*And And And*, Cole Swensen (Shearsman)

Cole Swensen's marvellous books have always been distinctive, each exploring a theme or concept, each adopting a form (or number of forms) best suited to their subjects, which have included art, hands, parks, garden design, views from a train, death, absence, memory and time. This new book is about poetry, about how language wanders, evokes, digresses and slips from both author's and reader's grasp; how language informs, perhaps rules and creates, our lives.

*And And And* mostly consists of prose poems, short lyrical texts at the top of each page, sometimes in brief sequences, sometimes circling back to earlier poems and ideas. The poems are inquisitive, exploratory, witty and impetuous, darting at language and words from all angles, never settling in one place, shifting and changing like the murmuration Swensen uses in 'Language in Motion' where she is thinking 'of written language as a wave of migrating elements, swarming in different combinations through books, poems, newspapers, telegrams, etc.', an idea she returns to a few pages later:

 Thinking of how alliteration and other consonant-based
 sound relationships stretch a text outward, ushering readers
 onward, through the poem and beyond, while vowel-based
 relationships, all forms of rhyme, off-rhyme, slant-rhyme
 assonance, etc. pull the text back in on itself, thus pulling
 readers back into the poem, sending them ricocheting around
 within it [...]
 (from 'Murmuration Again' [force justified in original])

Swensen is well aware that nothing is fixed or final, that everything needs redefining. In her poem of the same name she asks 'Can it be said that all definitions need constant adaptation, extension and reconsideration?' I suspect so. In fact the whole book starts with the idea of 'nuance', likening it to a ship 'slipping out of fog, and oddly more visible than a vessel less veiled.' ('The Ship') She observes that for the watcher, the ship is 'the shape of memory itself', appears to remember itself, yet even as it becomes self-aware, the thought is deflected and the ship keeps coming towards us.

Fascinated by how language works, Swensen scratches away at the linguistic itches she finds, informed by her own reading, writing and creative practice, at one point revealing where she found her book's title: in 'And' she is 'Thinking about Deleuze & Guattari's writings on *and* as a non-subordinating conjunction, allowing elements to be connected while also retaining complete relational equity and autonomy.'

This isn't a book of academic philosophical linguistic discourse though; mostly it is rooted in the everyday. Yes, there are abstract questions, but they are linked to how we, or writers, use language, how we make or might make poems and texts, but other poems are rooted in the body and the world around us. 'Thumb' is about the physical odd finger, the animal-ness of the digit; 'Clouds' and 'Wind' discuss response, transience and the possibilities of form; 'Shadows' prompts discussion of translation and how writing may be 'the shadow of that which cannot be said'.

My favourite poem in the book is 'Connote', which proposes an idea then explores it:

 I wonder if you can use words in such a way that only their
 connotations, and not their detonations, get activated. To
 connotate as one might cogitate or contemplate—a state
 chosen for its particular relation to thought—so that it's not
 the definition (always restrictive) of the word that comes into
 play, but its fields of association, its overtones and undertones,
 those always expansive, radiating zones of suggestion and
 implication. [...]
 (force justified in original)

In the second section of the poem, Swensen argues against herself, noting that adopting her proposed idea 'might lead to a greatly restricted vocabulary'. This is a tactic several poems adopt, for instance noting that when we adopt the idea of fragmentation in poems, that still implies it is a fragment of something whole. This is slippery, open-ended discussion, although there are occasional declamations. I am especially keen on the notion that 'There's something about poetry that is always and necessarily anonymous, the one mode in which the stroke of the *I* serves only to sever', although that may be a response to my students' current assertions that poetry is about self-expression and emotion.

I could write more. Each time I dip into this book there is something new and thought-provoking, sometimes revelatory, other times quiet reflection: on why watching rain is soothing, about attention, landscape, wind, detective novels, 'The privatization of memory'. It is a book of poetry and of poetics, a book of questions, possible answers, reflections and language, a way – as it says in 'Winds' – of 'keeping every other possible option always in mind.' It is challenging, informative and quietly provocative. And lots of other things too.

Rupert Loydell