

Review of Blue Wallpaper in Agenda (Anglo-French issue February 2020) by Patricia McCarthy

Patricia McCarthy Singing Lines

Jean Atkin: How Time is in Fields (Indigo Dreams Publishing 2019)

Robert Hamberger: Blue Wallpaper (Waterloo Press 2019)

Janet Montefiore: Disposing of the Clothes and other poems (Shoestring Press 2019)

Atkin's androgynous voice which attests to humans' belonging in a living landscape contrasts with Robert Hamberger. The latter is very gender-aware in his strikingly moving collection, *Blue Wallpaper*, which focuses mainly on loss: the loss of his mother who had dementia, a childhood friend, a colleague; the loss of youth, of an old life with a wife and children, and the celebratory embrace of the new; the loss of his conventional masculine identity and his coming out as a gay man. Love is always there, and tenderness musically conveyed often in perfectly crafted sonnets whose frames contain the strong emotions. In fact, the musicality in this collection is most impressive. Hamberger is very clever with his focus: for example his mother blends into Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis who is 'years out of date' stalks 'like a sulky duchess along the planks' of Brighton pier, past all the slot-machines, and rides the carousel horses before mounting the black horses of the sea into which she disappears. The images are vivid and redolent of a bygone era, like many of his poems, typified by old songs, jazz, the Supremes, the radiogram whose 'Gold mesh over the speaker hums like heat', by doors of a new home that 'sing on their hinges'; by a young man with HIV whose tongue sings 'each sentence', 'the bugle's final note/ fades to silence blue as omega' in the Rimbaud variations; as a young poet in 'My Bohemia' he 'tugged' his 'laces/ tighter than strings on a lyre'. Individual poems haunt the reader and spark off in the reader similar, in this case, childhood memories, as all good poems should do – such as the poem 'Camel'. This concerns a brown jumper hand-knitted by his mother for him, 'with a yellow camel across the chest'. A double knitting is here: the knitted image itself, and the way Hamberger knits the different images of the jumper and the personification of the camel into the integral meaning of the poem: about his father leaving. The innocent child, proud of the jumper, creates such an innocent image which is upturned, when, after nine months when he 'outgrew him' (the camel), his father went/ the way of camels and palm trees and I/ forgot my jumper when we were sent/ packing to our new flat, where other/ shapes filled the gap of a camel, a father'. This sonnet is just as moving and well-wrought as Heaney's sonnets to his mother, and as Heaney's 'Mid-term Break'. A charming childhood vignette which also stands out is another sonnet 'Strawberry and Lime'. Here the mother takes the boy/poet and his brother to 'Pellicis, Bethnal Green Road' for milkshakes. The sensitive awareness of the boy

is delicately shown when an unknown 'dark-haired man' at another table orders two more milkshakes for the children upon seeing their glasses empty. Referring to his mother, the poet says: I sensed her secret thrill that he'd bother to notice her. When I sucked my straw pink bubbles popped, one after another. These living moments with his mother encapsulate how all the more harrowing becomes her plight i with dementia – in further sonnets which suit the subject matter. For example, he tries to get her to recognise who he is. The syllables of his name that she 'knows familiar as a prayer' he utters 'like a stone/ dropped into her lake to test the water'. But nothing happens, and the silence darkens 'like a bruise'. Her bewilderment is graphically depicted: 'She left/ her past like clothes on a beach'. As the reader progresses through this cluster of sonnets, sand images recur to demonstrate the progress of her confused decline, until she dies and, a month later, on 'Mother's Day', 'mothers are everywhere', he sings her songs 'to keep me company' and hopes 'you've slipped your illness like a skin,/ free from it at last, young again'...He worries, as many bereaved people do, that he might lose her memory as life relentlessly goes on 'while the weeks and the waves continue'. In 'Ash' he scatters her ashes on water and she becomes part of everywhere, of every image he lists, in a beautiful eternity. Even when young we see his tentative attraction to the same sex. In 'An interest in musicals', for example, at the intermission when he and his mother have been watching 'The Sound of Music', a man draws close to him, the sexual attraction is there, but his mother arrives 'like a guard dog' to take him back in time for 'Julie/ climbing every mountain'. And the sonnet rounds off with: 'He left me songs/ in the dark about my favourite things'. How cleverly here, just as with the 'camel' image in the first described poem, Hamburger weaves in songs from the musical so that they become an intrinsic part of the particular experience. Another sonnet, a haunting elegy to a friend, 'Twenty, thirty years ago', demonstrates this same-sex closeness, more personalised this time: when he had to watch his young close friend die whereas they'd been 'two grown men/ swapping silly voices, giggling like schoolgirls' and time goes back on itself near his friend's end, as 'I'd read to him as I read his favourite/ pages from The Waves when we were boys, believing/ we'd ride against death, unvanquished, unyielding'. And the reader is left comforted that he, like 'Some people dance forever through your skin'. The next two groups of poems that, in particular, take the breath away, are entitled 'Husbands' and 'Being the Sea'. Here the poet, somewhat like Cavafy, bravely and sensitively expounds on his acknowledged homosexuality through which he finds true (and erotic) love. This is forbidden man-to-man love: 'The slope of his shoulders became my prayer', and even after death this love continues: 'By walking and speaking/ he altered the colour of words'. In this poem, 'Moment' John Donne comes to mind, for 'his bed had become the world's axis'. The first verse here is completely upturned and reads just as well backwards, enhanced by the repetition of the dawning acknowledgement 'he's gone'. The poet seems to physically feel the beloved dead person in dreams and waking dreams and he recalls a time when the loved man was late for a meeting with him: 'You were later than magnolias in July,/ cherries in autumn' and he felt lost and bereft: Since your fingers sparked the strike of flames across my skin, what's holier than that? What's more welcome than seeing your face in a crowd, with blackbirds singing? Hamburger always manages light touches of the lyrical no matter

how dark or difficult his theme so that beauty is always resurrected. He understands the complexity of having a male husband, having been a husband to a wife. In 'Husbands': 'Husband – a language of echoes for me/ having loosened the ropes from that name/ before we met'. Could we live in this title like a home with its glass roof and windows, or is the word a coracle, tilting the weight of both syllables, balanced by shadows, dipping oars with a coastline in sight?' This is brave, carefully honed writing on a subject surely almost untouched before now. In this last section, the poet takes the reader through the process of establishing a new home. Unpacking the books assumes a special significance, until the house and the male lover/husband become indistinguishable. – 'where fear of him disappearing / mixes with wonder at him staying'; 'Do we build a marriage/ from each other, commit ourselves to cornices, key-holes and dado-rails?'... Hope and joy increase as the two husbands assume their rituals "dipping our heads under a lilac branch/ as it leans over a fence into the street'. His penultimate poem on the AIDS memorial recalls two friends who died, one who taught him 'to pluck happiness like a harebell/ from the nettles'. And this is precisely what Robert Hamberger teaches all of us in Blue Wallpaper.