

Everyday music

*21 pages + psalm*, Robert Lax (91pp, One Island Books/Franciscan Institute Publishing)  
*Matrix I, Matrix II*, David Miller (unpaginated, Guillemot)

The two Lax texts collected here are key ones, now reprinted with a 'prelude', an 'interlude' and – rather clunkily – a separate 'afterword' for both '21 pages' and 'psalm' published one after the other at the end of the book, along with 'a note on the texts'. The book is a rather plain and small affair, with a slightly stretched typewriter-like typeface and unpleasantly smooth paper; a disappointment after the previous Pendo Verlag editions or the Stride edition of *Psalms* with art by Andrew Bick.

For Lax, these are almost verbose texts (or prose poems): interior monologues or spiritual dialogues with Lax talking to himself or a mostly absent deity. 'Searching for you, but if there's no one, / what am I searching for?' begins the 'prelude', whilst 'psalm' is less pensive: 70 pages later the book ends with the declamatory 'One of these days I'll wake up singing.'

The Biblical Psalms are, of course, songs of praise and doubt, lament and exile. Here, Lax seeks to know the unknown, declares that 'Your knowing cannot be a part of my knowing' and wonders 'To know is to love; but what does it mean / that I know?' Lax exiles himself from the unknowable god he converses with as he moves towards that final statement of intent: one day he will wake up singing. (But there seems to also be an implied 'not yet, not today'; he is still working it out. It is no more than a declaration of hope.)

Paul Spaeth's afterwords suggest that Lax's poems are mystical texts, with the narrator/author searching in the dark for the light, set within a Judeo-Christian tradition. They perhaps link back to St John of the Cross and his dark night of the soul, or the *via negativa* of Meister Eckhart's writings. The less visionary and more philosophical Eckhart is perhaps the better comparison.

David Miller was a friend and editor of Lax, but although the first two books of what appears to be a new series (*Matrix*) are minimal and contemplative, they are more domestic and human than Lax's work often is. Here is the everyday seen anew, here are 'sparrows nesting / in the bell tower' and 'heavy rain / at night'; elsewhere there is 'unrelenting rain & wind' and 'breadcrumbs oats & raisins / spread on the bird-table'.

The commonplace is re-presented here – unadorned and plainly told – to make it vivid and new. A vague spirituality and a human love are both woven through the images; personal memories along with adapted and re-versioned stories are simply and clearly presented. Miller is adept at clarifying and offering a focus on the world around us, or perhaps the world around him:

glass & shadow  
silence & word

I write in red

& write in black

starts poem 17 in *Matrix II*. The narrator writes as it rains (it is often raining in these poems; and if it's not then sea and waves are often present) and considers the 'diary of eyes' he is presenting, before concluding that he is 'nothing / compared // with nothing'.

This is rather too self-deprecating and self-abasing, and thankfully Miller is more adept at positive thinking and seeing throughout most of his poetry here. His world may be small-scale but he manages to write of both the domestic and romantic love in a realistic and heartfelt manner, looking for (and finding) everyday epiphanies. 'goldfinches / in forsythia bushes' may not be an earth-shattering vision, but it is enough of an affirmation for me. Miller's everyday music, his careful and precise lexical choices, along with a clarity of language, show a poet at the top of his writing game.

Rupert Loydell