Mandrakes, Merpeople and Memories

It's that time of year, when I have to face the fact that there are books on my desk I should have reviewed a few months ago and that I need to get on with it. So here we go...

Gabriel Josopovici's *Partita/A Winter in Züra* (Carcanet) is an awkward doubleheader (you know, a book with two publications in it, one starting each end) with contrasting or perhaps complementary themes. One is presented as a non-fiction account of eight months of Kafka's life following a diagnosis of tuberculosis and his 'escape' from Prague to Upper Bohemia, where his sister lived; the other is a mysterious 100-page story mostly told in speech, also about flight, couched in a narrative about silence, sound and a murder. Really, they could both be classed as creative non-fiction or simply stories. They are as obtuse, quiet and enigmatic as Josopovici's work always is, but not as memorable or engaging as some of his other work.

Nelly Sachs can also be difficult reading, not only because of the form of her poems but also because they directly respond to and address the Holocaust. The 554 page *Revelation Freshly Erupting. Collected Poetry* (Carcanet Classics) is a challenging and elegaic, if not downright miserable, read. 'When your forms turned to ash' starts one poem, and even the conclusion that those murdered have 'already been rendered / an integral part of the blue-veined / vast starry round' offers little consolation. Neither does the observation elsewhere that 'The children lie / uprooted from their mother earth / along whichever road / the wind has blown them' or the resolute 'Still plodding on towards our posthumous reunion'. Sachs' 'soundtrack of my dreams', 'Half lullaby / and half apocalypse' is shocking, disturbing and profound, an important document of witness.

More entertaining and less disturbing, though still gently eerie and unsettling, is David Greygoose's *Mandrake Petals and Scattered Feathers* (Hawkwood Books), which is subtitled 'Tales from the Forest and Beyond'. As you'd expect, these are stories rooted in wood and earth, new fables woven from dappled light and reinvented archetypes. This is a world where magic happens, tricksters change shape and charm their victims, and very little is what it appears to be. This is a thicket of chance encounters, unexplained events, out-of-place declarations and premonitory silences. It is captivating stuff.

Although Vaughn Scribner's *Merpeople. A Human History* (Reaktion Books) is also rooted in folk stories and sailors' tales, it is actually a serious history of how humans have always spotted, told stories about and sometimes believed in mermaids and mermen. It explores literature, freakshows, advertising, toys and dolls, science and marine biology, to evidence the extent and longevity of our engagement with what Scribner calls 'these fantastical hybrids', although he disappointingly notes that 'merpeople have become more human over time'. It's a fascinating read.

Botticelli may not have painted mermaids but he did depict centaurs alongside his gods and goddesses, as well as his many religious paintings. Although his religious works are astonishing Renaissance art, it is for two works in the Uffizi Gallery, 'Birth of Venus' and 'Primavera', that he is remembered the most. This is perhaps unfair as his nativities and portraits of Mary and Jesus are painted in just as delightful colours and with the same sense of movement and lightness of touch. Even a potentially dull subject matter such as St. Augustine studying at a desk is full of intriguing architectural details, folds of cloth and unknown objects. Anna Debendetti's book – *Botticelli. Artist & Designer* (Reaktion Books) – focusses in on the organisation of Botticelli's workshop but also looks out to the Florentine society outside, and considers how his work was marketed, perceived, and found a place within the culture back then. She also presents the designer side of the artist, looking at his drawings, tapestries and embroidery within the arc of his career and artistic achievements.

Bette Adriaanse's novel *What's Mine* (Unnamed Press) is also about how people sit within culture and relate to each other. Here, however, it is specifically two very different characters having to share the same space that produces assorted conflicts on the back of differing world views, expectations, lifestyles and habits. There are also outside presences which act as a catalyst for their relationship: a gardener, a cleaner, and a loud neighbour all have to be dealt with. I'm not sure whether this is a comedy of manners, a psychological observation or a surreal and facile document of unlikely relationships. It is not as funny as the blurb suggests, it is not always believable, and sometimes made me so cross with its main protagonists that I put the book aside. It feels both complex and simple, and I longed for the territorial disputes to be resolved, for the whole thing to unravel and end. It is not a world I wanted to belong to,

whereas James Elkin's *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, also from Unnamed Press, definitely is. Elkin's book is packed full of prints, diagrams and photos that inform the story of Samuel Emmer and his journey from studying bacteria levels in water supplies to collecting information about the behaviour in animals so that a proposed new zoo can be built humanely. The real journey that happens, however, is that Emmer travels inside himself, plagued and haunted by dreams and information, seeking answers to impossible questions about purpose, memory and the idea of the individual or self.

If this sounds dull, it isn't. Emmer eventually realises how simple the world is and how to live with and within the knowledge he has acquired. He moves to acceptance instead of interrogation, declaring that 'the world isn't a puzzle, where stray occurrences are secret signs, where forces of will and willed attention keep the fabric of meaning together. The world is not a graveled maze. It's not an impenetrable diagram, it's not a prison island, it's not pages of mathematics.' It is of course, partly all of these things, along with musical notation, but mostly it is what it is, 'lifetimes folded into nothing' and the realisation that 'Memories do not wait forever.' Instead, 'All that's left are books that no longer speak, like headstones scoured blank by rain.'

Réka Nyitrai's Broken Sleep book *Moon Flogged* is, claims the back cover, 'a compelling journey through surreal landscapes and the intimate corners of the human psyche'. Well, it's surreal alright, with some great lines, but in the end I don't know what these poems are for except as an attempt to be fantastical. 'The Tulip Whisperer' is just one great character here, 'I believe my hands will be reborn as birds' an excellent opening line (of another poem), but little is done with them. In 'The 12th House', the narrator says she 'broke my father's terracotta pillow' but this is not explained beyond a suggestion that the poem/act is an 'unfinished dream'. Dreams are not a good 'explanation' as they simply show the reader they have invested time and imagination only to serve no purpose.

Much more interesting reading from Broken Sleep's extensive list comes from Fokkina McDonnell's *Remembering / Disease*, Joshua Jones' *A Haunting Without Allegory* and Simon Barraclough's *Divine Hours*. McDonnell writes quiet, musical poems, sometimes in longer sequences, that combine imagistic observations with wonder and questioning, whilst Jones' wondering, also sometimes presented in sequences, is more concerned with revolution and change within the 'contradictory beauty and dismay' found within 'the present's ongoing mess'. 'What does it take to let love in' wonders the narrator, despairing that 'At the end of the world begins again' because it begins again 'With sharpened knives'. Jones' despair and nihilism is somehow refreshing and challenging: his writing cuts straight through the crap to demand change from the off, despite and because of everything.

Barraclough can also be downcast. 'Drain Fly' concludes, not unrealistically, '*England Made Me*. England betrayed us all' and elsewhere the heart is reimagined as 'Polar Heart', Ceasefire Heart', 'Orca Heart', 'Shard Heart' and 'Drone Heart'. Memory and time are entangled in these poems too, with the narrator of 'Womb' realising that he 'would love to return to my mother's womb / but now that I know her, the thought is obscene.' The real standout here is the long poem 'Iarnród Éireann' which ends the book. A rambling travelogue, a family discourse, a rant, a stream-of-consciousness and perhaps a final goodbye to places and people, it's an astonishing piece of work in a book chock-full of thoughtful surprises and surprising thoughts.

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