The Dark Scar

*Ceilings*, Zuzana Brabcová (Twisted Spoon Press)

For many years now, Twisted Spoon Press in Prague have been publishing fantastic and original books in English translation. *Ceilings* is their latest, a slippery and intriguing novel set – one gradually finds out – in a mental hospital.

Past and present, interior and exterior, fact and fiction, dream and reality co-mingle and alternate in a surreal [panorama] of events, moments and imagination. It's like channel-surfing or changing radio stations in the car as the landscape changes outside: scenes jumpcut, emotions change, moments fade into another, the past intervenes in the now, impossibilities present themselves as everyday events and possibilities.

This is surrealism with a purpose: to expose the way the world controls and conforms, and how addiction, memory and madness might be a form of resistance, a way to escape. Time here is sometimes personified, stretched and deformed in an extreme version of experiential time. *Ceilings*' main character is both male and female, their own brother and sister, and the asylum's walls can only partially enclose them.

It is unclear if this is a literal escape or merely the imagination roaming free in the fight against addiction and incarceration, unclear if it matters at all. We are what we think we are, we are where we want to be. Memory and longing facilitate encounters and travel, allow conversations to be revisited and perhaps revised, mean friends and family resurrect and remain, as 'dream follows dream follows dream...'.

'No matter what, it's going to be one hell of a trip' declares our narrator, and it is. It is a world of desires and rollercoaster emotions, where one can enter a wall painting, chat to or email dead relatives, dance with the wind, or step outside oneself to calmly assess and evaluate the other you that has been left behind.

That person, strapped to a hospital bed or confined to quarters, tranquilized and sedated, is not the person the narrator wants to be. They are somewhere else, could be someone else. 'Are you out of your mind?' asks one character of the narrator. Well, yes, s/he is, absent without leave, free as a bird, not feeling themselves but become a free spirit, roaming at will through time and place.

*Ceilings* is a crazy, delirious read, one that explores the complexities of being human and ruminates on how we assemble ourselves from what has happened to us, who we know, what we would like to happen and who we would like to meet. It is about ambition and desire: 'of course I knew where we were headed', says our narrator, 'to Strašmania, the land of the all-possible.' Zuzana Brabcová is the perfect tour guide, *Ceilings* a suitably strange map for the territory.

Rupert Loydell (460 words)