

Then Look Back

CHLOE STOPA-HUNT

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Sean O'Brien's new collection, *November*, opens by inviting its reader to "Look away just for a moment. / Then look back". This insistent, coaxing demand for reappraisal defines the book's engagement with literary tradition – lightly worn, but consummately understood – and directs our attention to its own "looking back", through the modes of elegy and memorial which it foregrounds. *November* is deeply rooted in O'Brien's earlier work: as far back as *The Frighteners* (1987), the reader was advised to "listen / For what I might mean when I stop", and this new collection offers a sustained, profoundly interrogative exploration of what O'Brien once called, in a short story, "the domain of Afterwards [...] where, secretly, you have always wished to be". Six previous collections have revealed a poet capable of accomplished modulations between wit, tenderness, and savagery, and this gift for synthesis allows O'Brien to orchestrate a genuinely novel and symphonic threnody from the fractious materials of bereavement and national decay.

'Fireweed', the concise lyric with which the collection begins, locates itself in "the silence / After the age of the train", but this silence is not only one of absence: it also forms the necessary condition for that "strong neglect" which is the poem's motive and subject in its lyrical capacity as a song of praise. The railway has long been a rich seam in O'Brien's poetics, and he uses it repeatedly and fluidly in *November* to figure loss. 'Narbonne' captures the whisk of sound from a passing train, and the subsequent stillness of streets "From which the sound has only now / Yet therefore utterly departed, which is why / I go on listening anyway". Fusing the fact of loss with the experience of it, these deceptively simple lines (the anti-intuitive distribution of line-breaks is much more artful than it appears) echo earlier poems from the memorial core of the collection – particularly 'Elegy', 'The Lost Book', and 'Novembrists', all of which repay multiple readings. 'Elegy', O'Brien's poem for his mother, belies its straightforward title by gesturing towards the impossibilities (even the importunities) of the elegiac endeavour:

This elegy's a metaphysical excuse,
A sick-note meant to keep you back
A little longer, though you have no need to hear
What I must say, because your life was yours,
Mysterious and prized, a yard, a universe away.

These lines testify to the ontological interests of O'Brien's elegies, which never simply lament but concern themselves with being, unbeing, and the slow processes of vanishing: "the task of reversion, this sweet degradation", he calls it in one of the collection's fine landscape-elegies, 'Railway Lands', a poem which recalls the end of *The Dry Salvages*, and the Larkin of *High Windows*.

The end of 'Elegy' revisits O'Brien's fascination with stand-ins and doubles, which in *November* takes on a pervasively wistful note. In the Dantesque milieu of 'On the Toon', the poet's nymph-like guide is subsumed into a parade of interchangeable losses: "her face appeared on posters everywhere, / As missing child and teenage runaway, one face / For all those we have carelessly mislaid". In this phantasmagoric mode, the poet can be reassured that "Her

disappearance / Was a test", but the other disappearances enshrined by *November* prove less playful, more determinate, though they too are tests of a sort: tests of love, tests of elegy. Several poems in the second half of the book address fellow poets: 'Michael', 'The Landing-Stage', 'Dinner at Archie's', 'Porteriana', and 'Leavetaking' all appear to hint, through stylistic echoes and occasional moments of graceful ventriloquism, at a resurrective poetics which might summon O'Brien's friends and influences back onto the page. Yet they ultimately bow to the mannerly demands crystallised in an image from 'Leavetaking', one of the poems for Peter Porter, in which O'Brien conjures "these so-courteous deaths, who sweep / Their maidens up and down the shore / In perfect silence on their light fantastic feet".

O'Brien's poems show an urgency of invention, which – coupled with his usual command of metre and pacing – lifts them far above any threat of elegiac torpor. In 'Bruges-la-Morte', sparking couplets revivify the European decay chronicled in Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novel of the same name, oscillating between registers from the biblical, to the medical, to the idiomatic: "all flesh is adipose", the poem insists. This damaged, decadent Europe complements the collection's interest in a waning England, and proves an engaging setting for poems such as 'Jeudi Prochain', in which O'Brien gives us a portrait of the Muse as a sometime Fascist collaborator and mercurial provocateuse, "Who in one instant shyly bleeds a pig / Beside a sunlit window in Provence / And next is all severity in furs". The striking, unexplained exactitude of "shyly" exemplifies the poetic assurance of *November*, which offers many such moments of achieved lyricism. These are pre-eminently thoughtful poems – their literary underpinnings stretching from Marlowe to Rimbaud to Auden – but it is O'Brien's lyric gift which succeeds again and again in making from this great richness, great simplicities.

Chloe Stopa-Hunt is a poet and critic from Hampshire.

