‘The Green Dress Whose Girl is Sleeping’ by Russell Jones

Review by Kevin MacNeil

Edinburgh-based poet Russell Jones has published three pamphlets and edited *Where Rockets Burn: Contemporary Science Fiction Poetry from the UK*. *The Green Dress Whose Girl Is Sleeping* marks his debut book-length collection. The titles of the poems point towards idiosyncrasy and diversity — ‘My Secrets as a God’, ‘My Adoration of Tiramisu’, ‘Random Sample from the School Career Library Classification Index’, ‘Above the “100% Human Hair Extensions” Beauty Salon’. Jones experiments with feeling and form, style and subject, and the poems that emerge are generally the result of a sensitive, questioning mind unafraid to reveal big questions in small moments:

> *[…] You ask for the earth*
> *to break and it does.*
>
> *I’ll stay with you, then,*
> *as the statue*
>
> *is painted darker by the rain*
> *for a darker world.*
>
> *— ‘Apparition in a Storm’*

A statue painted darker by the rain — something about that image seems thoroughly Scottish. These poems are far from parochial, though, despite and because of their being influenced by one Scottish writer in particular — Edwin Morgan. 'The Bang', for example, is a dialogue between 'Alice and Atlas: Opposing Protons in the Large Hadron Collider'. The star-shaped poem 'Star' mirrors itself, with the left side printed back-to-front. There are sharp, tender sonnets and single-word poems. All of these elements indicate a reverence for Edwin Morgan who would, I think, have enjoyed reading this collection. Who could fail to love lines like 'Children are gods, too', or:

> *At the party the green dress dances*
> *so wild that her hips shake the atmosphere.*
>
> *— 'The Insider'*

Cosmic and intimate, these poems shine with innate empathy — for a woman who lost her son, for a remorseful dog, for the flower that 'does not aspire to be a meadow'. Jones attempts not only to understand what it is to be a specific person, but what it is to be the very dress in which she dances (and subsequently sleeps). I love that kind of imaginative impulse.

The scope of subject matter here is impressive, with intellectual and emotional intelligence freely offered, explored, developed. The imagination and resourcefulness evident in *The Green Dress Whose Girl Is Sleeping* are to be admired. 'On Her Return from Afghanistan' opens with an intense and affecting stanza that shows Jones at his best:

> *My sister told me how she'd sewn*
> *the stomachs of two boys who set off*
> *a land mine whilst playing football near the market;*
> *removed the overcooked*
> *skin, tendons, muscle and cartilage*
> *from the legs of a woman trying to save*
> *her photos during a house fire;*
> *administered the drugs to a man*
> *she had eaten eggs with, knowing*
> *his death was certain.*

Poems this emotionally engaging will never grow old.

Not all of the experiments in the collection pay off. I found the ’26 ONE WORD POEMS’ to be flippant, unremarkable and fruitless. They detract from the book as a whole. For example, the ‘one word poem’ entitled ‘What You See Is What You Get’ reads in its entirety: ‘WYSIWYG’. Leaving aside the fact that WYSIWYG is not a word, how does a redundant ‘one word’ ‘poem’ like that earn its way into an otherwise moving and intriguing collection? Unfortunately, most of the so-called one-word poems fall flat. Similarly, the haiku that make up ‘Selection from a Summer Set’ fail to convince. Talented poet though he is, Jones has not mastered the haiku (in fairness, it is inordinately and deceptively difficult to write a true haiku). I can’t help but feel that omitting the one-word poems and the haiku would have made for an even more assured debut.

Still, let’s not be harsh. *The Green Dress Whose Girl Is Sleeping* is a striking collection and deserves to do well. I look forward to seeing more from such a promising poet.

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