

## Finding What Animates Us Paul McDonald

Martin Malone, *Cur* (Shoestring Press, 2015); Andy Willoughby, *Between Stations* (Smokestack Books, 2016); Robin Moss, *Walking the Ridge* (Mudfog Press, 2015).

Many will be familiar with Martin Malone from *The Interpreter's House*, the first-rate journal that he edits from his home in Aberdeen, and from his own poems that appear regularly in a variety of magazines and anthologies. I have always been impressed by his work whenever I've encountered it, so it was a treat to see this nicely produced collection from Shoestring Press. As a poet he is acutely conscious of the energies that animate us, as is evident from title piece, 'Cur', which opens the book. Here the primal, bestial urge that drives a mongrel dog is described as, 'A tipping point of sorts ... That point which snuffs out tenderness/with need,' and the speaker of the poem himself seems to identify with the 'famished ... intent' that displaces all other impulses, including restraint and reason. This kind of elemental vigour also drives two ardent lovers in 'Check-in,' a poem about a carnal hotel sojourn: 'And when we fell into that lobby, the concierge/smelled a rat and judged us by our baggage.' Their residency is fuelled by the 'road-kill and carrion of each other' and ends with the concierge 'backing slowly away.' Malone's interest in such energies extends beyond the libido to the arts, and there are several ekphrastic poems on the likes of Wyndham Lewis, Paul Klee, and Giacometti. Never content to let

simple forensic detail take the place of inventive engagement, Malone is excellent at climbing inside the artist's vision and feeding off their symbolism in imaginative ways. I particularly like his response to Magritte's 'Presence of Mind' (the painting in which a man in a bowler hat is flanked by a falcon and a fish). Malone's focus is on the human figure, and what the symbolism seems to imply about him as a type: he reimagines him as a dangerous loner—'an outsider on his perch'—through the lens of JFK's assassination. The poem closes:

From the Book Depository window, a view:  
the river, a street and vault of sky.  
*My God, they've shot the President!*  
The Knoll's talon, fin and thick black tie.

In Malone's reading, the fish and the falcon seem to stand for life choices, and the poem raises interesting questions about what informs them, particularly in terms of morality. Where do they come from, if indeed they are choices at all, and what, if anything shapes our life narrative? Perhaps the answers dwells in the unnavigable landscapes of the unconscious from which Magritte's 'falconmanfish' emerges? More benign manifestations of creative energy can be seen in the poems about his son. In 'The Right Stuff,' for instance, the latter has been caught 'Googling porn' by his mother, but Malone sees this as a positive expression of the spirit of life, one set to fuel his son's course to 'strange gravities of bliss, rapture's nebulae.' Likewise, in 'Lung Jazz' such energy is seen in the inchoate noises his son makes as a baby: he begins to 'riff' in 'that scat style of a six month,' an incipient 'Chet Baker' or 'Coltrane,' the poem closes with a reflection on what is lost and gained in the cycle of life:

Fionn, keep the beat  
and, in your own good time,  
tell me what I have lost.

Despite the ostensibly melancholy note, there is little sense that the speaker has lost much of the energy he celebrates in his offspring; Malone still jumps with a 'jazz' of his own, and is more than capable