

## Review: 'The Waiting Hillside' by Martin Malone

*The Waiting Hillside* by Martin Malone. Published by Templar Poetry, November 2011. Paperback, 50pp. ISBN 9781906285302. £8.99. [Click here>>](#) to buy.

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### Hitting the delay pedal

Templar Poetry's beautifully produced books already catch the eye with their strikingly illustrated, gatefolded covers, but turn *The Waiting Hillside* over and you'll find praise quotes from none other than the Poet Laureate and Simon Armitage – not necessarily what you'd expect on the back cover of a debut collection. Clearly, with endorsements like these, Martin Malone is a talent to be reckoned with and we're advised to pay attention.

His most obvious themes are family, the ties of love, and a deep sense of place, but I was also intrigued by the 'delay pedal effect' on time he seems to achieve through the medium of the poem. In another life Martin Malone worked as a sound engineer and he is a musician. He came to poetry via music and uses the argot of the sound man in poems such as 'Switchover', 'Mic-ing the Kit' and the plangent, touching 'Haas Effect', dedicated to the ultimately tragic singer-songwriter, John Martyn:

Observing this law of the first wave front  
is an involuntary sensory inhibition  
mirrored in your memory;  
the acoustics of which can be cruel.

That ear for sound and rhythm serves him well throughout the volume. In shorter pieces such as 'Merula', we hear birdsong lilting through each line, images of sound throughout: 'my sleep refashioned on the anvil of his song'.

For me, the easy earthly lyricism of these more abstract pieces makes them the most successful of the shorter poems in the book, and they reminded me of Hardy's 'Dynasts'. As

it turns out, Hardy is one of Malone's heroes – he has written a paper on his short stories – and you can hear something of Hardy's voice in his own.

But there is so much more to this multi-faceted, multi-talented poet than sound effects and a lyrical gift. A close reading of 'Echoes' or 'Cathal', for example, reveals a pull towards nascent short story. The poems read as if narrative is being pulled back, strapped down – a clear strong outline of something longer, more prose-like tugging to be free, as in the wonderfully drawn character of Cathal:

... The house was doused  
in his tenancy, wore his stain on its  
fingers like porter and nicotine.  
I would clock him on the stairs, shrinking  
back into the shadows of shy custom.

We have a strong picture of an ageing Irish fencer of goods, a small time criminal, a vulnerable man on the edges of a dangerous world – pure short story stuff in the vein of John McGahern, perhaps.

Another strong theme is the visual – colour and images in words, seeing the world through a time-lapse camera. 'Easter Sunday on Pyrgos' is the obvious example here – an idyllic lunch in Greece where 'April sun dropped its lemon juice of chipped light'; and also 'Decades', a road poem starring the poet and his mother, set against a bog-soft Irish landscape, driving through time as well as space:

It is getting late. In my rear-view  
the solstice sun thins out  
against the wild Atlantic as  
before me, black and huge, Croagh Patrick  
mars the horizon with the dark  
obligation of an evening  
Mass from a Sunday teatime long  
ago ...

The painter's eye is also evident in 'Barbury Castle', and it was no surprise to learn that it appeared on Radio 4's Today Programme homepage as part of their 'Magic of Place' feature. Some of Malone's recent work includes a series of poems based on famous paintings, including one (Mrs Mounter) that won this year's Mirehouse Prize.

I can't end a review of Malone's work without mentioning his poems about relationships. The volume is bookended by poems set on Dragon Hill at Uffington, by the Vale of the White Horse. 'At Uffington' (the first poem in the book) and 'Best Kite on the Hill' (the last poem) must rank among the most sensitive and insightfully touching works on the relationship between a man, a woman, and a boy in recent poetry.

Malone uses the delay pedal technique again to move through time, melding past with present, interweaving strands of emotion from then to now. 'Best Kite on the Hill' begins:

Back at Uffington, the line heavier now  
with a history; its haul weighty

beyond the burden of a ground hefty  
with its own tales. You, me and your son  
and the best kite on the hill.

And ends:

Up there, do we find our correlative?  
Or, loaded with history, circumstance  
and doubt, do we quiver, veer and fall?  
Shot falcons, ploughing ourselves  
back into the waiting hillside.

Carolyn Richardson lives near Carlisle, organises open mic nights at the Off The Wall Café in Brampton, and is a senior lecturer at the University of Cumbria. Her poems have appeared in various anthologies, including the recent [Split Screen](#) (poetry inspired by film and television) from Red Squirrel Press.