

MARTIN MALONE: REVIEW

Metaphysician, heal thyself.

X by Vona Groarke. The Gallery Press. 93pp; £9.95, ISBN978-1-85235-576-0.

There are moments in Vona Groarke's new collection that I used to connect with the first reading of a Seamus Heaney book; moments so sure-footed and beautifully pitched that they *enrich* your next hour's breath. In a contemporary scene unfortunately prone to over-stating the strengths of many a decent-but-not-great collection, this is an all-too-rare phenomenon. Groarke herself observes that:

There is at stake an honesty
in knowing, definitively, what is meant

by walking into a moment
and taking the measure of it,

(*Furrow*)

and this honesty is definitively what *X* displays throughout; with a deftness that leaves behind a trail of pristine poems which, as John McAuliffe recently observed, "gather silence around them". If this sounds a little esoteric fear not, for whilst this is undeniably intelligent poetry, there is a human generosity and sheen of grace about it which takes the collection way beyond any charges of 'mere cleverness' that may come its way. As *The Wrong Silence* observes, there are "hours that cannot be reasoned with" ...before going on to do the job of poetry in trying to do exactly that, and find "a name for what's yet to be loved".

Overall, there is abroad in *X* an ease and quality of associative thought-matched-to-line which put me in mind of that other much-garlanded metaphysician, Michael Symmons Roberts; though evident too is Eliot and the signifiers of *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets*. This is particularly apparent in the splendid Garden Sequence at the heart of the book, where the flowers open up obliquely hefted reflections upon mortality and personal history. In *The Garden, Over Time*, for example, Groarke asks:

how much longer
until I am planted,
bulb in winter,
in my parents soil?

In *The Garden, From Above* - with its aspiration to stake, "whatever it is that is staked/ by one body in sight of another and no love between/ something beyond love" - we get a moment wherein we're allowed to trace the linguistic stitching of transcendence,

Something like a name

let slip from an upstairs window
into a slipstream of summer,
let to sway like grass in heat
and come asunder even
before it comes to rest

then watch it, indeed, come asunder under strain from the inscrutable nature of the subjective moment itself:

your gaze

a frame of its own devising

within which the garden settles,
turns in on itself,
leaves you to turn away.

What's apparent is that this is a poetry in which language itself is stress-tested and taken to the outermost reaches of its own quest to express the inexpressible. However, this is so dextrous and entertainingly done that when the *invited* import of the poems does get through we can only gasp in admiration. In many ways, the book is about how we locate and fix ourselves in the flux of time and space; in its best moments, then, it is attempting to replicate the trick of stars in the way only poetry can. Groarke herself acknowledges the gig in the opening poem of the Garden Sequence:

Inside of which
it falls to me to imagine
the blue of cornflowers
has knowledge
of gothic windows
and tapestried plainsong.

(*The Garden As Music And Silence*)

Stylistically, this is often achieved by a sort of metaphysical anthropomorphism, whereby abstract notions are imbued with a casual, almost perfunctory consciousness. So, the day can "take the trouble to explain" (*The Blue Garden*), the night "is required to fold itself up in squares that get smaller and smaller" (3), "the furrow's trench-like depression/ knows nothing, or almost nothing/ of the barrow's burial mound." (*Furrow*) and the fields observed from a train can "chase each other down/ in the kind of blue that learned abstraction moons ago," (*High Notes*). The overall effect of this is a kind of magical sanity of reflection which allows for an abundance of surprise and high notes of its own.

Reading *X* one is aware that we are, indeed, in a poet's garden and the garden of a poet assured enough to remind us of her craft in the process of its own process. Everywhere, there is the phrasing of composition: "if I liken you to anything/ it will probably have to be" (*When All This Is Done, Sure*), "The Storm presents itself/ on the stage of my window" (*The Storm*), "Put 'Lintel' as a title: see what comes of it?/ I, too, may think of line endings with every quoin/ or cant;" (*How to Read a Building*) and "It spills over, what I write on paper, onto/ counter tops and quilt covers" (*Taking an Interest in the Decorative Arts*). This conceit is in keeping with the book's own closing phase which concerns itself explicitly with other art-forms, culminating in *The Hammershøi Sequence* that is both an ekphrastic tribute to the Danish painter, Vilhelm Hammershøi, and the opportunity to revisit a trope common in Groarke's poetry: the metaphorical opportunities offered by the interiority/ exteriority of doors, windows, rooms and other enclosed spaces.

All of which is not to make heavy weather of *X*, because Groarke's touch remains astonishingly light throughout and this is a collection shot through with playfulness and wry humour. What does she write about *about*? Well, it's the stuff of most poets: her garden, her family, the adjustments occasioned by the end and alteration of relationships, art, time, memory, even the weather. What sets this work apart, however, is a totally distinctive sensibility in firm possession of both its own craft and the human raw materials it is processing. In the book's opening poem, *A Pocket Mirror*, the poet asks:

What is it I keep this tentative record of? For what reason
do I step along high words with immeasurable care
or list the fanciful logic of one moment then another?

Whatever the reason, we can only be grateful that she does. Already much appreciated in an enlightened Ireland, *X* really ought to be the collection which garners a higher profile for Vona Groarke in the UK.

