

## The Mask of Realism

*And I used to Sail Barges*, Mike Ferguson (Red Ceilings)

*translating silence*, mike barlow (weather or knot)

*The Singing Horse*, David Crystal (29pp, £4.00, Dreich)

*Disparate Measures 1: Spuds in History*, Steve Waling (49pp, SRP)

Mike Ferguson's book of prose poems is a layered and self-referential kind of Borgesian labyrinth of asides and references to the world of the past and present, a semi-fictional wish fulfilment of fame and fortune, skilfully undercut with self-deprecation and poetic wit. Goodness knows what's made up and what's confessional here (perhaps it's all fictional!) but I like the way Ferguson projects his poetic career into the past and future and gently entwines hairdressers, critics and readers, Trump and bargees into his original and highly readable work. This feels like a new departure for Ferguson and as such a brilliant one.

Mike Barlow's poetry sequence here is considered and philosophical, ruminating on the 'skinned moment[s]' and 'frisson of dissent' that make up the relationship of the narrator with the unnamed addressee. The silence is one of mutual assent and comfortableness, yet there are also moments where the speaker declares that there is 'so much I'd like to have written myself' and 'so much I'd like to have said', although it seems the moment has gone and he ends up 'stepping back and slightly to the side'. But in the end love or poetry prevails, for this poet carries 'my songbird with me'. This is a gentle, conversational piece of writing, which might help us all think about notions of home, companionship and our place in the world.

David Crystal's writing is tougher and more streetwise, slightly surreal and unnerving in the way it observes and engages with the world around it. 'Tender is the Night' might fit into Barlow's booklet with its red wine and and log-burner, but even this pastoral evening is disturbed by 'the sirens, the rape scream of fox'. The view in 'A Room With A View' turns out to be of '[t]he fucker/ in the grey hoodie' who 'drops out / of a window / on Silverdale Court' before he 'shits in the grass / like a stray dog'. The brief epiphanies and moments of poetry, love or light, here are hard-won amongst the urban realities of the poet's world, whilst the horse of the title turns out to be 'the horse / with a fat jelly tongue / lolling', merely 'a forgotten creature / in a stoney field'. Crystal's world is bleak, his poetry fights for space on the page and in your mind, but wins the argument every time.

Steve Waling has a gentler, perhaps more inclusive version of grim reality, although there is often evidence of verbal slippage and collage at work as different voices and viewpoints bump into each other. Waling's poems inhabit street, bars and buses in suburbia, but also get quietly political when it comes to the Irish Famine or war. Country music, potatoes, misplaced religion, Paul Nash and Fred Dibnah all make appearances here, as do alternative local histories:

Elvis went to our Grammar School,  
discovered rock'n'roll  
he did

declares the speaker of 'Tourist Information' which also asserts that 'the food that

clothed the Empire was Hot Pot'. Waling's narrators are self-made men who have educated themselves (usually in the rarely used front rooms of their childhood homes) and escaped 'the clothing of christian men' and being 'bungalowed / outside Sainsburys' to seek 'the smell of good coffee' and 'open plan living', a future that ultimately cannot be sustained or justified:

Do you know what I hate in the morning?  
putting the mask of realism on

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