

Postcards to Ma, Martin Stannard (Leafe Press)

You have to take a deep breath before you dive into this pamphlet, which is actually a single twelve page long poem. Not only because of its length, but because you will need as much oxygen in your brain to cope with digressions, lists, and the unreliable, perhaps even irrational, narrator.

Stannard is adept at keeping a straight face, however weird his poetry gets, and for taking language on long, surreal walks. He's also good at using repetition and near-repetition, to help structure his work. In this long poem, which starts with the narrator noting that he 'Sent a picture postcard to Ma "Arrived Safe"', this involves variations of the theme of how people see him and similes for how he sleeps, irregular reoccurrences of phrases such as 'Special Offer!!!' and a kind of chorus to break up the flow:

Crack of dawn Swam in
ocean Frolicked on sand Sent postcards to Ma

Each day, post-swim, offers new infatuations and obsessions, be it the 'tautness / of cotton across generous bosom' or 'Gal by the name of Mabel looked better / than a Mabel', who decides 'she thought dancing was too sexual' and heads off home with her husband.

As well as dance, philosophy, history and exploring 'the kingdom republic or state' he is holidaying in, Stannard's narrator reports that he

Had a crack (ten minutes tops) at being agnostic
Buddhist vegan pacifist Marxist epicurist internalist
Satanist atheist Christian externalist Irish
Thought about differences between philosophy and religion

although it not until the next day he 'Read philosophers thoughtfully / (ten minutes each tops)', though it is long enough to (mis)quote from several in the same section.

Another day, in response to happening 'across abundance of / lucrative literary prizes' he 'Turned to scribbling for an easy buck', quickly dashing off his first two novels under a *nom de plume* and 'Between novels had a couple / of free days Penned slim volume of award-winning poetry'. Of course! And, as one would expect, it is titled 'The Zenith of Our Feelings', for 'When a man is happy he writes damn good poetry'.

And of course, on the back of his literary success

Was offered post of
Writer-in-Residence at Tourist Information Centre
Declined Accepted instead role of Poet-in-Dormitories
at St. Theresa's Finishing School for Young Ladies
A short-term contract abruptly terminated at lights out

I confess to finding this not only reminiscent of the Fast Show's lecherous old man ('Me, in a girls school, with my reputation?') but also very funny, in a squirming response to this surreal inappropriateness.

There are similar engagements with the visual arts, including 'a self-portrait (I have often wondered / how I see myself)', sport, nature and music, the last with good results:

Taught myself piano violin cello guitar ukulele flute
piccolo trumpet bassoon oboe recorded harmonica kettle
drum triangle Established first one-man orchestra

Of course, soon after, he notes 'Decided to become a singer/songwriter'.

Thankfully, having 'Slept like a cuckoo in a clock', there are signs this monologue may be ending:

Have run out of postcards so am unable to write
which is a shame pity cause for regret disappointment
sorrow ruefulness perhaps even woe I don't know
It's the last day of the jollidays

It is, seemingly, not before time, as 'Things are turning interesting slightly bewildering', as they already have for the reader. There are elephants, rainbows, séances and a 'well-formed nymphet' who 'scampers off teasingly into the trees' (it's not clear if she is wearing a white blouse or not) and it is 'Probably / wise to be leaving', 'to speed with a merry heart / returning home to Ma.'

This is a strange surreal annoying hilarious disturbing righteous tasteless ridiculous surprising unexpected text. It comments on any and everything in the process of describing and participating in it. The narrator appears to not only be obsessive and irrational, but also perhaps hallucinating the whole thing; like Stannard as author, however, the writer of these strange reports and postcards is seemingly oblivious to how strange the strange world he lives in is, and simply responds to it, although 'Sometimes I think I think / too much'.

And if our narrator 'can't remember all the words I made / some notes', let alone 'remember what any of them mean', then why should I as reader reviewer poet author writer friend critic? I am going to take several slow deep breaths and hope to sleep 'like a badger in a badger box', although I have idea what that will be like. 'What else is there to say?'

Rupert Loydell