

## Review of *Blue Wallpaper* in *The North*, 65 by Matthew Paul

It will be no surprise to fans of **Robert Hamberger's** poetry that *Blue Wallpaper* is an intensely personal book. It consists of six sections, addressing: his mother's dementia and passing; childhood/youth; 'Rimbaud variations'; creatures, real and imagined; relationships, under the heading 'Husbands'; and a final section of other personal poems. Hamberger's sexuality, as a gay man, underscores throughout, but *Blue Wallpaper* covers more disparate subjects than his previous collections and consequently has more breadth. Of its 61 consistently good poems, 34 are Hamberger's trademark sonnets. It's brave to open a collection with sonnets about dementia and death, but each sets the bar high. Hamberger uses the form's rhyme and enjambments as naturally as if he were talking:

My mother doesn't know me from Adam.  
She's baffled by my face, wonders at my words.  
I make no sense; but if I tell her who I am  
my name might echo down her corridors  
to a room where she sits by open windows,  
looking up from empty hands to find me there.  
She'll hear Robert because of course she knows  
those syllables, familiar as a prayer.  
(*'Saying my Name'*)

The observation in 'Every Visit' is acutely poignant: 'Though I'm bearing yellow chrysanthemums / at every visit a few more pounds / have gone. There's less of her to see; the sounds / she makes are softer.' If there is a finer sonneteer writing today, I'm yet to read them.

Poems about his working-class upbringing in Hackney are equally evocative: in 'Strawberry and Lime', a benefactor in 'Pellicci's, Bethnal Green Road' orders milkshakes for Hamberger and his brother: 'Two more turned up, as if our blinks / at empty glasses meant milkshakes flowed / from heaven.' The adjectives and a simile in the delightful 'My Cousin Gillian' work wonders:

I wanted to be as happy as her  
while she prettied herself for the boys,  
one of whom, the latest one,  
might arrive in his mohair suit  
with his tidy cut and clipped words,  
loitering in the passage  
suave as a cucumber, itching to leave.

Another terrific portrait depicts exuberant 'Aunt Anna' who would 'kick her leg high and never topple, / shimmying way past the midnight hour, / dabbing her ash, sloshing another swig, / cramming her minutes with life, making them big.' An elegy 'Twenty, Thirty Years Ago', for one of his two close schoolfriends who were also gay and died from AIDS, prefigures both the vigorous Rimbaud variations, in which one highly-skilled gay sonneteer adapts the poems of another, and the intimate love-poems and elegies within 'Husbands' and the final section. The longest poem, 'The AIDS Memorial', for those two friends, bears comparison with the best elegies in *The Man with Night Sweats*. I must offer a word or two for *Blue Wallpaper's* lovely cover and paper, which complete the collection's beauty. It's high time that Hamberger becomes widely acknowledged as the marvellous poet he is.