

DEAD TO THE WORLD ON A DUVET



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CAROL RUMENS, *Holding Pattern*. Blackstaff Press, £7.99

In 1991 Carol Rumens was appointed writer-in-residence at Queen's University Belfast. *Holding Pattern* collects all of her "Irish poems": poems which were written in or about Ireland during Rumens' time in Northern Ireland and her subsequent residency at University College Cork. This book's first section comprises work previously published in her 1995 volume *Best China Sky*, with the second half given over to newer work. Intriguing tensions arise from the contrasting perspectives of the volume's two parts: a first flush of dazzled infatuation followed by a harder-edged recognition of "that journey / of infinite dread and tedium, which love is." *Holding Pattern* charts the stages of a love affair with Belfast.

Rumens' interest in the changeability of northern weather perhaps owes something to that other laureate of meteorology, Louis MacNeice; it also provides an elastic metaphor for Rumens' examination of identity in an environment where identity is the most vexed question of all. Here the visitor is repeatedly thrown off guard by Belfast's ability to subvert her preconceptions. If cities are gendered entities, Belfast (especially to an outsider) could be regarded as decidedly masculine in character. But Rumens identifies her muse, Belfast's *genius loci*, as female, fusing her with one of the most durable figures of the tradition, the Aisling. She even has a go at the form herself in "Stealing the Genre", where the vision is reconceived as a failed seduction:

In my humble position (a woman, English, not young,
Et cetera) what more could I ask of an Irish dawn
Than this vision, alive, though dead to the world, on my duvet?

The sleepy vision proves comically indifferent to her overtures and the visiting poet's sense of the place's history: "so condensed, so weighty!" is captured in a tone of rueful, self-mocking tenderness. "Genius Loci", an ecstatic love poem, condenses these ideas:

She is every wind blowing,
Each darkness that's dressed in an impulse of light or water—
An identity left, for a dying moment, wide open.

But Rumens is too alert a writer to fall permanently under the spell of her own claim in this poem: “reality's never itself but a vision”. “A Small Incendiary Device on Eglantine Avenue” shows the dangers inherent in the aesthetic impulse, where an explosion appears beautiful to those who view it from a distance: “After the bang, seven globes flowered softly / On their seven stems...”. The poem ends with a hint of menace, an implicit criticism of itself: “And a stick with which some child / Had touched the sky fluttered / Star-burned to our feet.” Poems such as “Intruders” and “Variant Readings”, for all their delicate lyricism, admit the existence of darker realities:

Home was like this long ago, but can't be again.
I'll have chosen guilt and illusion, if I choose this
Most English of Irelands, our difference seemingly less
Than that between neighbourly hedges, depths of green.

Rumens' seismographic sensitivity to plural “Irelands”, to a frequently misleading appearance of stability and civic order, and the seeming ease with which she approaches her theme, are ample demonstrations of why she is one of the most sophisticated writers in these islands.

The second section of the book shows the poet post-travel, renegotiating her sense of home. “Stanzas for a New Start” witnesses her unease with the fixed notions of identity that “home” denotes: “Home, after all, is not a simple thing.” The image of Ireland that emerges from these pages is not simple either. “A Hiccup in the History of Belfast” shows the speaker's growing sense of her status as an outsider, carelessly getting lost “on some new estate”:

I'm met
By a man with food and anger in his mouth.
“Looking for somebody?” He gives no hint
Of registering my accent and odd manner...

The sharp edges of her environment clarify themselves in poems like “Old Friend, New Address” or “Absent Weatherwomen”, where the ubiquitous weather metaphor is counterbalanced by an awareness of a persistently underlying threat. “An Answer”, “A Label” and “St Peter's

Welcomes the Peace Walkers” demonstrate the complexity and intelligence of Rumens’ response to Belfast. In the last of these a moment of seemingly insignificant chat, away from the main action, proves epiphanic. The poet is asked

“D’you really like Belfast? Are you going to be staying?
I’m frightened to go out.”

“Couldn’t you move”,

One of the women says kindly, “to the suburbs?”

Something collapses in the long silence.

Call it religion. Say what emerges, naked

And guileless as the orange walls, is class.

This complexity of vision, a refusal finally to be satisfied with the easy formula or standard notion, finds an echo on the level of form. Rumens’ range is, as always, impressive: frangible, exquisite lyrics coexist with long, discursive poems (“Spark City”), experiments in dialect (“Chrisnin Gifts”), epigram (“An Answer”), and hilarious satire (“Words for Politicians”). *Holding Pattern* is never less than superbly entertaining, but there are breathtaking poems here too, making this a genuinely instructive and valuable addition to the poetry that has emerged from Northern Ireland.