WHAT IS NOT RETURNS

*An Arbitrary Line*, Sarah Cave (97pp, Broken Sleep Books)

Sarah Cave's new collection offers poems about – sometimes tentatively about – Slava, a hermit and shaman who lives in the 'wilderness church' of the Russian Arctic. Slava has become 'other', has become part of the landscape and wildlife around him, inhabits the snow and ice and rock in every sense possible.

Somehow, Robert Lax's poetry gets into this mix too. There is one poem subtitled 'after Robert Lax' and others which undertake a similarly minimalistic engagement with the world. At times, it seems Slava wants out: sometimes he is aware of the isolation, the lighthouse's passing beam, the cold and darkness; so much so that he plans on sending messages in bottles. Other times he is content to become bird, soaring above himself, or encounter fox and bittern, mollusc and heron in mystical reverie.

Throughout the sequence are 10 'Watching the Clock' poems, each 'transcribed from Lady Franklin's Archive at the Scott Polar Institute, Cambridge'. These are rather pious homilies or prayers, religious jottings dislocated from Slava's (dis)engaged life in a spiritual and geographical void. The mist, icy desert, sea and spray, are all Slava has to underpin his 'reversed catechism'; his is a kind of accepting panentheism: both he and his absent god are within, of and one, with the world as it is. No more, no less.

Throughout the book Cave delights in wordplay, gentle typographical and visual experiment. There is an attention to syntactical and physical detail, and – through the voice of Slava – an inquisitive and sometimes humorous questioning: 'Do caterpillars have toes?' he asks at one point. Slava's voice is also echoed through the animals he shares his terrain with: '"Does all time end here?" asks the goose' a page before a quote from Vyacheslav Korotki tells us 'Life's fine as it is, why think about death? Why spoil the time you're given?' and ends the book.

There is nothing arbitrary or slight about *An Arbitrary Line*. It is an intensely moving, complex and – dare I say it – genuinely spiritual work, one which shines its (Northern) light(s) across its pages, just as, earlier in the book, 'light slits tinfoil midsummer' for Slava.

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