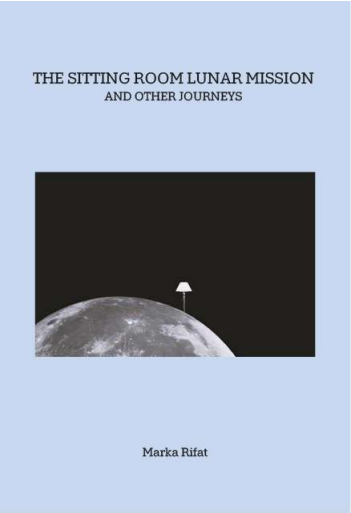
‘The Sitting Room Lunar Mission And Other Journeys’, by Marka Rifat

Review by Alistair Lawrie



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So, for example, a poem having as background the Fall of the Berlin Wall focuses on a group of Western visitors to a bakery in a remote East German village in the frosts of just pre Spring, their purchase of pastries, accompanied by acute observation of the area surrounding a lake whose name they don’t know. Of course metaphor is subtly at play here but the clear focus of the poem is on the specifics of the day. Any reflection about what the future might hold is fixed in its contemplation of the changes that might be wrought here, in this precisely realised but deliberately unnamed place.

Similarly the first lunar landings are seen through the lens of three young lassies imagining themselves as astronauts in their Tunnocks cardboard box space

capsule. The poem is presented with gentle humour but again treads delicately between the ordinariness of the girls' play and the extraordinary nature of man's journey to the moon. Instead of downplaying the significance of the major event, the poem succeeds in celebrating the imaginative power of both the moon landing **and** the girls' imitation, presenting a moving affirmation of humanity's desire to explore, to be fired imaginatively.

This juxtaposition of the ordinary, the mundane even, and the extraordinary permeates the collection. Often these apparently unlikely collocations are based on counterpointing present day experience with things from long ago. The most obvious example of this is in the poem 'Ring Of Brodgar', detailing a visit to the ancient stones. It starts with the apparently redactive 'First saw you on a shortbread tin – quite a shift / from stags at bay and Scottie dogs –', and this apparent dismissal continues with the children who run unheeding round its slabs

> *… with no*
> *care for yesterday, no concept of*
> *millennia past.*

Typically it then goes on to ask 'But then, who has?' (Strictly in fact the answer to this is Marka herself who has it in spades and who has suffused it throughout many of these poems.)

However, the poem ends with another question:

> *Better to preserve the mystery, let*
> *each person listen in gale-whipped*
> *solitude to the stones, to their own stories,*
> *or keep to digging and scraping for meaning?*

The preferred answer is made clear by the structure and careful balancing of language – we should celebrate the mystery of these stones rather than trying to tie down their meaning.

A similar celebration of the idea that the true value of the ancient past is its mystery, its impenetrability, appears in "Steps In Time". Current theories change and will change again but none will capture the innocent joy of simply being, felt by those folk who left the footprints now studied so painstakingly.

An acute consciousness of the past regularly intrudes into these poems. Even a poem about the moods of a wee North East Scottish stream is conscious of the history it has seen

> *… roaring by*
> *Raedykes, where Roman soldiers cupped a drink*
> *and longed to quit this grey outpost for sun and home.*

The poem personifies the different moods of this wee river as it journeys towards the North Sea in a series of playful but precisely observed encounters. The liveliness of the stream is embodied in the language Marka utilises so skilfully to convey the various roles played by the waters as they pass. The stream *"strathspeys"*past anglers or becomes *"a maelstrom"* before passing the ducks who ignore her

> *…whether pebbles fly towards them or lie still,*
> *still as a jewelled sark when you*
> *take your ease and slide, now the graceful lover,*
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The assonantal sibilance of these lines and the repetition of the word 'still' combine to create a conclusion which is as quietly graceful as the river Cowie's own entry to the sea.

'The Ziggurat of Burgh St Peter, Norfolk' reveals another unusual collocation, here a ziggurat in the heart of English countryside where 'your weathered strangeness / still makes us gasp, reflect and marvel.' This is often our reaction to her poems. Overall these poems form a paean of praise to the power of the imagination to create wonders from the everyday, the downright homely such as Tunnock's biscuit boxes or library cards.

There isn't the space in a relatively short review such as this to do justice to the richness of the poems themselves. Their easy colloquial tone belies the reflection going on at their heart and the rich cultural reference that features throughout. Rifat however wears her erudition very lightly, expressed as it is through apparently casual comment in her wonderfully controlled narrative voice.

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very occasional use of repetition give shape and structure to her poems. Above all it is the precision of her expression which gives force and focus to her work. These poems are written with great skill. I'd like to exemplify this by reference to a wee selection that particularly appealed to me.

'Stranger on Union Street' is a lovely poem. Again it hinges on an unexpected collocation, a meeting with a confused woodcock on a city street. The bird is described (as are all the many birds in this volume) with precision, clarity and admirable economy in the lines 'I marvel at your dappled markings, / pale cream to peat-brown from arrowed tail to fine, long beak.' The bird's departure is described with elegant assurance:

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Alliteration combines with the enjambement to give sibilant emphasis to the woodcock's smooth upward movement and contrasting it with the more jarring 'indifferent heads' before returning to a more rhythmic lyricism in the last line.

An interesting juxtaposition is utilised in 'The Yellows of Spring' – of style rather than subject matter. It's a cleverly constructed poem representing two voices in a format consisting of cadenced, colloquial free verse sandwiched between two four-line stanzas which, although unrhymed and irregular in their metre, echo the tone, form and lexis of earlier, more traditional poetry.

In the long middle section the echoed use of imperatives from the opening stanza and the present tense combine with the carefully curated enjambement to give a vigour and urgent personal immediacy to the gifts and by association to the features of Spring which are at the poem's heart.

The lyrical opening and closing stanzas which sandwich the poem create the expectation of a standard ballad-style rhythm but then subvert this by avoiding the use of rhyme, creating something that echoes the verse of a certain period but which makes use of that as a reference point and which is consciously invoking its spirit. There is a persona in these stanzas who is taking vicarious pleasure in being reminded of beauties which they're no longer able to access themselves, reminded by the other, by memories of Spring and by the poetry about it that is

being echoed throughout.

As elsewhere in this collection Rifat consciously uses cultural reference points to add depth or universality to what she has to say as in ‘Carduelis Carduelis’ and the wonderfully funny ‘After Hitting the Floor of a Swerving Bus’. Often these poems concern being surprised by the lyrical in the midst of the everyday as in ‘It Was Summer Yesterday’. The poem starts with the everyday in the form of a busy list:

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Today, it’s a downpour.
A crow hunched and scunnered
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Rain rolls off his gothic claws.
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This is particularly true of ‘Buckie Picker’ where Scots is mixed effectively with English throughout. We get a clear picture of his ‘ramrod gran’ (‘the auld besom’)

throughout and the poem creates a sense of the clear-eyed, unsentimental attitude to life typical of the fisher folk Rifat is describing: ‘She died disappointed, / but fa disnae?’

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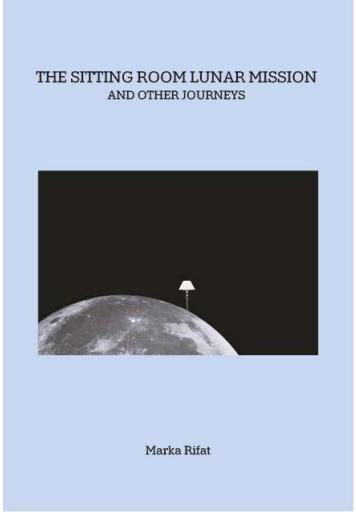

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