

*Before We Go Any Further*, Tristram Fane Saunders (Carcenet Press)

Before we go any further, let me say I wanted to like this book. But whatever the back cover blurb says, whilst Saunders' poetry is formally inventive and confident, it does not dazzle beyond its surface.

Before we go any further, let me say there are some intriguing rhymes and rhythms here, but like most end-of-line rhymes they feel contrived and awkward in the 21st Century. Why can't Saunders be inventive with internal rhymes or syntax? Assonance? The sound or look of his poems on the page?

Before we go any further, let me say that however much these poems map 'the ways we try to communicate with each other across real and invented distances', they are still rooted in that idea of *content*, of *what the poem says*, rather than what the poem can be. These poems may be clever but only within the confines of mainstream poetry which however much it delights in the quirky, oddball and witty, remains self-imprisoned within the restraints of ego and self-expression.

Before we go any further, let me say that several poems made me laugh or smile, a few even made me pause for thought, but that's not really what I read poems for. In the amusement category, 'Five Songs on a Cruel Instrument' – previously published by Aaron Kent's Broken Sleep Books – are the best, translations or modern renderings of what I assume to be non-existent folk songs, accompanied by a pseudo-academic introduction and lengthy final footnote following the previously unknown and unsung 'Lucus's Hymn'.

Before we go any further, let me say readers who enjoy tricky metaphors and convoluted imagery will enjoy this book, as will those who like a bit of erudition or pseudo-erudition. The somewhat dull group of poems about Crystal Palace Park, despite some light asides such as the one about Hawkwind supporting Vera Lynn at an anti-heroin fundraiser, are full of information about dinosaurs, mythology Welsh vocabulary and other trivia. Part III of the book starts with these Crystal Palace poems, then gradually moves slowly away to consider pet rat burial, Battersea Park and bedsits, and goth music in 'Club Antichrist' which is probably my favourite poem in the book.

Before we go any further, let me say I wanted to like this book. But I'm afraid I don't. It is slick and slight, well meaning and ever so contrived and dull. It is full of twists and turns and small epiphanies, either imagistic or metaphorical, offering us the key to understanding hat ahs gone before. They remind me of those sad Martian poems Craig Raine produced back in the day, and indeed at times share a coy diluted surrealism: 'Like a beating toffee apple, my heart in your mouth.' Really?!

Before we go any further, let me say I do not wish to go any further. As the narrator of 'Lullaby', which appears to be a student poem about being students, says 'I look like something you might like to sleep through.' You do indeed.

Rupert Loydell