

Here, More Than Anywhere

Kathleen Jamie, *The Tree House*. Picador, £8.99 (pbk)

Medbh McGuckian, *The Book of the Angel*. Gallery Press, €17.50 (hbk), €11.40 (pbk)

“When asked what I write about” says Kathleen Jamie, “I like to reply that ‘about’ is the wrong word... I prefer to say ‘from’ or ‘toward’, or occasionally ‘through’”. It is this emphasis on process that has brought Jamie to a clearer alignment of the formal and the political in her work and finds heightened expression in the lyric brilliance of *The Tree House*, where human relationship to nature is explored in a range of versatile poems. Jamie has long investigated ideas of being in the world—through the motif of travel and through engagement with Scottish identity in direct and explicitly political ways. That human relationships are subject to endless re-negotiation has been an important theme for her. Here ways of relating and the experience of separateness undergo new forms of exploration and the responsibilities of humans towards the natural world take on spiritual significance.

Most of the poems in *The Tree House* are short and they speak with a measured clarity. The result is a collection that reveals the deceptive flexibility of Jamie’s craft and the subtlety of her treatment of voice. Whether it is the assertive resonance of “The Wishing Tree” (“To look at me/ through a smirr// is to taste the iron/ in your own blood”) or the idiomatic witticism in “Water Day” (“couldn’t we make/ heavy weather of it all?”), the reader is always aware of the delicate tonal shifts within the poems and of the surprises these offer. Arguably it is this feature that allows the poems both to speak from, and to transcend, their particular cultural circumstances. In terms of the collection as a whole it ensures that a certain unity of theme is balanced by subtle varieties of tone and form.

Throughout *The Tree House*, particular aspects of the natural

world receive sustained treatment in different poems. A delicate web of images and inferences connect these and other individual works so that, for example, swallows flit in and out of nearby poems that explore a range of ideas: resilience, protectiveness, expressive engagement. Marine life enjoys slow, sustained examination in consecutive poems—"The Blue Boat", "Gloaming", "The Glass-Hulled Boat", "White-sided Dolphins", "Basking Shark" and "The Whale-watcher"—which take experience and observation in a number of different, though interconnected, directions. "Basking Shark" explores being-in-space using syntax and line-breaks to disturb the reader's sense of balance and perspective. The speaker lies at the cliff-edge looking down at the shark below: "Behind me peat moor/ careered inland. I gripped/ sweet rock—but it was only/ resting...". Rock, moor and shark create an unexpected contrast of the dynamic and the motionless. We must read through this dizzying perspective to reach an understanding: that it is only through proximity to the cliff that the shark can "come to sense the absolute/ limits of its realm".

At times, though, Jamie takes what might otherwise be a form of "nature" poem in a decidedly human, often familial direction, as in "The Buddleia":

whose heavy horns flush as they
open to flower, and draw
these bumbling, well-meaning bees
which remind me again,
of my father... whom, Christ,
I've forgotten to call.

The reader too is reminded that, no matter how oblique the human connection is, it is always present in the creative—and the reading—mind. The title poem, for example, traces a similar turn. Here the tree house is a retreat to a place of infinite possibilities ("we might have lived/ a hundred other lives") from where the speaker speculates on alternatives through the metaphor of the random taxi journey: "Suppose, just for the hell of it/ we flagged one—what direction would we give?" Yet this poem enacts the circularity that subtly drives the collection as a whole: the taxi journey brings them back to that place of childhood play, a tree house made of planks, "a gall/ we've asked the tree to carry/ of its own dead".

In spite of the concentration of natural imagery in these poems they are also preoccupied with language: in part as a barrier to relationship with the world, being an exclusively human means of communication; in part as a means of developing the spiritual exploration that nature prompts. Here the cultural particularity of language is not overlooked by Jamie in favour of its universal nature. Instead she includes four poems in Scots, carefully inserted in two proximate pairings, to alert the reader not only to the importance of our encounter with nature but also to the complexity of its representation. In spite of the apparent simplicity, even the ease, of Jamie's writing, she is finally concerned both with the deliberateness and the difficulty of the act: "I can't coax this bird to my hand/ that knows the depth of the river/ yet sings of it on land".

Medbh McGuckian is also concerned with artistic complexity and she explores it through the obliquity of style that is now the hallmark of her work. In *The Book of the Angel* this style finds a new context in revelation, in both the poetic and the biblical sense. The entire collection of fifty-six poems meditates on representations of the angelic that inflect mediæval and Renaissance art with personal contemplation and recent cultural conflict. What is most striking about this work is that the intrusion of the divine into the secular world can seem at once passive and active—an æsthetic representation and a dynamic, mystifying force. It is a significant yet paradoxically logical development for a poet who pushes explorations of selfhood—emotional, political, artistic—to the limits of poetic coherence. McGuckian's first foray into the thematically unified collection in *Shelmalier* (1998) finds its devotional counterpart here and interpretative problems persist, or are intensified, for her readers. The insistence on a single concept permits some of these poems to exist as fragments, or glimpses, rather than completely individualised works. While this exerts a positive shaping force on the early sequence "Studies for a Running Angel", its operation throughout the collection as a whole limits, rather than expands, our response to these poems. McGuckian's usually varied palette is limited here, blue greatly predominates; likewise her imagery is refined to emphasise the essential repetition that is part of devotional structure.

The book has five parts, which we may be tempted to see as the Joyful Mysteries, since the Annunciation unifies some early poems in the book with painterly detail: "It is impossible to tell/

from the brocade and feathers/ of the robes, wings and hair of Gabriel/ ...// whether he has already spoken". The arrested quality of this scene is repeated elsewhere in this collection but here draws appropriate attention to the speech act itself as crucial to the moment of incarnation. Speech as at once an act of revelation and one of concealment has shaped McGuckian's poetic voice since her earliest work. Where previously she used multiple voices and shifts in perspective to deliberately problematise the relationship between self and world, here speech suggests meaningful revelation yet withholds it from the reader:

We will have to understand some such
word as "today", a luminous Word
for the "until" verse of the god-
making, brief Messianic stir
air-kissing the harmony of the data.

There are poems in *The Book of the Angel* that transcend this overcrowded, unyielding style, though. In the difficult mingling of divine and secular worlds, McGuckian's ability to reach beyond intellectualism with an instinctive, risky handling of language allows her to enter devotional worlds without fervour or cynicism. The poems here that best express the dislocating power of the spiritual moment are those that enact a kind of letting-go of meaning without wilful confusion:

someone stops to look back or returns
our gaze with the same wan evenness.

It was here, more than anywhere,
that we met, the sky unfeathered and burned,
as if a valley were pounded into it,
the leaf that could be found fluttering

takes leave of the step.

Formally, McGuckian continues to favour regularity of stanza length to contain the potentialities of language, though poems such as "Spells for the Embalmers" and "Charcoal Angel" adopt more flexible patterns in memorable ways. *The Book of the Angel* highlights both the strengths and limitations of McGuckian's

work to date: its extraordinary sensory imagination and testing of diverse perspectives must be balanced against a refusal of syntactical coherence and now against a proliferation of work that at times privileges the vigour and range of expression over the slow concentration of meaning.