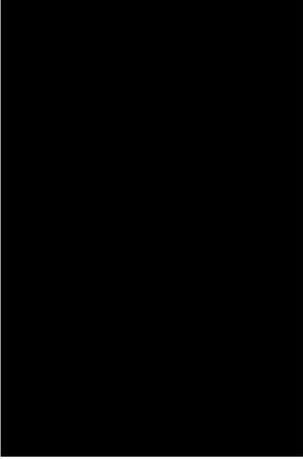


# Killochries by Jim Carruth

## Review by Eithne Ní Shúilleabháin



In an extraordinary turn of events, Jim Carruth gained a laureateship before he had a book published. He had a handful of chapbooks in print, but his appointment as Poet Laureate of Glasgow in 2014 predates by a year his verse narrative *Killochries*.

This sparse but fluid sequence follows the course of four rural seasons, charting the changing relationship of two very different men as they live and work together on a hill-farm. It's interesting that the laureate of Scotland's largest conurbation should write so resolutely of a rural setting but Carruth grew up on a farm, which is why he writes with such authenticity of the marvels and pains of the natural world.

The narrator is an alcoholic, an atheist, a man with a troubled past, who wants to put everything behind him by leaving city life and working on a hill-farm with a farmer who is older, religious and, it turns out, wiser. The farmer lives an apparently basic life – he has no television, his only book is the Bible, and the telephone is unplugged:

*He likes his radio  
but has no TV.*

*The outside world  
is hard enough tae listen tae.*

*Why wad A bring its troubles  
intae my living room?*

*Looks straight at me.*

The book centres on certain deepening relationships: between these two men; between the narrator and God; between man and nature. I say man because the only women in the book are both rather passive seeming: the farmer's mother is in a precarious and dependent state due to dementia, the narrator's mother is absent, still living in the city he left behind.

Carruth sets out his stall early; *Killochries* is shot through with Biblical imagery. It's no surprise that slowly but surely our narrator begins to see the world in a new, theistic light. He learns the hard work, the practicalities, of being a farmer, of tending to land and livestock. He's too busy to be overly self-involved, although he does keep a diary. Above all, his mind opens to the possibility of a religious life. And he even manages to have a single alcoholic drink at Hogmanay. He shares his writing with the older man, who presents in return verses from the Bible.

At its best, the writing style is concentrated but loaded, achieving real emotional depth, as in this poignant scene where the narrator meets the farmer's mother for the first time:

*She does not speak,  
presents only a vacant look.  
I offer less in return.*

The younger man's increasing respect for the old farmer is palpable, as is his fascination with nature's ways:

*Morning comes.  
Hen house silent,  
limp bodies,  
a feathered shroud.*

*Why kill so many, fox,  
when you can carry  
only one?*

Carruth generally writes with a well-tuned cadence, often holding back as though his ink is being rationed. This is a stark, poignant book laced with moments of quiet but effective drama.

Carruth's writing is very clear – almost to the point of being colourless at times. The publisher is keen to draw parallels between his writing and that of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. I'd add another name to that illustrious list. Killochries reminds me at times of Iain Crichton Smith – specifically, the Smith of *The Village and Other Poems*. Like *Killochries*, that collection is spare and lyrical, unflinching and intense; it engages with the natural world and the frailties and possibilities of being human.

Where Smith's collection differs, though, is by matter of degree; it is that bit more colourful, more characterful, more memorable. Smith's poetry has the ability to startle, whereas Carruth's work, while accomplished, feels a little unadventurous – safe, even. As if Carruth, in pushing for a pure, minimalist touch has sacrificed a measure of richness and texture. The best minimalism is wide open and alive with nuance rather than suffering from a slight feeling of claustrophobia borne of a limited colour palette. There is no doubting that *Killochries* is a praiseworthy book – it's extremely readable. I just couldn't see myself rereading it the way I would Heaney, Hughes or Smith. Still, it is very accessible and is recommended to those who like their poetry pared-back, proficient and unshowy.

*Killochries* by Jim Carruth is published by Freight Books, 2014.

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