Minhinnick's careful, slow-moving, four-beat lines help us attend properly to what is unfolding—though we, however attentive, cannot help these motorists, who instead help one another survive.

Minhinnick's 1989 volume (also entitled *The Looters*) included the first stab at what in *After the Hurricane* becomes his signature form: the set of short, related yet non-narrative poems strung

together. “Fairground Music” describes Welsh “characters”, ill-fated folks: in its ten-line component “Nuns Bathing”, “Each one holds a camera./ Their children are already conceived”. Are the nuns’ photographs like replacement children, or does each nun plan to leave her order and give birth? We don’t quite know, and it’s better to leave us guessing, there with the nuns and their photos of dunes and seaweed, seeing the shore-like future as they did. Here is a mental patient describing his nurse in “Isolation Ward”—another person whose past and future Minhinnick has veiled in order to focus on similes:

she whispers far into my sleep
Teaching me to walk.
My cheek’s upon the silver
Eye of her watch, face clenched
In her groin. Behind glass
The children are like thistledown
She is blowing towards home.

These techniques improved his autobiographical verse, too: Minhinnick depicts himself as a Bridgend schoolboy “Watching the birth of 1966”:

Guitars come out of the vans
And all the unrecognisable
Schoolgirls line themselves against
The walls, a different insignia
At their throats, eyes sooty
As the shy, tree-hurdling lemur’s.

Notice how far Minhinnick has come from explaining who does what to whom and why. Here, guitars seem to act on their own, and the schoolgirls (trying on eye-shadow) look not just unfamiliar, or frightening, but like shy, endangered, limber primates: they have become half-alluring, scary, new.

Though he continued to write long (overlong) meditative poems, by the 1990s Minhinnick had finally learned to trust the similes, sketches and glances at which he excelled. My description may make Minhinnick sound like a belated Martian (“ours never being/ A precocious country”). In fact, though, Minhinnick never sounds much like Craig Raine (nor like Raine’s

epigones), not only because Minhinnick's slow cadences rarely resemble Raine's succession of quick pix, but also because Minhinnick seeks not sensory resemblances for their own sake, but the human stories or moral conclusions a simile can reveal. In a poem about slow adult learners, "The sky was like the cratered asphalt yard/ Where the caretaker now laboured/ With a delivery of smokeless fuel". Minhinnick wants not the sky's colour, nor the pavement's texture, but the dismay of the frustrated teacher, whose students have failed to catch intellectual fire.

Minhinnick's similes, and his compact stories now lend themselves well to poems about travel. In Brazil (in another poem from *Hey Fatman*):

the soiled petals of banknotes
Blow around our feet

And each lance of the hibiscus
Shakes its rust over our shoulders.

(Notice, again, non-human nature compared to the manmade: banknotes are flowers, but flowers are weapons that rust.) It's hard to imagine how Minhinnick the traveller would describe Galway, or Seattle, or Eden: as in his earlier poems about shipyards and pubs, he likes scenes and details that stress decline or frustration, great gaps between what is and what should be. Though he has no desire to shock for shock's sake, Minhinnick's recent poetry wants very much to share his anxiety and his dejection, and to make you acknowledge his, and your, privilege (assuming that you, too, live in a First World country). Albania proved ideal for his recent essays; for poems, however, Minhinnick has gone to Iraq.

"Twenty-Five Laments for Iraq" opens *After the Hurricane*. It belongs first in the volume because it introduces both the volume's consistent (sometimes strident) disillusion, and its best mode, the mosaic sequence. Here is the sixth lament:

While we are filming the sick child
The sick child behind us
Dies. And as we turn our camera
The family group smartens itself
As if grieving might offend.

The poem appears to protest Western sanctions (which may contribute to Iraqi starvation). The queue of sick children (like the queue of five lines, each bearing its own victim) offers, appalled, a more general picture of want, and of the human drive to watch and be watched. A later, simile-based (and similarly dispirited) poem about Iraq is “The Nurse”: it reads (in its entirety) “All my babies shrunken/ Like lemons in a bowl”. A whole neighbourhood gets the simile treatment in another of the “Twenty-Five Laments”:

Over the searchlights
And machine-gun nests on Rashid Street
The bats explode like tracer fire.

The simile works not only because batwings sound like guns but because it reminds us what’s familiar in this locale, whose residents hear guns more often than they see bats.

When Minhinnick isn’t chronicling far-flung places, he’s often investigating the physical sciences. As we might expect from a founder of Sustainable Wales, Minhinnick worries about our nuclear legacy, and devotes a slow-moving but finally remarkable poem to “The Discovery of Radioactivity”:

When our sun is as small as the heart of the prickly pear,
The atoms of your black stone
Will still scintillate,

Compulsive as that key you finger
In the pocket of your waistcoat,
Impatient on the journey home.

Minhinnick’s greatest scientific discoveries occur not there but in the sequence “Elementary Songs”, twenty-seven poems spoken by personified chemical elements, from lithium to the transuranics. “Carbon” returns to Heaney’s neolithic corpses, but does something new with them:

Murdered, they buried me
With a pestle of wheat, a wineskin.
Now as the ice melts
Whose face is it you recognise
Grinning behind the glacier?

Heaney spoke for the disinterred man; Minhinnick speaks for the element into which he will decay, the element which drives both our biology and our automobiles. As we fill the air with carbon (dioxide), as the glaciers melt, we may perceive, with the poet, a likeness between Stone Age destructiveness and its industrial counterparts. Though "Carbon" lacks a simile, it, too, compares human to non-human things. Built on another such comparison, "Chlorine" fades its anti-air pollution message into a shockingly beautiful coda, which is not "image", exactly, but perhaps an "evocation":

At last I come upon Port Talbot,
Its sky full of flamingos.
I will enter the citadel from the sea,
My barges filled with sandalwood and saffron.

Those "flamingos" must refer both to pink (polluted, beautiful) skies, and to the curved necks of dockside cranes.

Such assemblies of short poems as "Elementary Songs" let Minhinnick evoke a place or a problem without having to keep to a step-by-step narrative, and without having to record (in any direct sense) his own discursive thoughts. The mosaic poems are why *After the Hurricane* matters. Their subjects include (besides Iraq and the elements) Welsh geography and botany, the industrial cities of the north-eastern U.S., and "A Natural History of Saskatchewan", at whose remote university Minhinnick spent several (apparently miserable) months. Where American poets like Bishop and Frost regard moose as mute, awesome hierophants, Minhinnick's garbage-scrounging Saskatchewan "Moose" reflects not just green politics but his own distaste:

Here stands old swampbreath
Raggeder than the muskeg—
Nosedown in a wheelie-bin,
Arsebone to the Northern Lights.

If the North American poems reveal Minhinnick's demystifying temperament, poems set in Wales apply Minhinnick's new techniques to old-fashioned emblems he actually respects. His liking for distaste and disillusion conflict with his loyalty to Welsh nature. The resulting tension makes "A Welshman's Flora" the sin-

America, go on far too long (13 pages, the longest poem in the volume), and roll through casually appalled, sub-Larkin quips: “I’m out east in suburbia/ Where the serial killers play Dire Straits”; “it’s not too long/ Before you know they’re all a load of shits”.

Minhinnick’s mosaic poem set in “Jack Kerouac Park”, in the fading industrial town of Pawtucket, reflects more reticence and more attention—it may be the only North American poem that plays to all his strengths:

I saw the maples rising straight as smoke
 And birches black and bridal
Stripped in their nunnery,
 While in my fieldglasses through the trees
Walkers passed routemarker after routemarker
Fuzzy as bears, the blue discs
Of the trail they had taken
Or the trail that had taken them
Leading them home.

Always disillusioned, sometimes bilious, fascinated by hobbled male presences, given to small, dense units, Minhinnick’s ways and means now resemble Heaney’s less than they do Robert Lowell’s. The stanza above even recalls the once-famous opening to Lowell’s “Where the Rainbow Ends”: “I saw the sky descending, black and white/ Not blue, on Boston...” The long string of short poems—the mosaic structure—has, however, no analogue in Lowell; if Minhinnick found it anywhere (rather than inventing it for English), the best candidate might be the early work of the American Objectivist Charles Reznikoff. Really, however, the form is Minhinnick’s alone.

Elizabeth Bishop divided her best book in two sections, “Brazil” and “Elsewhere”; Minhinnick might divide his *œuvre* into “Wales” and “Elsewhere”, though the “Elsewhere” would have to include not just other countries but the ocean and the Periodic Table. In such a division, “Elsewhere” would likely win out. The real division in Minhinnick’s work, however, occurs between *After the Hurricane*—especially its sequences of short poems—and everything before. The new poems—and new kinds of poems—suit his temperament at last, and show his gifts made good.