*All the Eyes that I Have Opened*, Franca Mancinelli, translated by John Taylor (Black Square Editions 2023)

There is a wonderful three-line poem at the start of Franca Mancinelli's new book, an epigraph which acts as a possible explanation or prompt to the reader:

 *cannot scatter itself
 puts itself back together at every turn
 like a flock flying onwards*

This not only suggests that poetry is alive and in constant motion, but that even when poems and poem sequences appear fragmented or individual – like an individual bird within a group flying – the whole is what counts, is the sum of its parts. Mancinelli's sequences of poems are murmurations of language, wheeling in constant flux across the sky/page; each word and line and page contributing to the whole.

In the past I have sometimes criticised Mancinelli's work as too abstract, but the opening sequence here, 'Jungle', could not be more down-to-earth. The first half consists of diary-like entries from a refugee's journey, then moves from raw prose-poetry to imagistic aphorisms:

 deaths are time's beads
 we go through them like a string.

This literal toughness contrasted with more philosophical lyricism continues. There is brutal pruning, death, fire, desertion, abandonment and fleeing in response to cruelty and abuse; but there is also light and resistance to the darkness, a sense of physical and mental self that roots itself to the earth, to memory, to others and to language and writing. So even the fact that 'there is a point when life overturns / becomes Morse code' (and presumably not easy to read or understand) is countered in the next poem by an acceptance of nature:

 at the centre of mystery, the stamen
 of time. Petals grow
 and days. There is neither vase
 nor garden. Only
 the earth. The light. The rain.

Mancinelli's poetry is accepting and limpid, sometimes bemused: 'how I arrived here, I don't know' she states in 'Diary of a Passage', the final sequence in this book, which again begins in prose. This sequence, too is, is about transition, transfer, migrancy, travelling; it is unclear if the narrator is helping refugees or is one themselves. Either way, 'You cannot lose or forget on this journey', even if you 'don't know why I'm here.'

Nature and travel are only parts of the mythology Mancinelli constructs for herself. In addition to light & dark, the photographic darkroom is a place of retreat and calm, of contemplation, as are trees; although these, like human bodies, can be hurt or dismembered. Photography and light are, of course about *seeing*, and St Lucy's eyes, like a budded twig, are held out to the reader on the front book cover, and the Saint herself is referenced, though not named, in a sequence called 'December 13th', her feast day. Even with her eyes gouged out, she notes that

 *all the world's strength*
 *can't shift a ray of light*

Mancinelli's poetry seems rooted in this idea of continuation, metamorphis and change. We should, she says,

 expect to travel
 as sacred dust.

This new book which, its translator John Taylor notes, means 'nearly all of Mancinelli's writing to date has become available in English' is her best yet. It's tough acceptance, startling imagery, and the very human stories it alludes to, allow us to believe 'in the sky. In the broken line of the horizon. Like a simple outline, a possible form of life.'

Rupert Loydell