

late summer ode, olena kalytiak davis (Copper Canyon Press)

Olena Kalytiak Davis' first book, *And Her Soul out of Nothing*, introduced a startling new poetic voice; her second, *shattered sonnets love cards and other off and back handed importunities*, was even more exciting in the way it, well, shattered sonnets, without any nods to tradition or respect. Shakespeare got an invigorating kick up the backside, as did the sonnet form generally, and the (American) English language.

late summer ode includes a section of sonnets, too, and for me is the best part of the book. There's something about the restraint and shaping undertaken that contains Davis' wilder inclinations and tendency to ramble, repeat and drift. I'd forgotten how disappointed I'd been by her last book, *The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems*, and have struggled to find a way in to this one, to find any sense of structure in many of the poems.

There are plenty of intriguing ideas to spark the poems, ideas which are often used as titles: 'The Benefit of a Hangover' and 'Today I Walked My Racism' are intriguing concepts, but the language is tired and dull, the poems seem like first drafts, more akin to beatnik cliché than contemporary experiment. There's also a tendency – perhaps inspired by engaging with the likes of Shakespeare and Rilke – to use archaisms such as 'methought i saw', 'o sophisticatio / o lyric shame', and 'i have lived in wait of thy bright poesies'. I've come across a lot of this recently in poetry submissions to *Stride* from the USA, so she's not alone, but it doesn't work for me, especially when so many poems are full of popular slang and exclamations: 'dude', 'shit', 'fucked', 'stupid fucking POEM'.

There are also several longer poems which repeat phrases, repeat phrases again, and occasionally subvert the phrases when repeated again (and again). I'm all for the idea that repetition changes things (because the repeat is affected by the original, etc etc) but this isn't a Brian Eno CD and the phrases used are very ordinary narrative-driven sentences. Davis also seems to have bought into the confessional rather than distancing herself from her work; even if it's ironic it doesn't work for me:

Here It Is

the poem
that pretends it is suffering
as much as you

and truly, yay, truly
it does not know what to say

So why say it then? The poem really doesn't say anything, and ends with the egotistical narrator (let's be kind: narrator not poet) asking

(how) could they be as lost as in need of

as me?

Dunno, sorry. And to be honest, don't care.

Anyway, let's end on a positive note, which means ignoring the awful six pages of prose, 'Chekhov, Baby' which closes the book, and focussing on the 36 sonnets which form a separate section of the book. They're mostly numbered and use the first line in brackets as a title, use no punctuation and little capitalization, and generally adhere to 4 + 4 + 4 + 2 line stanzas.

The archaic vocabulary and syntax is mostly reined in here, though I still find some lines awkward, such as this first verse from 'iv.':

these selves divided from my selflessness
defect with consummate animation
go forth supreme superb superlative
less me than my masterly aberration

not to mention the ending couplet:

i math i count upon their countenance
they my argument and m'acquiescence

It's interesting to have math turned into a verb, and the pun using count, but it's 2022 and I am not sure what poetry like this is doing in a contemporary book. It is more arresting when interrupted; 'vi.', for instance, closes with 'sit down be humbled sit down bitch be HUMBLE', which at least makes you notice a change in dynamic, tone and utterance.

By the time we get to the thirtieth sonnet ('xxx.' – keep up!) Davis is ready to abandon the 14 lines and subvert the form. 'xxx.' is a brief statement of poetics, a reflective aside:

(the iambic and the anapest, the dactyl and the trochee, the right words in the right order by instinct if you're lucky)

though personally I don't think luck comes into creative writing. That's the whole poem by the way, and this is the whole of the next:

xxxi.

i fucking glazed it; olena kaly-
tiak davis from anchorage made this!

I guess it's a kind of graffiti tag for the page, an effusive shout, but apart from raising a snigger why is it here? Better are the skinny one-word-a-line 'erased sonnet' and 'sonnet for mark, joe, ted' which follow, Ted presumably being Berrigan. The closing poem in this section/sequence is 'airless sonnet' which

mentions 'prodigious lack // of purpose . . . find myself making certain (marks) in it', having previously declared 'a moment of of, a small self portrait.'

The back cover blurb suggests that 'Davis writes from a heightened state of ambivalence', which might explain my ambivalent response, but also claims she is 'a conductor of sound and meaning, precise to the syllable', which I find harder to take. For me this work is mostly ramshackle, shapeless and unformed, too self-content and seemingly self-centred. Even the self-aware deprecation of a title such as 'My Own Self Still Unconcerned' doesn't contradict the fact that these poems do seem to generally concern themselves with the self, constructed or confessional.

'please. make fun of me(,) for how i suffer.' reads that poem's last line. I don't want to make fun of any poet or their work, but this isn't a great book. I'd really like to see less shattered sonnets, less importunity and more creativity and looking outward: to contemporary poetry and critical works, anywhere but the introverted self.

Rupert Loydell