

Nigel Jarrett's debut poetry collection, *Miners at the Quarry Pool*, is one that demands re-readings. This is because the poems are, it seems to me, often quite resistant to the reading process itself – partly, I think, because their narratives sometimes take a little working out, partly because of references that may need following up, partly because the flow of thought is often detailed, and partly because of a certain riddling quality which seems to offer up poetry as a sort of puzzle.

The opening poem, 'A Shepherd Learns to Read', uses its first two stanzas to set up the narrative frame: there's been a 'bucolic tragedy', with the protagonist having been found 'beamed in a barn with no curtain'. *Beamed*? That word still leaves me at a loss. Had the eponymous shepherd tried to hang himself from a beam? Or had something felled him as if he had been hit by a beam? The second stanza informs us of 'a new heart' which is 'urging him to an old endeavour' – the latter being the learning-to-read of the poem's title. But is that 'new heart' literal (was it heart problems that caused the 'tragedy' of the opening stanza?) or metaphorical? I couldn't unravel it. To a certain extent, of course, that's incidental to the main burden of the piece – which is a telling, over the subsequent four stanzas, of the shepherd's attempts to learn to read. And here we learn how the poem's protagonist is 'tortured by diphthongs, / ankle-tapped by silent Ms', before the final stanza describes how success comes as he will 'whistle-in words till / they wheel to a white knot, / an omphalos'. I'm not sure that the sudden leap in register at the end there is entirely successful – the final word feels awkwardly out of place – just as I'm not sure why the earlier rugby-related image of ankle-tapping belongs in this particular poem in any coherent way. All the same, notice the careful detail of thought in that final stanza, where words are rendered as sheep, gathered together in an act of shepherding. Pay attention, the poem says: I shall work for you an image that will precisely render the newly-reading shepherd as a shepherd of language itself.

'Ars Longa, Vita Brevis' provides a different sort of challenge. The clumsiness of the opening line ('The widow of poet Tom Lynch's angling buddy') is simply a syntactically poor start, after which the poem improves into a possibly wry consideration of what the poem calls '*cremorialisation*' – how someone's ashes can be used in an act of memorialisation. This is an interesting idea and well worth exploring poetically – though I'd prefer it if Jarrett had avoided the cliché of 'frisky trout' along the way. The more particular challenge comes in the speaker's 'favourite' idea for *cremorialisation*, as the final two lines propose being 'well ground with Veronese's burnt umber / and circulated unseen at the Cana marriage'. There is emphatically nothing wrong with poetry that is deeply engaged with other cultural artefacts – here, I presume, the reference being to Paolo Veronese's 1560s painting *The Wedding at Cana*. But, of course, the way it's done here, you do need to know the particularities of this reference before those final lines make any sense at all.

Whereas the two previous poems are illustrative of readerly challenges that I think are fair enough, a piece such as 'Killed on the Ice' was – for this reader at least – an exercise in a sort of riddling that I simply couldn't work out. Crucially *what* are the things that are 'Killed on the Ice'? Unless I'm missing something completely, I don't think the poem gives enough information for that to be known – barring guesswork. And whilst difficulty in poetry is often an important aspect of its potential pleasures (leading to richness of ambiguity, multi-layered meanings, diverse emotional resonance),

poems which seemingly demand that their reader just makes a guess at something leave me pretty cold. So I wasn't entirely surprised that I ended up writing the note 'tiresomely oblique' against one poem later in the collection ('Serenade'). Indeed, it wasn't until 'Training Camp, 1914', in the final ten pages of the book, that Jarrett managed to engage me emotionally – in a consideration of the fate of three WWI soldiers. Here, writing of 'wide-mouthed Private Meryvane', there is the devastatingly simple finish of 'a shell to shatter his illusions'. Nigel Jarrett is clearly an exceedingly clever writer; I'm just not sure that such cleverness always plays to his advantage in this debut.

*Forged Light*, by the Welsh-American poet and painter Margaret Lloyd, is very different. The poetic language here is much more conversational than Jarrett's, much *plainer* in style. Indeed, Lloyd's apparent disinterest in straining after unusual (or unusually placed) words or in creating startling images is a great pleasure. The volume is split into five sections, two of which I shall comment on here. The first, 'Tales', displays Lloyd's notable mythic concerns, drawing as it does on Classical, Biblical, Welsh, and even literary stories. If this sounds potentially somewhat dry, the poems are not – the liquid ease of the language keeping the eponymous tales moving with a fluid beauty. Thus, in Lloyd's version of the angel appearing to Mary to announce that she is to bear the Christ-child, the angel delivers his message and then comes back to making pottery: 'He returns to the clay, failing sometimes, / and sometimes making a pot so shapely and thin, / it leaps like the gazelle he once saw / in early spring on earth'. The same sort of linguistic ease is also apparent at the close of 'Rhiannon Speaks', a poem which plays on the association between the eponymous Rhiannon and horses (through which she is sometimes linked to the Celtic goddess Epona): 'The truth is I became more / than human, not less, / when I became the horse, / carrying others on my back'.

However, it was section IV of the book, 'Money for the Boatman', that I found the most moving. Here, the speaker of the poems responds to the imminent death of her mother – and does so without, I think, descending into either lugubriousness or sentimentality. Thus, in 'To a Nereid', the speaker declares, with a certain blunt force, that 'I am not ready for her not / to arrive again, for me not / to arrive at her door'. Moreover, even in the poem 'Residue', which pursues memories of places long-gone, the speaker ends up not in nostalgia but in a clear-eyed confrontation with both mortality and permanent displacement: 'Hovering into night, / slowly becoming dead, / she will never be home again'. In its offering up of a poetic dwelling on the long-drawn-out loss of a parent, *Forged Light* is definitely worth reading.

Back in 2007, I reviewed Margaret Lloyd's previous collection, *A Moment in the Field: Voices from Arthurian Legend*, and declared it to be 'often profoundly moving' as well as written in 'language that is beautifully controlled and strikingly unfussy'. Precisely the same assessment can be made of *Forged Light* – with the added note, perhaps, that Lloyd's fine work deserves many readers.