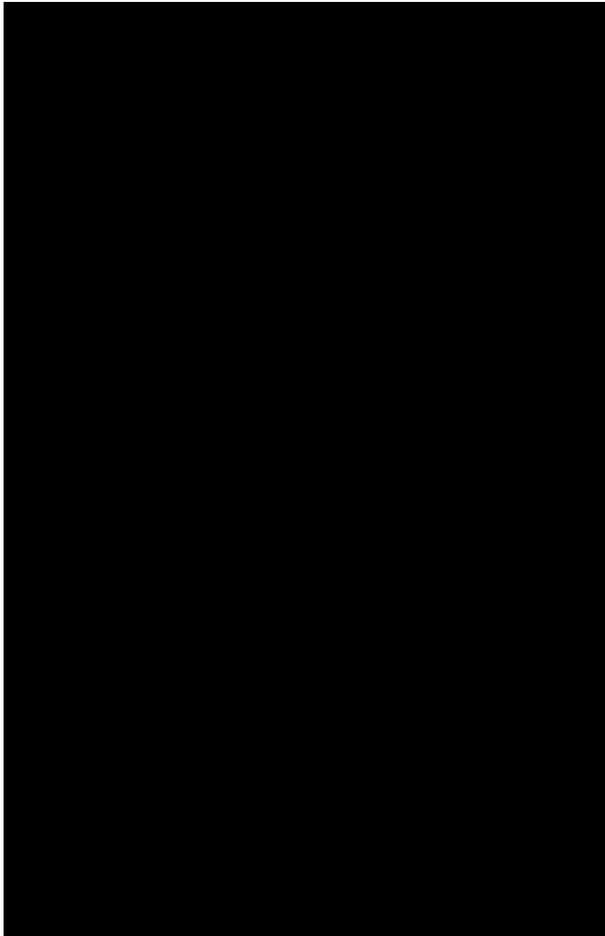


# 'What Planet' by Miriam Gamble

## Review by Will Burns



Miriam Gamble's third collection of poetry, *What Planet*, published by Bloodaxe Books, follows in the footsteps of her two previous collections *The Squirrels Are Dead* (2010) and *Pirate Music* (2014). Born in Brussels and raised in Belfast, Gamble studied at Oxford and Queens University and today lectures in creative writing at the University of Edinburgh. In the last few years, Gamble has won a string of awards for her poetry, including the Eric Gregory Award in 2007, the Somerset Maugham Award in 2011 and the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize in 2012.

*What Planet* is divided into five sections and contains a total of forty-six poems. A quotation from Claudia Rankine's bestselling, genre-bending 2014 book *Citizen: An American Lyric* prefaces the book: 'If this is not the truth, it is also not a lie'. It is clear that Gamble's third collection is going to deal with ambiguity and contradiction. The line is emblematic of today's post-truth culture, while also bringing to mind riddles and paradoxes. Gamble's epigraph omits the preceding line of the quotation, 'Memory is a tough place. You were there,' playing with the distinction between memory and forgetting, and absence and presence, all of which cut through *What Planet*.

'The Landing Window is Unspeakable' is the first poem in the collection and sets the scene for what follows. The first stanza reads:

*There s a turn in the stairs beyond which,  
in the darkness, you are terrified to go  
the realm of the creaking life which somehow carries on  
when everyone is out cold and unable to witness it. (11)*

Immediately, the reader is confronted with a sense of the uncanny as a child is frightened by the darkness in her home, 'woken foxed by the dimensions of the house' (11). As 'The Landing Window is Unspeakable', and yet is the focus of the poem, the second poem, 'The Oak That Was Not There', is haunted by 'the blasted oak' (12). Alienation, dreams, memory and existing in liminal spaces characterize *What Planet*. In 'The Oak That Was Not There', the repeated line 'the clocks went forward, the clocks went back' (12) places the reader in a between-world. In the

structured poem comprising six six-lined stanzas with the end-words repeated in a specific order). Gamble's sestina 'Betty Staff's' is based on the poet's grandmother, an all-Ireland professional ballroom dancer who owned a dance studio in central Belfast. The first stanza is:

*In retrospect it turns out that her bouncer was like an octopus  
nimbling across the floor to take his fill from the bar  
perched back sweetly at his post  
before a body would think to look. It s the 1950s,  
so she doesn t have cameras on the door or on the dance floor.  
He flashes his teeth, parades the tart liquor on his breath (26).*

The end-words 'octopus', 'bar', 'post', '1950s', 'floor' and 'breath' are repeated in a rhythmic cycle and serve to mesmerize the reader (as many of Gamble's poems do), while conjuring images of dancers revolving and circling around the dancehall floor. Furthermore, the repetition of words forges poignant connections, such as 'floor', which at the beginning of the poem denotes the dance studio, but in the final three lines of the poem describes the ground to which her grandmother falls as her husband strikes her: 'more than once he will knock her to the floor, and free of breath.' At times the structure of the sestina struggles to hold its form, such as when 'octopus' becomes 'puss', and 'post' becomes 'post- / pub'. But stoically it perseveres, as if to say 'the show must go on'.

The themes that permeate Gamble's collection are summarized in 'The Canal at Fountainbridge': ecology; reflection; memory; and poetry. The final three lines suggest the potential violence of readers and critics trying to make sense of the poet's memories and creations:

*Here is ecology, here is the furtherance  
of education, bright school climbing the sky,  
  
its every out-facing surface a mirror.  
Here are the Spanish boys drumming up  
  
lonely salsas, a twirling glitter-ball, twigs  
rubbed in the night. Here is the scurf*

