

The Giving Way, Richard Skelton (Guillemot)

How do we engage with the past? What are history, time, and the past? This seems to be the question, or one of the questions (plural), that musician, writer and publisher Richard Skelton attempts to answer, or at least explore, in this beautifully designed pamphlet. The very first part of this sequence sets the reader up for this exploration:

and what is this
what is it
is it
is

Immediately we are aware of the ideas of echoes (of sound, of the past, of other work) and also the idea that things simply *are*: what is will be; what is, *is*; and we must be accepting as we consider 'it'.

For the rest of the sequence, Skelton lays out a number of possibilities of what it is, or might be, including the mythological, the sacrificial, the scientific, the specific and the conjectured, the unknown and unknowable, for instance (and these lines are all from different poems):

is it the cortical dream of the scoured earth

is it the lost pathway across the Dogger isthmus

is it the placing of hands

is it the great unknown rite of blood

is it the radiocarbon measure

is it the flattening of tireless millennia

Deep time leads us to 'the porosity of worlds / of fleshworld and spiritworld' and the idea of the spiritual, 'the vast battery of souls of the indwelling multitude'. This foregrounds the almost liturgical nature of this sequence, a liturgy that remembers how centuries build upon previous centuries, 'becoming tabular rasa for the next'.

There is ecological change too, and further change as humans inflict their presence on the world:

is it the great plateau of ice
giving way to tundra
giving way to taiga
giving way to wildwood
giving way to the axe

These axes and other stone tools are also present as a number of drawings with collaged text, and also as echoes in some of the poems, such as this (note the 'blunt gesture'):

is it the unimaginable here and now
is it the black chambers in the caverns of time
the momentary glance of stars
the blunt gestures of galaxies

Gradually Skelton circles back to specifics of the Palaeolithic era, engaging with notions of 'seeing', 'bearing witness' and 'testimony'. There is no formal resolution beyond what 'simply is' and:

an echo
reverberating

reverberating

but
diminishing

gradually
fading

and
gone

This is a complex and questioning text which despite its minimalism is expansive and wide-ranging. It offers suggestions and prompts for the reader to think for themselves, but remains open-ended and non-didactic. It mourns for but also celebrates the past, regrets what we have done to the earth and how everything has implications, but mostly it is an acceptance, a remembering, a reminder that we simply are, right now, dependent upon but also separated from the past. We have been given and must give, it is *The Giving Way*.

Rupert Loydell