



Terms For Grief

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Penelope Shuttle, *Redgrove's Wife*, Bloodaxe, £8.95, ISBN 1852247347

Why does *Redgrove's Wife* find Penelope Shuttle so eager to dictate terms and conditions to the reader? Take the strangely forthright title (not exactly fearful of being defined in relation to her partner, is she?) or the cover (a picture of a mask called 'La Malinche, interpreter and mistress of Hernán Cortés') or her statement on the back cover regarding the role of the poet (the poet, we are informed, is there to tell us "how to go on loving the world"). The blurb even talks about "life-affirming and redemptive poetry", threatening to re-open a now polarised debate over whether/how/why poetry should offer consolation/support/help in moments of emotional need. It is a relief to see how quickly the work itself escapes such narrow terms: again and again, a title or opening line that promises a direct emotional appeal is subverted into something rich and strange. For example, 'Wife, Widow' begins "Like any married woman, I..." If we are cynical, we brace ourselves at this point for the too-palpable design, the sentimental appeal for easy identification. And then this happens:

Like any married woman
I dream of great houses
disabled by fire,

of maps that grow of themselves,
like old experiments
in organic chemistry

Like any widow
I have a garden
where twelve Apostles and a Christ

dine on mist and rain [...]

The poem takes the form of an extended list of such attributes: some of them come teasingly close to matching their common-sense tone (“Like any married woman / I rank myself below a queen, / above a princess”), but most take pains to frustrate our expectations: “Like any widow I honour the bloodstone, / revere the pearl”.

The poems of grieving culminate in ‘Missing You,’ a moving sequence of twenty-four lyrics which puts Shuttle’s trademark invention to service: grief may continually tell the poet the same thing, but the poet can fight back by responding differently every time. Shuttle can be disarmingly direct, and even when she foregrounds poetic devices, her stress on context and the responsibilities of the poet means that the devices never become ends in themselves. This is from ‘In the Kitchen’:

A jug of water
has its own lustrous turmoil

The ironing-board thanks god
for its two good strong legs and sturdy back

The new fridge hums like a maniac
with helpfulness

I am trying to love the world
back to normal [...]

When grief declares itself as a subject, Shuttle responds with fireworks. Elsewhere, when she considers more diverse subjects (including spiders, postal regulations, endangered languages and driving lessons), she occasionally succumbs to the lure of closure prematurely. It is easy to feel that some of the shorter poems would have yielded even more had Shuttle pursued them further: compare ‘Pluvialist’ with an earlier gem like ‘Taxing the Rain,’ which deals with similar subject matter. Like Redgrove’s, Shuttle’s best poetry tends to work like an accumulator bet: the more sustained the risk, the greater the reward. Conventionally ‘important’ subject is not a prerequisite: part of the thrill of reading these poets is seeing how their

vision transforms the apparently everyday. This is exactly what happens in the best poems of the second half of the book, such as 'Dukedom,' or 'Fountains and Gateways,' where Shuttle allows herself a broad canvas. This is from 'Dukedom':

He folds me in his septembers worked
in ivory silk, in his seascapes of living memory.
He wraps me in his dukedom
of windfall, goldfinch and peach.
He inflicts his dukedom on me like dew on a fountain,
like a year of consents,
like a lily merchant.

'Footnotes' takes the enough-or-too-much approach into comic territory to good effect, consisting entirely of bizarre footnotes to an unseen, unimaginable text:

48. Inventor of the first practical diving bell.
49. 'Long may you sleep.'
50. A poem of over a million lines describing the destinies of Central Asia from the beginning of time.
51. Numerous medical uses of the pigeon.

The fact that English poetry has nostalgic lament as its default setting is an obstacle to the writer who wants to write truthfully about grief and loss. Shuttle rises to the challenge with a confident display of invention which in the hands of a less certain poet would appear tricky. Instead, Shuttle's insistence on poetry's over-spilling creativity makes a fitting tribute to Redgrove the poet as well as Redgrove the man. Whether the writing of such poetry was therapeutic should not concern us: that Shuttle has designs on the poem rather than the reader ensures the results are genuinely affirming.

Paul Batchelor's pamphlet *To Photograph a Snow Crystal* was recently published by Smith Doorstop.

