

# HAUNTED CORNWALL

*Spoil*, Morag Smith (Broken Sleep Books)

Morag Smith's poems are haunted by the past, both historical and personal, and a desire to return:

I want to go home  
                                but keep unpacking  
The whole idea of home  
disintegrates when I touch it

What she can do is conjure up various possibilities of home, versions of belonging, tentative histories and the stories she has lived and learnt about.

The book opens with an incantatory wish to be transported back to 'the Island of Tin', using the ancient sky disk as a talismatic focus. Then we are transported to pre-tourist trap Heligan and Smith's youth, with goats and wilderness. Elsewhere she tells stories about her days living and travelling in a van, despairing of poverty, vandalism, evictions and abuse, but also celebrating her freedom in poems like 'Eye on the Mirror':

Up here  
above the road  
I'm a fucking queen  
[...]  
I've got ten tons of truck behind me  
and kids everywhere

But it is the land that rules this collection, Smith's own heart, the mined-out and abandoned rocks, failing industry and wilderness:

The mother that made me  
                        was mud and stone  
I was cut from rough rock  
                        raw and ragged

she declaims in 'Prima Materia'. It is hard to know if this is tin or ore personified or Smith's own lineage. In 'Salt of the Earth' she insists

Don't call me salt  
call me soil  
call me dirt  
call me unrefined

later, in the same poem, as she finds her own place in the scheme of things, she declares that she is

Aiming my eyes at the earth  
I look into the dirt  
see the disturbances  
beneath the surface

The past pulses  
through my boots

Many of the poems channel these pulses. Specific carns and abandoned mines are named and discussed, and there is a stunning sequence of four poems which focuses on the bal maidens, young women exploited by mine companies to break stones and collect ore for hours on end, at minimum wage.

Adrift in mizzle and mist, living in communities of shared poverty and temporary residence, Smith finds hope and purpose in 'trying to touch that impossible line' she compares to the edge of an infinity pool. It is a line of history, of resistance, of power and celebration. Morag Smith is a poet as strong as rock, as fluid and musical as water. *Spoil* is an amazing debut.

© Rupert Loydell 2021