*Spring Journal*, Jonathan Gibbs (CB editions)

One of the most memorable seminars on my Creative Writing MA\* several decades ago was the first on the Long Poem and Poem Sequence module. We were divided into small groups, mostly with people we didn't know, and asked to start a translation of Beowulf from the original text. In the second half of the session we read and discussed Louis MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal', and were set the task of writing our own journal for the duration of the module.

Whilst I've always liked MacNeice's poetry, and used several phrases from his poems for some early paintings of mine, 'Autumn Journal' had eluded my attention. What a wonderful text it is, each canto offering a different perspective and take: a mix of the personal, political, social comment along with observations of the changing seasons, all in a relaxed, conversational metre, with deft use of full, near and off rhyme throughout.

Unlike most of my MA seminar group's journals, Jonathan Gibbs' *Spring Journal* follows the form and shape of MacNeice almost to the letter: 24 numbered cantos written from March to August 2020, bearing witness not only to the arrival of summer and departure of spring but to covid rules and regulations, news items, familial relationships and his own fluctuating emotions. It also sometimes directly addresses MacNeice, as well as dropping in allusions to and lines from other poems of his, or by directly misquoting or subtly changing some of the original *Journal*.

Having just read Gibbs' subversive and satirical novel *Randall*, a hilarious and bawdy reinvention and critique of the YBA London art scene of the 1990s, I was surprised to find that he had written *Spring Journal*. Hidden away in the catalogue of the wonderful CB editions in London (if you don't know them do check them out) and mentioned in online dispatches by bloggers I had missed at the time, Gibbs had moved from originally tweeting his poem to having it read out loud each week in 'an online salon' hosted by a friend, thus setting a timetable for writing as well as offering a way of legitimising the project.

Most cantos in the final book were written in under a week, although you wouldn't know it, despite the sense of immediacy and commentary on display. On this page is an angry riposte to politicians, here a longing for parties and friendship, there a considered moment of reflection on Brexit or the fact that students at the university where Gibbs teaches would not have a graduation ceremony that year. There is an initial sense of separation from what is going on; even by the end of April Gibbs declares that 'still no-one I know has died', although it isn't long before he is self-questioning the pan-banging for the NHS set against disorganisation and lack of funding, and by late May he is already worrying about the future:

As infections decrease and we lift our heads and wonder

If we understand the next part of the role

We're being asked to play in this terrible opera.

This sense of a tragic, bigger picture and how the world is going to cope is contrasted with lower key events: what Gibbs is reading and thinking, what his partner is doing elsewhere in their house, football matches (why is there always bloody football?); and also more considered responses to the concept of Englishness (as opposed to MacNeice's Irishness) and Gibbs' sense of separation and disbelief at what is unfolding, not to mention the government's ongoing mismanagement.

We're all very good at forgetting about things, even my nostalgic self, so one of the most important things about this book is the reminder of how awful being kept away from others and told to stay mostly inside was. How lucky those of us who had a space to sit outside were, how neighbours came together to have distanced drinks in the sunshine, how we all learnt to converse, play quizzes and games or argue, online with our cameras on. How we got used to phoning distant relatives we otherwise didn't stay in touch with. All those things ceased pretty quickly once the all clear was announced but, of course, the consequences lingered, especially for our children and students, the elderly and those who had been unable to grieve or say goodbye to the dead.

Gibbs not only captures a sense of personal worry and foreboding, but also considers the bigger problems, with Canto XXIII offering a kind of prophetic declaration that appears to have totally come true. Having noted that 'Crisis needs crisis management, and this bloody fiasco / Will ripple out beyond this week' he goes on to declare 'The crisis is not the virus but the government'. This whole section riffs on MacNeice's suggestion in *Autumn Journal* that 'the equation will come out at last', with Gibbs nothing that:

[...] the bastard was right.

The equation did come out for Britain,

The war was won, and from it we fashioned

The NHS and the welfare state,

Everything we've grown up to take for granted

And are losing now to toffs and spivs

Who dress like lawyers and act like thieves

And know not to waste a good crisis.

The next and final canto, XXIV, is laconic and quiet, if somewhat resigned. The narrator seems to have lost any sense of urgency, is thinking again about the book he was supposed to be writing, thinking about sleep but also about waking up, only to find that 'we stagger about, stupefied and overwhelmed', whilst 'future generations will bear the brunt' of what has occurred. But with a sense of inevitable acceptance he notes that 'Time and the seasons are immune to human despair', and that on one level things continue as normal:

Swallows gathering on the telephone lines,

As, close and slow, summer is ending in London.

Many 'plague journals' and other works written during the pandemic have been published but *Spring Journal* is somehow different. It is reflective, yes, but also at times militant and contrary, belligerent and opinionated. I was going to say it is honest, but 'immediate' is a better word, or 'sense of immediacy' a better phrase. It is self-questioning, doubtful, awkward, responsive and elegiac. Gibbs doesn't pretend it is polished and honed, he says it is 'carved from chaos'. That taming, capturing and exploration of the chaos of a few years back makes for an engaging and thought-provoking read.

Rupert Loydell

(\*The other most memorable seminar was Tony Lopez's introductory one to his Poetry module, where not only were we introduced to one of Tom Raworth's poems that discusses how it is written and deconstructs itself, but were all asked to read out 'Howl', going round the room. A lot of the students were elderly and somewhat shocked by Allen Ginsberg apocalyptic, revolutionary and belligerently sexual poem!)