The poem as iceberg

*A day that you happen to know*, Nic Stringer (72pp, Guillemot)

*In the half-light* [CD], Nic Stringer/Fractured Strings

Stringer's book, beautifully produced by Guillemot Press, features visual 'illusions' by Lucy Kerr, which are as enigmatic and strange as the poems. Having lived with the book for a few weeks, the colourful images have started to reveal their constituent parts – I would hazard a guess at powdered dyes or paint, flowers, a toothbrush, reflections, dolls house furniture, crumpled paper – yet they remain unfocussed and entrancing, as do many of the poems.

This might suggest the poetry is 'difficult' or 'experimental', yet in many ways it is neither. The vocabulary and syntax are normal, I understand the words and there is a musicality and form, but somehow I am not on the same wavelength. This isn't a complaint: away from this idea of content or message, I have returned time and time again to these clusters of language on the page, intrigued by moments of observation and travel (Alice Springs, Jakarta, Shinagawa, Andalucia), the uncertainty of 'An essay on certainty' and other poems, the characters who appear and disappear in the poems, the strange (ir)religious tone in parts, and the occasional formal experimentation with layout and (concrete) form.

The desire to want to understand these poems is perhaps reflected by the Guillemot website's blurb for this book (there is none on the back cover) which states that Stringer's work 'considers the effects of our desire to believe and the consequences of our vulnerability to power and influence. In these poems knowledge is a state found by way of skin and as likely to be transient as transcendent.' I like the idea of momentary knowledge and of receiving it through touch (though the pedantic in me would say that the senses are not understood, or indeed sensed, until the brain has processed them into language/thought). It is a provocative and intriguing concept for poetry. Stringer's 'Icebergs in Ilussat' may help explain:

We call this an adventure, a reason to travel

but remain as abstract as the lines of saturated blues

and bone-dry whites, drifting together and apart.

I am happy to consider these poems as icebergs, with much of their meaning hidden below water, and to drift alongside them. They are ambitious and engaging texts, sometimes gnomic and meditative, at other times lucid and celebratory. I hope to get to know this work better over other days to come.

For the full experience you can listen to Stringer's CD *In the half-light*, which is subtitled 'A soundtrack to A day that you happen to know'. It's an intriguing mix of John Cage meets Tangering Dream with a little bit of Nurse With Wound thrown in. Voices whisper and cut across each other, grand sweeps of synthesizer underpin minimal piano, before sequencers and strings cajole the listener elsewhere. There is the occasional obvious moment, and I confess I find it distracts not enhances my reading, but it *is* an intriguing listen and adds to the ambition of this interesting project. And like the poems and images it sometimes is not what it seems: what I assumed was the tracklist turns out to be a short poem. I think.

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