

## MARTIN MALONE: REVIEW

---

### **And that is all, and that is everything.**

*Killochries* by Jim Carruth. Freight Poetry. 131pp; £8.99, ISBN978-1-908754-91- 2.

It's a rare thing to come across a poetry collection that makes you yearn to see its screenplay but Jim Carruth's remarkable debut engendered precisely that desire in me. Accurately described in the jacket notes as a "verse novella", *Killochries* reveals its' author to be the master of a spare story-telling style in which so little is told though much shown by the thrifty revelation of both lyric and narrative detail. Set on a lonely hill-farm and built around a single year's seasons, the collection outlines the developing relationship of its urbanite narrator – a prematurely washed-up writer/ academic – with his aged uncle, an isolated figure who looks after his ailing mother whilst tending to a dwindling flock of sheep and scratching out a precarious living from an unforgiving landscape. This setting, along with Carruth's impressive economy and sharp eye for the telling details of farm life, draw favourable comparisons with Heaney, Kavanagh and R.S. Thomas; whose Iago Prytherch the farmer oftentimes resembles. Such is the sheer *élan* of the story-telling, however, that *Killochries* also put me in mind of a heavily-erased version of Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* or even *The Master of Ballantrae*. Carruth displays equal flair in his astute management of the collection's key structural and thematic elements: the diurnal four phase cycle is itself interwoven with discreet sequences, such as the ten fox poems and six citations from the King James Bible (the only book the old-man has about the farm). These devices, plus an instinct for classic three-act structure and a tight staging of the dramatic space, allow Carruth to expertly manage the synergy between his attenuated lyric style and the demands of the narrative. What will be clear from all this is the fact that we are encountering a poet blessed with an extraordinary array of harmonic skills which help to facilitate a strikingly ambitious first collection.

Given such an embarrassment of riches it is, perhaps, best to start with the verse itself. I'd take issue with the press release description of *Killochries* as a "stunning prose-poem". Stunning it certainly is but the blank verse is far more diverse than the uniformity suggested by this description. Short-lined and spare to the point of malnourishment, the poems are, nevertheless, unafraid of burring themselves to whatever passing trope will carry forward the slowly-revealed narrative; the skill being Carruth's assembly and judicious allocation of these threads to each particular moment of revelation. So, throughout the book, we become acquainted with its mentor hero, the old farmer, as he is revealed to its narrator in a manner recalling Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. The first of these – at a point when the narrator is a reluctant visitor to the farm sent there by his mother "to get away from the city - / lies and excuses" – serves as a template for the slow journey towards mutual understanding which follows:

#### **i.scarecrow**

I catch him first  
on the skyline, facing away

St. Francis of the crows  
in a skewed bunnet,

Here the unrhymed couplets are cut to the bone yet redolent with an economy of small detail and observation which constantly inches the sequence forward, both in terms of narrative and lyrical revelation: the narrator turns up as an unannounced outsider, the farmer is, at this point, "facing away"; his biblical presence already allocated a hagiographic signifier, his dialect anticipated by the phrase "skewed bunnet". A lot of ground is covered in a short space and this pattern is impressively

sustained throughout, even in the twelfth and final revelation when the two men's shared regard is revealed in a typically understated gesture that is, nevertheless, loaded with unforced symbolism:

He hands me his mother's bible,  
a parting gift:

*Son, here, take this –  
a pillow fir the hard grun.*

It is, indeed, the way in which Carruth manages to breathe contemporary life into age-old pastoral and biblical themes that is perhaps his greatest achievement here. These are postmodern eclogues, equally shorn of traditional flourishes as they are of digital media yet retaining a true resonance of both worlds. The book is awash with binaries and dialogical relationships: youth and age, belief and scepticism, articulation and reticence, competing linguistic registers, modern urban unease butting up against the final glimmers of a much older peasant existence, to name but a few. Yet all of these are handled with a dexterity and lightness of touch which never intrudes upon the natural flow of the narrative or the plausibility of lyrical discourse. The story is always moved on via subtly interjected details; often so small as to be at risk of being overlooked. The moment when the narrator vainly attacks the old man's faith models a reticent strength widely evident throughout:

Silence in that byre:  
the old man's brief glance to me  
an hour-long sermon.

The narrator's gradual absorption into farm life is similarly rendered in moments of equal subtlety. Often, this slow integration begins at the level of language, betraying altered consciousness at an almost pre-cognitive level. Carruth is wise to this too, as his narrator learns about the old farmer's life first "through the dank curtain/ of his language" then gradually through a more consensual initiation into arcane knowledge and new registers:

This flowering language  
fills me –

heather a blaze of colour to the muir  
I reach out to touch and name:

In many ways, *Killochries'* central concern is an oblique exploration of defective father-son relationships, and the possibility of their viable relocation elsewhere: both men had uneasy times with their own fathers and it is in the quiet modelling of grace by the farmer that the narrator finds a way forward. The old man does get help, however, in the form of the local fox, who functions as a sort of elemental spirit guide to the narrator across the ten poems that are interlaced through the book. The narrator's personal growth and increasing ease with the natural world is located somewhere in this sequence; a fact all-but acknowledged by early summer and the eighth poem addressed to his animal avatar:

Fox,  
we're both  
changing:  
unkempt, impatient  
scratching at old fur,  
beneath this slow moult  
of winter coat –  
leaner and sleeker.

The fox poems, along with the beautifully-chosen good shepherd style sequence of citations from the farmer's bible, act as way-markers for both the diurnal progress of the farm year and the characters' inter-dependent narratives. Crucially, neither of these sequences feel shoe-horned into the collection as mere device or effect, each simply grows out of the beautifully managed context of the book's setting and characters. Unifying features aside, *Killochries* is capable of individual moments of fine poetry; such as the beautiful exploration of the symbolic power of a single object inherent in the late poem that sees the injured farmer, now reliant upon the narrator, hand over power to his mentee:

Too tired for the flock  
he stays at home,  
gives out commands,  
hands me his crook.

The fact that Carruth can wrest fresh meaning and significance from so old and traditional a symbol as a shepherd's crook and *not* make it seem forced or over-poetic is testament to his the qualities as a poet. We are never far from the well-worn path of pastoral tradition in *Killochries* yet the sequence consistently escapes charges of over-familiarity by the sheer story-telling skill of its author and the clarity of his verse; a feat of contemporary renewal worthy of comparison to Heaney in particular. Not even Seamus, however, quite managed the lucidity and tightness of narrative evident here; leastwise, not in the context of *telling* as opposed to *re-telling*.

Ultimately, a review of this book could have gone in a number of directions: one might have focused upon a wonderful economy of line and detail, the immaculate execution of verse narrative, evidence of a screenwriter's eye for tight three-act structure, the hero's journey towards an unsentimental redemption on offer at its end or Carruth's hugely impressive achievement in marshalling some of the oldest components of setting and symbolism to relay a story of both timeless and contemporary import. Impossible, then, to quite do the collection justice but an absolute pleasure to try. I can only recommend that you buy it and see for yourself. *Killochries* is published by Freight Books; that is, by an imprint outside of the big five or six poetry publishers, whose frequently inferior collections take up space on prize lists that really ought to be occupied by books as good as this one. As the old farmer himself might observe: *son, sometimes you get what you deserve, most times you get what you get.*