

There Are Angels Walking the Fields, Marlon Hacla, tr. Kristine Ong Muslim
(Broken Sleep Books)

Let's get the negative out of the way first: Tilde Acuña's calligraphic and hand-drawn 'Introduction' is physically unreadable here, despite looking wonderful. It's a shame, because Broken Sleep books have got better and better designed since the press started, because I'm sure she had something useful to say, and because this is a marvellous book.

Kristine Ong Muslim's useful 'Translator's Note' explains that this collection was originally published in the Philippines in 2010, and frames the book as a gathering of ekphrastic poems which "'manifest" real or imagined artworks through various poetic devices'. It's not the kind of ekphrasis that the reader – or English readers – will recognise, as few sources or artists are mentioned. Instead we get intense and often disturbing snapshots along with captured moments, most often set in stark, desolate or abandoned settings and populated by nameless characters and personified objects.

The language is often voluptuous, the images engrossing, even when describing violence. 'Diorama #26' tells us 'The fingers were like dragonflies / As they strangled her', whilst 'Serial Killer' enters the mind of the subject:

Now, about that man on the first page of the newspaper
This morning, the one whose mouth has been slashed,

Don't worry.

I let him scream
Just a little.

Always, knives are reasonable priced in the public market.

The titular angels appear in the final line of 'Diorama #54'. They are the memories or ghosts of those already dead at the scene; the poem is about a grenade which 'was useless at this point / Because there was no one else left to kill.' Hacla's landscapes are often populated by the unexpected: cicadas which 'sound as if they are trying to tell him something' ('The Trysting Place'), a child's 'invisible friend' ('The Playground') or 'a being that was not yet an infant' ('Some Forsaken Things').

Time and action are frozen here, where 'Everything begins / With a long wait behind the window' ('5.26 p.m.'), a long wait that is shared by many others behind their own windows, all aware that 'Everything ends with a long wait behind the window.' Even the 'White stones have been crushed / Into teardrop-shaped pieces' ('Still Life Moments after the Blast') and 'Suppressed moans can still be heard / Next door' ('The Starry Night, Vincent Van Gogh'). Only by remembering can the world be understood, and there be the possibility to forget.

Caught in this contradictory tension, the poet and reader are like the characters in the brief poem 'The Room' (reproduced here in its entirety):

He led me inside the room
Where she kept his past.
Each day is like a corpse.
Like sapphires devoid of luster
Their open eyes.

All night we stroked and closed
Every eyelid.

By recognising and confronting the war-torn, abusive and violent world, Hacla animates and subverts the darkness, offering us an awkward exit point in 'The Exchange', the final poem here:

Tell me everything you want to say
Before the light silences us.

This is powerful, moving and lyrical poetry, and I hope to be able to read more of Marlon Hacla's astonishing writing in due course.

Rupert Loydell