

Review of 'Tidal Shift, Selected Poems of Mary Palmer' – by Helen Moore

'Tidal Shift', edited by Jay Ramsay, is both a poetry of conscience and the delineation of a life, culminating with the spiritual outpourings of the poet as she nears death – at 52, prematurely by Western standards. Poignantly in 'Journey' she notes "here in Africa, I am an OAP", and this awareness of the parallel realities of the overdeveloped West and the lives of the oppressed is a hallmark of Palmer's work. Throughout we experience the communications of a compassionate heart – sometimes burning with fierce irony, elsewhere disarmingly tender – yet steadily maintaining a courageous gaze in the face of others' suffering.

Having worked as a dietician in hospitals, the poet's ironically titled 'Hospital Heaven' sketches portraits of patients inhabiting "this keep of stone/with sheets folded cold as ice", where doctors label people with "measle words/obscure as curses" and the "advance of science" is more important than quality of life.

'Bunty' and 'Edward' are the most successful poems in this section, skilfully weaving through descriptions of each patient lines from Corinthians in the former poem, and in the latter from Eugene Field's 'Wynken, Blynken and Nod', to create gentle pathos.

Palmer's time in Africa also provokes poems of passionate indignation. She's all too aware of the cultural imperialism implicit in teaching English to Tanzanian students – "*Cargo, trade laws, cash./ Strange sounds explode/ as in a storm of chalk dust/don't let that dust settle – / such whiteness/ could smother them.*" A visit to the former slave depot at Pangani eerily evokes the ghosts of the place, and in other poems coconuts are twice seen as skulls; but most extraordinary amongst Palmer's oeuvre are the poems where she convincingly shape-shifts to write as 'Esmee', a black slave in Bristol; 'Africa', the voice of the continent, personified as a young woman impregnated by a "white trader man"; and Mrs Mokombe, "In Jamaica wi suh thin/ mi brudder he die." These dramatic monologues echo the tradition of black performance poets, such as Kwesi Johnson, in giving voice to the oppressed. And for "a consummate performer" (Palmer's description by friend and publisher Kevan Manwaring), they were effective stage pieces, made all the more startling given the poet's own racial background as a white English woman.

Other poems chart the ongoing legacy of empire – "Flesh comes cheap here,/ the foundation on which you build your life." ('World Trade II') In 'National Health', the decrepit hospital infrastructure (with a "cripple" sitting by a poster that says: "'Looking for Vitality?/ Try Zinc.' Signed 'Anglo Franco & Co'") becomes a metaphor for postcolonialism. Yet even here there is redemption through the heart – "Light filters down through dust/ on a relative seated/by the patient – the balm of kindness/and healing touch of love/all she could afford."

Intimations of Palmer's own life are glimpsed throughout, at times revealing a spirit of feminist iconoclasm – “A hammer, I will smash/ your Victorian corset of iron.” (‘Church Radiator’) – the struggle to escape the patriarchal triumvirate of Church, academia and science (‘Mad Meg’), and a ‘Swimming Free’ from rationalism, “the weight of logic that said/ there is nothing sacred, nothing./ No joy, no wonder. And love?” (‘Taliesin’s Salmon’)

Longing also pervades the poems. ‘If Only...’, a prose piece, reflects on the course the poet’s life has taken, as she regrets so much time spent in hospitals, wishing she’d imbibed African vitality sooner, while in ‘Leda’s Daughter’, her homage to Yeats, this longing becomes sexual as the progeny of Leda’s rape by the swan yearns to escape her “mortal shell”, “to feel/the prickle of quills through skin/ a smothering of white.” Many poems are characterised by a hunger for sensual detail, deployed most vividly throughout the African poems, and where the continent is seen to have had a healing effect on the poet, who, addressing herself, writes, “Here fed, relaxed/ you rejuvenate.”

In ‘Hospital Heaven’, patients often over-eat or refuse food, and it’s thus ironic that the underlying theme of longing/hunger ends with the penultimate poem ‘NBM’, evoking the hospitalised poet’s inability to eat or drink. With this prohibition, her longing – the vital Eros principle – also ends; she tells herself: “Do not thirst, do not dream/ You must feel the knife/ before you can resume/ living.” Instead she seems to draw nourishment from her spiritual resources, and this I feel is indicative of the ‘tidal shift’ that takes place in the final sections of the book (from ‘Invocation’, through the ‘Wild Goose’ section (goose as Celtic image of the Holy Spirit now replacing the lusty swan) into ‘Last Poems’.)

At the end of her life, Christian faith and love have become Palmer’s main source of nourishment. However, her concern remains predominantly with others – the poet’s often fragmentary utterances are epitomised by her desire to extend a ‘Lifeline’ to those she’s leaving behind: “I believe in going/ the oyster way/ in weaving meaning/ around the grit/ in leaving you/ a rope of pearls.” But ultimately, I feel her courageous surrendering to death is the greatest gift she offers her readers – “give yourself/ to the surgeon’s knife/ let go/ an outpouring of love/ your miracle.”