In the world

*LIstening to the Night*, Jane Routh (64pp, £9.95, Smith|Doorstop)

My main response to these quiet, crafted poems is one of intimacy. I don't mean in the sexual or personal sense, I mean that the poems are detailed, indeed intimate, about the narrator's place in the world, with the emphasis on place.

What at first appears simply observational or reminiscent turns out to be the working out of how the speaker of these poems (and in this particular instance I suspect this often means Routh) is situated in the world around her, and indeed why.

This is a world of 'many darknesses', which the poet moves through in the title poem using hearing and sound:

 When the owl calls, I follow him high into the night
 until they hunt – the kill is soundless.
 An hour before dawn, they beat their bounds.
 I echo the one who lives close, but no reply –

although this intuitive and careful tracking doesn't always occur. In the second poem, '3am', the theme continues from another angle:

 What if you listen and there's nothing,
 not even the unheard tick of the alarm
 you shushed on the bathroom shelf,
 not even the hum / not-hum of the fridge.
 What if you open the window
 and the world out there holds its breath
 then steals about its business in secret,

Routh wants in, wants to be part of and to understand the world she lives in:

 Yes, you'd want the whole rackety mess of it
 to keep yourself from listening to yourself
 and the background thunder of your blood.

If this sounds too interior, rest assured that much of the rest of the book's poems look outwards, at the people and wildlife around her, at the hills, landscape, buildings and roads (there's even a poetic biography of her car):

 When you know a place lifelong, you've no need of maps;
 every name has its shapes and its feel underfoot:
 ('One place')

She may not need actual maps, but these poems *are* the maps Routh navigates by, or at least poems about the maps of time, people, the seasons, crops, friendships and acquaintances she uses in the world. By contemporary standards her world is a small one (though I know perfectly well Routh travels), but like maps these poems reveal small details and incidents, which when pondered over and questioned reflect bigger truths and ideas. Even though she is aware of death and decay, change and absence, the ongoing lives around her are what envelops and facilitates her life:

 How to bear

 the news? Easier when there were gods
 and afterlives. The gold leaves top off the heap
 already higher than me: next year's leafmould
 for next year's planting – a faith of some sort.
 ('November mood music')

It is this intimate faith, a down-to-earth, no-nonsense engagement with and partaking of the natural and human world around her, with no sense of mystical mumbo-jumbo, that underpins this tough, intimate poetry. As it says in 'A garden bench':

 When I speak of *Iron and rust*
 it's to speak of loss and endurance:

 © Rupert Loydell 2019