

'Equal Night' & 'Circulation' by Graham Fulton

Review by Richie McCaffery

Considered side by side, Fulton's 2017

As the speaker in *Sack Race* openly admits, we must laugh to stop ourselves going mad. Years ago, I volunteered at the editorial offices of a literary magazine and the chief editor's primary bugbear was poems about holidays and poems about hospitals. I saw where they were coming from about superficial holiday snap poems, but surely all poems and poets end up in the hospital. It is such an inherently sterile and mechanical place that it cries out for the music and eloquence of poetry. Like Fulton's mentor, Tom Leonard, has said of these poems, they have the hallmark of genuine necessary art. In *Changing Room* we see how the health system has the power to de-humanise people as well as the poet capturing vividly a person hovering in the interstice between life and death:

Divided into three sections, or movements, *Changing Room* deals with the poet's mother's cancer diagnosis, her illness and death, and then her funeral and its repercussions. What is perhaps most remarkable about these poems is not so much the acute, poignant and clearly loving attitude to poet has towards his mother and her demise, but rather his ability to see things analytically, to show us how our bodies are processed in such a clinical and cynical way. Fulton's dealings with apathetic undertakers who wait for the next wee job (*Services Rendered*) and put on a feast / of retro sandwiches (*Received*) shows us that R.I.P has become R.R.P, like the biography of Robert Mitchum that the poet's mother was reading, unfinished, on her death bed: A pressy for Christmas, less than a year. / Somebody dead to read all about. (*Full Stop*). It is too glib and pat to say that these poems are a vital part of the healing process for Fulton, but they do mark his movement through the underworlds and death-zones of illness and bereavement in striking and memorable ways. There is also a sense that the poet

comes out the other side with the solace of memories and an unsinkable ability to see humour and beauty in daily events, such as those recounted in *Precious* :

While a death in the family, although it happens to us all, represents something of a terra incognita, *Precious*, Fulton's latest collection, marks a return to the poet's familiar terrain and characters of his home town of Paisley. I've written in a previous review of a Fulton collection that he should have the title of *Makar* of

Similarly in *Circulation* the speaker makes us laugh by condemning themselves with their own mouth:

Before you think that Fulton is presenting us with a freak show for our own judgemental amusement, it should be pointed out that Fulton is one of the major eccentrics to feature in these poems. In *Walking in the Park Pretending I m Blind* we are given the image of the speaker, a grown man, playing a game from their childhood where they pretend to be blind; and in *A Paper Clip in My Scrambled Egg* we are treated to a master-class in self-deprecating mock-heroics:

I admire how no-one is sacred in Fulton's poetry, and while his tone can be sardonic, it is also invariably sympathetic. In *The Mike and Eddie Show* the speaker finds himself at the Free Verse Poetry Book Fair in London and spots in the room the veteran poets Eddie Linden and Michael Horovitz. I too have been treated to an impromptu rendition of Eddie Linden's pacifist-atheist-lapsed-Catholic-/homosexual-octogenarian-/Scots-Irish-alcoholic-communist poetry, so I laughed when the poem ends with Linden, having walked around the room multiple times looking :

Here Fulton is not only gently mocking Linden, he is also saying he too is the proud member of a band of misfits, all gathered together to celebrate poetry. Fulton's poetry is often celebratory and life affirming, even at its most satirical, and *Forcefully* marks a return to form after the crushing blow of the loss of his mother, dealt with so movingly in *Forcefully*. There is always a risk, as with Robert Garioch's poetry, that too much emphasis is placed on the humorous aspects of a poet's work and the poet is typecast as a result, but together *Forcefully* and *Forcefully* are proof of a relevant, resilient and versatile voice at work on the fringes and centres of society. Fulton has done here what he's always done and what he will go on doing:

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While a death in the family, although it happens to us all, represents something of a terra incognita, *Counter Intelligence*, Fulton's latest collection, marks a return to the poet's familiar terrain and characters of his home town of Paisley. I've written in a previous review of a Fulton collection that he should have the title of 'Makar' of Paisley's bampots, but *Counter Intelligence* has made me reassess this claim. While Fulton certainly can send up others, there is an underlying affection to his writing, and he is never looking down on the people who give him the amazingly whacky utterances and soundbites that spark his poems. Fulton certainly is the chiel among us, takin' notes, and he has the temerity to write them up and print them, but I get the impression he relishes life in Paisley for all of its absurdities and surreal moments. *Counter Intelligence* is one of the many poems here, like the title poem *Circulation*, in an urban demotic Scots and presented as a monologue of a character, and here the speaker is trying to buy a packet of cigarettes and instructing the shop owner to:

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