T S Eliot Shadowing Scheme 2014 – the Winner and Runners-up

emag Shadowing Scheme winner, Billie Esplen chooses David Harsent

They say we must analyse poetry in layers: to dig below the surface; strive tirelessly for deeper meaning. But perhaps this is not the best way to go about it. The very nature of poetry means we can read it over and over again. We can sink deeper and deeper into it; read ourselves through the different layers of meaning. And this is what is so digestible – and indeed delectable – about Harsent's two poems. They are all about layers: about depth, height and boundaries. It is possible for one to almost physically sink into the enjoyment of them.

Most obviously, the girl in 'Dive' is sinking. She is drowning. Everything around her is in a process of diminution: the 'voices fading'; the 'light' as she 'slips' and 'drift[s] down'. The mid-line ellipses in the first stanza convey this perfectly, allowing the reader time to sink into the essence and feeling of the language. Even the verb tenses move forwards; downwards, leaving her life on the surface further and further in the past until they end on the pluperfect and final 'had ever been'. Similarly, in 'Icefield', 'rising' water is not only submerging the landscape, but also diminishing its natural 'music'.

The idea of layers and boundary lines also beautifully permeates both poems, giving them structure and poise. Both are composed of stanzas of almost exactly equivalent length and width. 'Icefield' starts with the layers of 'ice on ice' and 'white on white'. The girl in 'Dive' 'sets her face to skim', merely grazing layers of perception, and watches the 'surface' disappear. As she drifts, her line of connection with her previous life is 'sever[ed]'. Similarly, reference is made to the defining lines of Harsent's icy landscape with the words 'skyline' and 'horizon', which are the boundary between the grounded and the heavenly, while, at the same time, the use of enjambment conveys the continuous drifting of 'Dive', and the watercolour uniformity of the Icefield.

Indeed, in both poems we find a deep conflict between the solid and the spiritual. The girl falls away from material things she had 'owned' and 'wanted'. The 'vast machine' of human destruction and climate change 'cut[s] hard and deep' into the arctic landscape which was previously filled with 'wind', 'ghosts' and 'dreams'. The 'light' and 'voices' in 'Dive' connote the heavenly or other-worldly, as do the 'clouds', 'birds in flight' and 'blue never seen to anyone but her'. In 'Icefield', too, there is mention of a 'white bird'. What this conflict does is bring to fruition the tension between descent and ascent; between sinking diminution and heavenly exultation. Harsent's 'Icefield' is losing its sublime, and the subject of 'Dive' is finding hers.

And this is what poetry should be: simultaneous descent into delicious three-dimensional meaning and ascent up to sublime higher understanding. Harsent's two poems are the very embodiment of this, and, in being so, they allow the reader to do so absolutely.

Billie Kathleen Esplen, Highgate School

emag Shadowing Scheme runner up, Hope Coke chooses Fiona Benson

The role of a mother as protector and provider is universally recognised and separation between mother and child can be intensely difficult, as in Fiona Benson's 'Demeter.' A pattern of connection and separation lies ingrained in the poem, conveyed even by the image 'pull at their silver tails', which carries connotations of a fragile, almost invisible bond, like a phantom umbilical cord. As the child makes her way through the hay bales the reader is plunged into a stream of consciousness demonstrating a level of panic that is usually hidden below the surface, but is here vividly brought to light. Benson compares the mother's potential loss of the child to that of the Ancient Greek goddess, Demeter, who's daughter was taken to the underworld. The vulnerability of the child is highlighted with the repeated image of a 'small' physical presence, first a 'small smashed body' then a 'small blotched body'. Both are violent descriptions that emphasise the need for protection that the 'small' child requires – protection that the mother has failed to provide. So hidden within the poem is also a sense of the insecurity of the mother about being somehow unworthy of the role that has been granted her, and a role that she is therefore obsessed with fulfilling effectively.

Benson manages to articulate the sort of buried panic that most people seek to forget but is, however, present in all of us. This in itself exposes something significant about human nature, and the way in which we may have within us fears that far exceed a given situation. After all, how could it be that the daughter would end up in 'underground rooms' by simply wandering out of sight in a field? But that is why Benson's poem is so effective, because despite the fact that the associations the mother makes are absurd she is panic-stricken regardless of this, to the point where she goes to get her daughter in order to 'carry her protesting home'. Ultimately the mother's decision to take her daughter home is not what makes her daughter happiest, but what allows the mother to maintain her control.

What furthers the impact of this poem is the fact that it is inevitable that the mother will not be able to protect her child forever, and the 'silver tails' that bind them will become increasingly strained as the daughter grows up and gains independence. She will eventually have to accept the helplessness she fears so much in regard to her child.

The idea of the futility of human desires is echoed also in 'Submerged Forest.' By the end of this poem what the narrator 'wanted' is not granted, as the question of 'How will I get beyond?' is left unanswered, with no resolution in sight. The imagery carries a sense of decay and finality, indicating that there will be no return to the way that the woods used to be, which is what the narrator longs for. Objects are described as lacking somehow; 'shoals of acorn', 'drifts of leaf' – both are only parts of what they formerly were. Additionally a 'shut-up cist of an egg' and an oak that is 'pocked' both seem corrupted and infused with sickness, as though the fertility of the forest will be irretrievable. Benson therefore effectively communicates through both these poems the way in which the human mind can torment us by operating so apart from rationality and attainability.

Hope Coke, Wells Cathedral School

emag Shadowing Scheme runner up, Theodora Critchley chooses David Harsent

'At first the surface is just touchable', a sensuous, cinematic unfolding of events, though 'a little deeper' lies in wait the theme of loss. With both structured around a concept – a dive, global warming – and enhanced by vivid, highly visual lexical choices, David Harsent's 'Dive' and 'Icefield' connect the reader with the core of each poem in a profound, meaningful way.

Upon first inspection, 'Dive' appears simply to be structured around the descent 'from almost-day to almost-night', however the title invites a reader to explore further, to venture beyond the metaphor of the concept and into the depths. There is a 'slow drift' to the poem, evoked by the sibilance throughout and, with each stanza pulling the reader further into the poem, 'Dive' shows 'her' carefully constructed narrative – 'all that she owned or wanted' – being taken by a malevolent force. Avoiding a generic, clichéd approach that our protagonist could be anyone, Harsent's subtlety of an unnamed character (referred to only as 'she' and 'her') with an ambiguity to her home and values, leaves ideas such as 'this could happen to anyone' open.

In many ways, 'Icefield' is the opposite of 'Dive', with the introduction of loss being not within the first line, but ending the poem abruptly. This creates such an impact which suggests to a reader the destructive force of the 'vast machine' on nature, alluding to the overall magnitude of the damage caused by global warming.

The tricolon of semi-colons gives 'Icefield' a rigid, methodical structure, reflecting the introduction of the machine into the natural world. Similarly, the machine being introduced in the same stanza as the natural world shows the suddenness of the industrial revolution; 'some vast machine', so different from the intimacy with 'the wind', 'the skyline' and 'the cold' – the dreams which were once of 'a white bird…and music' are now of science and advancing technology, of inanimate man-made monstrosities, while mankind's connection with nature becomes smudged as the horizon.

Perhaps more terrible than the loss of respect for nature and traditional values is the portrayal of our destroying the environment: mankind is not just losing its connection with nature, but nature is losing its own identity as a consequence of our actions. A humbling thought, conveyed in two short phrases which bear the gravitas of the situation whilst also raising the idea of confusion of identity. Referring to the skyline prior to the invasion of modern-day man, 'clean as a scar on glass' brings the comparison of nature with a manufactured material; the two do not belong together. And with the 'stain cut hard and deep in the permafrost', the poem seems to reach a point of no return, as there is a direct attack on nature itself.

Harsent weaves into his poetry the allowance for a variety of interpretations unique to the reader – 'never seen by anyone but her'. This freedom of thought, instigation of imagination is the beauty behind 'Dive' and 'Icefield'. There is a humanity expressed within the poems that establishes a connection between reader and poem, and a truthfulness to Harsent's poetic style which echoes hauntingly their content.

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