Rhapsodies Graham Hartill Aquifer, 2021

Rhapsodies begins with ‘After Hokusai (from the 100 views of Pen Y Fal)’. In these poems, as Hartill explains, his local ‘axis mundi’, Mynydd Pen y Fal, known as Sugar Loaf, is figured as Mount Fuji, paying tribute to the great Japanese artist. It’s prefaced by an amusing account of late life development as a writer, which is modelled on Hokusai’s late achievement of the Fuji prints: ‘when I get to 110, / each syllable / will be squirming - / tadpoles in a net!’ A series of poems chart Hartill’s haiku-like observation of this high hill, this mynydd, a much-loved dominant feature of the local landscape seen in various sunlights and starlight, which shape it and the poem differently.

The next section, ‘Easter (in appreciation of Albert Ayler)’, in contrast, is a tribute to a gifted African American saxophonist who died young, aged only thirty-four. Errol Henderson called him the ‘pilot of exploration’ and these poems are also explorations and experiments. As we find in ‘The Instruments’:

> New York’s East River
> with its cargo of humidity
> flows always into its life
> like music-
> is there any other way to write
> than to make it up as
> we go along
> words come alive in the mouth

At the same time the tradition of the spiritual and the horror of the deep South run through them: ‘and it is always Easter/ whenever an artist discovers/ gold/ in the oldest songs/ and redeems it’. I’ve seen Hartill performing this sequence with Lyndon Davies, combining voice and sax, to powerful effect. Hartill’s verse is often characterised by short lines which give pause for emphasis and reflection, as they would in a live performance. These are lyrics which allow space for the instrument to play through, and also make use of collective refrains, a gospel call and response, such as ‘Give him some rain’ in ‘That Afternoon’.

‘Letters from America’ are written from a series of visits to Salt Lake City and record the dark side of American life and social injustice, with Hartill’s observations of the down and out, the ‘panhandlers’. It seems as if we could be back in the 1930s. As a visitor, Hartill can only record his impressions and express his concern, but I particularly liked the ‘3 Psalms for That Year’ in which modern versions of the psalms are repurposed for good. They combine the language of psalms with a New rather than Old Testament ethos.

> ‘These are pure words, as silver …
>
> For the deliverance of the poor
> do they now arise’.

‘Only Human’ is based on stories from Hartill’s work with prisoners, as a writer in residence, and his close involvement with them. They include a man who was abused as child and prevented from writing and is only now given permission: ‘He wrote with the Devil’s hand / so he was strapped for writing’. Some of the prisoners are clearly inventing their life stories, as in ‘Lying’, which allows the individual to protect himself from the reality of his ‘violent greed’: ‘your life is a jigsaw of damage and fantasy’. Sometimes, as in ‘F’s poems’ the lines seem to be an actual transcription, a moving and naked language: ‘all my

life is mine no more'. The short poem or transcription, 'Entire', expresses immense sorrow and desire for healing through the poem:

> 'that the stone could be
>   pulled from his chest
> and become his father again
>
> - that he could write an entire page
> and his father be in it'

These stories recur in other sections of *Rhapsodies* and clearly haunt the listener as much as the narrator.

'Crowd Scenes' is also about people who are damaged, often mentally damaged, and about poetry workshops with them, although they live outside the prison walls. In St Anthony's Well, 'Jane', a recovering alcoholic, gets up to read her poems barefoot. It ends: 'Your getting up there at all / is an idiom / even an ideology'. Hartill makes determined use of idioms and speech patterns that have to be encompassed by the poem, with or without grammatical approval.

'Palaces' juxtaposes the beauty of architectural and religious creations with human acts of violence and what they tell us about our own history. In 'From a Chained Library' the acts of violence focus on the 'bloody jet planes' which gash 'my concentration' and then 'cleaver-hacked the sunny mountain sky as 'ornaments of power'. The environmental damage caused by jet planes, as well as their irresponsible use in warfare, is well targeted here. Hartill's meditation on violence is an indictment of a theocracy or capitalism which wants to 'chain the text'. Sometimes, as in 'Votive' it feels as though Hartill's spiritual values are expressed in a shorthand of abstract concepts, such as God, Love, and Dream, but this is constantly undercut by the 'fat rank world'.

'Migrating Bones' is an important sequence which focuses on the Neolithic site of Kilmartin in Scotland and is also a tribute to the poet Anne Cluysenaar. He brings this ancient monument into the present day, showing how close we are to our ancestors, even though their rituals may be different to ours. It is imbued with knowledge and experience: 'Love / we found, / isn't easy to bring into being … is held when landscape is ceremony'. Throughout the significance of language and poetry is questioned and examined. As well as Cluysenaar, the legacy of 'a feather/ of presence' left by Edward Thomas and Barry MacSweeney's unreachable 'Pearl', also figure in this text. Hartill confronts our primal terrors and celebrates the unknowable, both in our landscape and our bodies: 'the brain / the darkest and most complex forest'.

Ancient, sacred sites feature in the final sequence, 'Lyrics', as in the rapid line movement of 'From Silbury Hill':

> 'For I am the fastest mama / flash
>   of creamy light
>   between the rain

He also draws on another sacred text in 'The Laws of Hywel Dda', to update human and natural laws and the need for co-existence. 'Lyric for New Year' perfectly captures the old and new world around him at the turn of the year and its languages:

> and born, reborn
> the wren's fleet

shudder of vowels…

The final poem ‘Love’ might be called a prayer for death: ‘The buzzards will carry your body away to the tops of the/ forest, Mynydd Du’. I was walking on Exmoor recently and saw a man emerging onto the coast path. He wasn’t young, neatly dressed, carrying a jacket over one arm. I thought that at most he had explored the knoll just below us. ‘Have you come up from below?’ I asked. ‘Yes’. ‘Not all the way from Burgundy Chapel?’ I could see him more clearly now, slightly flushed from exertion. ‘Yes, I try to do it once a fortnight. One day they may find me at the bottom of the hill’. That is my dream too.

‘Love’ is not the last poem in the book, as, after the Notes, we find ‘The Invocation of Kuya (caved by Kosho, 13th C)’. Kuya was a Buddhist monk and this invocation is a creation myth in which he calls the world into being: ‘people wriggle from his lips / like sprats on a line, like saplings, / syllables of wood’. It also returns us to the beginning of *Rhapsodies* with Hokusai and his squirming syllables. It’s a good creation myth and Hartill invokes it in our damaged world, with all its prisoners’ nightmares, and then reshapes it for his own contemporary lyric and love songs.

Frances Presley
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