

What Our Bones Know

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Anne Stevenson, *Stone Milk*, Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 9781852247751;
Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, trans Paul Muldoon, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*,
Gallery Press, £9.95, ISBN 9781852353742;
Naomi Shihab Nye, *Tender Spot: Selected Poems*,
Bloodaxe, £8.95, ISBN 9781852247911

“Most of what we write / time will erase,” says Anne Stevenson in ‘A Lament for the Makers’ – a bald statement from any poet, never mind one midway through her eighth decade. But Stevenson remains undaunted; if anything, she appears to welcome the possibility of effacement. Threading its way through her collection is the suggestion that old age can offer freedom from the narrow confines of the self; read this way, her assertion that “Most of what our bones know / has been said before” slides in tone from demoralized to triumphant. While time may expunge individuals, it reveals our shared humanity.

Stevenson establishes and locates herself upon precisely such a poetic continuum in the dialogues with forebears which frame the collection. In ‘Lament’ she roams an underworld filled with the shades of poets from Milton to Plath (dexterously ghosted in Dante-inspired tercets); the final section, ‘The Myth of Medea’, offers a playful reappraisal of Euripides’s tragedy, in which author and characters grapple for control of the text. The ‘Lament’ in particular, with its ticklish form and twining internal rhymes, demonstrates that age has not withered her bravura technique, but it’s in the eponymous central segment that the finest poetry is found. Shucking the archness of the buttressing sections she meets mortality head on, finding strength and consolation in the blank endurance of the “raw deserts” of the hills that “comfort [...] / with the pristine beauty of my almost absence”.

If the disjunction between sections prevents this from being a flawless collection, it undoubtedly contains some near-flawless poetry. With a confidence born of long years’ practice, Stevenson lightly sidesteps the pitfalls of portentousness and sentimentality that accompany her formidable subject-matter, confronting death’s spectre with a redoubtable-ness most evident in the devastating brevity of her wonderfully cool, pragmatic conclusion:

I am alive. I'm human.
Get up. Make coffee.
Shore a few lines against my ruin.

Where Stevenson mines and revivifies literary heritage, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill creates it. Myth and reality jostle in a collection which imagines the history of those Merfolk who have abandoned the sea's suppleness and consonance for "fresh air, knowledge, the shining brightness of science". Despite the teleological view of progress such a move implies, this is at heart a chronicle of what is lost when we abandon our roots. Through the mermaid of her title, Ni Dhomhnaill gives voice to the deracinated everywhere.

As effectively as the mermaid appears to have adapted to her new environment, internal fissures – detailed meticulously in faux-objective, anthropological language – remain. Unable to reconcile new life with old, the Merfolk have developed a repertoire of customs and folktales that redefine their heritage as primitive superstition, which they're then free to reject. 'The Order of Baptism' treats us to the recognisable spectacle of the ultra-orthodox convert who proves his piety by abjuring any vestige of his former life. Some mermaids, we learn, were "so strongly in denial of water / they completely refused its use in [...] Baptism", ultimately obtaining a "dispensation from the Vatican / that wine could be used instead [...]".

Although the establishment of such rigid divisions can itself be read as a coded renunciation of the boundless sea from which the Merfolk emerged, the ocean nevertheless continues to saturate Ni Dhomhnaill's poetry; it remains the collection's central metaphor: giving life, dealing death, erasing divisions. No surprise, then, that the mermaid finds the concept of boundaries troubling. "She could barely take on board / we were not all fundamental parts of herself but separate people" observes the speaker, noting laconically, "This caused quite a few difficulties."

Not least of these is in the field of language. In the mermaid's mother tongue, there are "no strict boundaries", "everything [...] runs into everything else" – and here again real-life bumps up against fiction. This collection is presented as a parallel translation, with Paul Muldoon's euphonious English facing Ni Dhomhnaill's Irish across the break of the page; one suspects Ni Dhomhnaill was well aware that this fracture visually enacts the psychological divisions which ultimately result in our mermaid's disintegration. That origins matter, even if we can't wholly decipher them, is written into the very form of this collection.

Mythology of a more personal kind occupies Naomi Shihab Nye. In this

substantial *Selected*, tracing her career from 1980 to the present day, her dual heritage (American mother, Palestinian father) offers a point of access to central concerns of family, language and war. While geographically her reach is broad, stylistically her free-verse mapping and sanctifying of daily life (the “possibilities / of coffee cake and ripe peaches”) follows firmly in the footsteps of her American antecedents; her fondness for the second person pronoun, meanwhile, suggests a Whitman-esque inclusiveness, a desire to gift experiences to the world.

One of the pleasures this collection affords is the opportunity of observing Shihab Nye’s poetry growing in subtlety, both in conception and execution. As her interest in the quotidian deepens, objects become active, aware. A man discovers that “No one answers his questions better / than the split brick he hit / with a hammer”; elsewhere the everyday is imbued with miraculous power, as when “Something about pumpkins caused / the man who had not spoken in three years / to [...] open his mouth.” Ultimately, words themselves become her focus, assuming physical dimensions as their significance grows (“a single word” she says, “may shimmer and rise / off the page”). She is fascinated by the idea that they, like her daily objects, have lives of their own; that she only harnesses their power rather than creating it. Although there are moments when even words appear weak in the face of news from abroad (talking to her father in the wake of devastating headlines from Palestine, she observes “It is too much for him, / neither of his two languages can reach it”), the force of her poetry militates, in the end, against this conclusion. This is a collection that champions the power of words, as Stevenson’s and Ni Dhomhnaill’s, in their different ways, do too: over people, over history, and ultimately over death itself.

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