

Pearl & Bone, Mari Ellis Dunning (Parthian Books)

Rebecca Goss' back cover quote describes this book as a 'profound study of the maternal journey', but Dunning's weighty 'Foreword' makes it clear that this is not just a personal story of pregnancy, giving birth and motherhood, but a thematic collection hung on that story to consider lockdown, abortion rights, historical associations and issues 'of medical bias, gendered violence, misogyny, control over women's bodies and reproductive rights, the praising of chastity and virginity, and the notion of female bodies as vessels alone'. Quite a list, and one Dunning seems nervous about tackling 'through poetry alone', suggesting that *Pearl & Bone* is just her starting point.

The book opens gently, with the narrator sharing the news of her pregnancy with her partner as they walk a mountain trail, although the poem is addressed to the already born child, a story in the past tense. 'You were a fish' relates movement in the womb to the ocean, whilst the following two brief poems discuss how the body changes during gestation.

Then we are transported back to 1963 and the voice of Christine Keeler as she poses in an Arne Jacobson chair, 'stripped and bare as a newborn foal'. She comments on the journalists publishing a list of her lovers, and throws the question asked of her, '*are there any of them you actually loved?*', back in their (and the reader's) faces. Keeler is a character who reappears throughout this collection, but there are many others too: Prospero (perhaps, or maybe another wizard or magician) in 'Ace of Wands', Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Eve, Sarah Everard, and Bertha Mason (from *Jane Eyre*); all victims of power in one way or another, be that a rapist and murderer, a character's husband, the author, God, politicians, history or opinion.

In between these powerfully voiced poems are more straightforward texts, where the personal and domestic are foregrounded. A spider hangs under the sink the narrator is cleaning, the baby arrives with 'a cacophony of cries, the thundering beauty of lungs' ('July 2nd, 15:08'), and 'A Sudden Mother' is forced to stay on the postnatal ward during Covid-19, as one of the 'pale and bloodless ghosts', whilst the baby's father is

[...] pitched miles away, butting at doors that scream:

Stop.

No entry.

Elsewhere, other poems document the discoveries of parenthood: persuading children to sleep by driving them around, sharing Spring's first daffodils, walks in the rain, self-doubt and wonder, and the way 'the house changed too', as 'there are traces / of you / in every room'. And there is a changed and re-shaped body (both physically and mentally) to deal with, and the worries and implications of *Roe vs. Wade*, rebuffed in 'Blessing for the Women'. The following poem, 'Altar', draws on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* for its epigraph and imagery, where the poem's addressee worships 'at the tired altar of [her] own shame'.

Towards the end of the book, Dunning returns to Wales, but a Wales tinged with the mystical and magical, wild nature, holy wells, and unholy water where curses are known to take root. The priestess, 'whittling magic' is no longer present at the end of the page, instead there is a sibling for 'Jac' to contend with, and a final declamation where 'The Womb Speaks':

Believe me –

I will wear these scars like jewels, mined hot from the earth.
I will bleed and leak. You shackle what you fear: the minotaur
pacing its maze. The circus bear sweating rags behind bars.
This vacant womb. Its deafening power.

This is a brave, complex, powerful, angry and loving book, full of poems that argue, discuss, share, and reject the abuse of power that women and children are constant victims of. Rooted in the physical body, it places individual experience within a web of other voices and events, asserting and demanding without ever heckling or abusing its readers. It is a model example of issues-based poetry, where argument is not reduced to sloganeering, preaching or demands, a concerned and original voice in the current debate about sexuality and gender.

Rupert Loydell

[691 words]