

WARD, BEDROOM, CHURCH



Cliff Ashcroft

AIDAN MATHEWS, *According to the Small Hours*. Jonathan Cape, £8

Once read the autobiography of a journalist who travelled around the world re-examining the church miracles that had inspired him as a boy. He didn't find his lost faith, in fact the miracles now made him squirm. They were so much of the body and its products—exudations of blood and tears, spontaneous wounds, sweatings and liquefactions. There was a peculiar whiff of the mortuary and hospital ward about them, despite the religious setting. I think Aidan Mathews shares this experience. For him the whiff of holy incense permeates both ward and bedroom. Certainly his poems are occupied by the character and products of sickness, birth, sex, all infused with the language and ritual of Catholicism.

Divided into three sections—Compline, Vigil and Lauds—this and the poem titles (“Biddings”, “All Souls All Saints”, “Martha and Mary”, “Psalms for a Mammal” etc.) indicate the kind of religious immersion we might expect. But the book is never sanctimonious, rather it is unsettling in its mixture of the sacred and the secular, its language demanding, its effects both puzzling and intensely beautiful. *According to the Small Hours* is often an ordeal to read because of Mathews' ragged incision of a religious sensibility through the troubled body of family life. There is a very Catholic appreciation of the incarnation, not just in one person but in many—our tender flesh, the delicate breakable things of this world. The incarnation not only transfigures “wonderful things”, the sacraments of the everyday, but also terrible things—the crucifixion and its agony, the grief of powerless onlookers. A dead brother's transplanted organs is just one of Mathews' arresting images for the holy and terrible.

As I was reading the poems I often found myself discomfited and agitated. This seemed to come from two sources. First of all, that accurate, visceral evocation of the body:

His son opened a book as beeswaxed as Bibles once
At the black-and-white sub-tropical plates of tumours,
Spotlit melanomas on goose-pimpled ghost-bikini tops.
The women's faces were blotted like bar-codes, their teeth
bared.

They had taken off their earrings, even. You could see the
holes ooze,
And a phone-number inked on a veiny, papercut hand.

“Surgeon at Seventy-Five” is a powerful and poignant poem, for the most part superbly crafted. However, there is a second source of disquiet, namely the baroque complication of Mathews’ line, a pushed cleverness that can suffocate the verse in a panic of imagery. Now this rapid falling of simile upon simile does reflect the difficulty of his subject; however, we still get over-worked verse (the “zigzag, dogsbody dialogue”) even from the same poem:

Static of cardigans. The thousand nuclear breast-pocket
Ballpoints aimed at the curving globe in our galaxy
Were the mythical here-be-monsters of Krishna’s milkmaids.

Some of the frequent conceits in the book can be wonderful: “long rope ladders... like the chiselled calendars in a cell”, or “His arms ached like Christ on the cross from the spread newspaper”, softening the portentiousness of the biblical imagery. Others are less successful and suffer from the familiar metaphysical problem. They are flashy and clever, we admire the display and proficiency and are at once distanced from the work itself, which for Mathews creates an uncomfortable to and fro between intimacy and rebuff.

Mathews is at his best when he focuses on one scene and maintains that focus. So the discipline of a fixed image harnesses his inventive tumble of simile, producing such powerful and beautifully observed poems as “The Plot Thickens”, where a woman tends a grave, or other stunners like “The Acoustic of Water”, “Lava”, “Fatherlands”, “Relics”, “Handicap”, “The Head Appears”, “Genesis” and “Caedmon”:

when the accurate image
Cools and clears in the sacred mysteries
like an egg-white whitening in the pan.

Moreover, things are not all downbeat. There is a kindness and a tender-hearted humour to his work that sometimes reminded me of the domestic epiphanies in Stanley Spencer’s paintings. In “All Souls, All Saints” the dead rise in their “sportscoats and blazers” at the last judgment, “their legs dangling in the bright, new-fangled burglar lights / Like bathers trailing their green calves in a swimming pool”. Just like the dead who open their box-lid graves in Spencer’s Cookham cemetery. God also appears “in a nappy”.

Despite the uncomfortable feelings and reservations I have voiced about the book, I wouldn't like to give the impression that this is poor stuff. It clearly isn't. The poems are intelligent, well-crafted, and, here and there, both brilliant and beautiful. With so many good rhymers and jokers around now it comes as a peculiar relief to find a substantial poet of gravity *and* wit.