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Review of  
Eileen Sheehan: Down the Sunlit Hall, Doghouse, Tralee, Ireland, 2008  
RRP €12 (postage free from publisher)  

The era of plenty that preceded the economic downturn had little space for poetry in the big publishing houses. Even in Ireland where artists seem to be more valued by their government. Poets don’t sell well. If it weren’t for the small publishers (like Black Inc. Publishing and John Leonard Press, Ivor Indyk and his journal, Heat), generous patrons of poetry, who typically put their life’s savings into tiny volumes, Australian poetry would be a lost cause. There is more hope in the Irish poetry scene (and the Poetry Ireland Resources site demonstrates this - http://www.poetryireland.ie/resources), and Doghouse, which functions very efficiently online, with its delectably ironic moniker, is a very small, specialist poetry publishing house that seems to be focussing on emerging writers like Eileen Sheehan. Down the Sunlit Hall is a second volume, and Eileen Sheehan has an impressive tally of prizes to flaunt.

The Irish poetry scene has for decades now boasted a phalanx of feisty feminist poets, and Sheehan is one of these. Her locale is domestic, her loves familial (dying mother, children, husband more equivocally), her sensibility dark and real, but with an eye on resurrection.

For me, the most moving sequence in the collection is a series of poems (‘woman in the small hours, walking’, ‘living in the surreal with Alois’, ‘Each Vessel Containing’, perhaps ‘In a Land that had already Known Hunger’, ‘On the Morning of My Mother’s Passing’, ‘New Year’s Eve’, ‘Threat of Rain’, ‘Down the Sunlit Hall’, and ‘To Keep’) about a mother who died when the poet was 43. Her sense of loss is understated, and the more real for being so. These are poems that enact loss and console simultaneously. The most impressive of them, ‘living in the surreal with Alois’, deals with a terrifying tumour-induced dementia without dehumanising the woman who is tragically conscious of her condition:

she’s even forgotten my name I am visitor I am the one  
to complain to
I am the one who is helpless as her she knocks she knocks  
on the side of her head I imagine the lump she imagines  
inside of her head I imagine it shrinking she knocks  
on the side of her head and it falls out her ear  
rolls like a marble look I tell her it’s gone it fell out your ear  
rolled under the table got ate by the cat she laughs was it grey  
no, I say it was black, black as the darkness back as the devil  
a right bad lot but he swallowed it up then he swallowed a rat  
and she laughs I remember she says it was black, black
What the lack of punctuation and the matter enact is an imaginative fusing, through ameliorative storying, of difference and empathy. Mother and daughter are separate but mutually complicit in finding the saving narrative. The domestic simplicity of the tale bonds the two in gentle jocularity which diminishes the malignity of the tumour, helps the old woman save face, and briefly understand her appalling condition. In a lighter mood, in ‘To Keep’, when asked by the undertaker about taking possession of her mother’s wedding ring, she notes the slenderness of her mother’s finger and imagines a father 12 years dead, but ‘always early for everything’ and ‘marking time/by leaning on the five-bar gate’, and a reunion in which the mother is

... smoothing back the flying tendrils of your hair and running
Running to meet him (p.68).

The choice of present tense powerfully works against potential sentimentality, as does the satire earlier in the poem directed at the unctuous undertaker and the clear-eyed image of dead hands ‘threaded with unaccustomed / rosary beads’.

The volume aches with loss and miscommunications – apparently trivial, but telling. ‘The Trigger Factor’ recreates that moment when a partner or close friend drops a clanger of which s/he is unaware of the significance – the ‘How could you have’ moment. The sharp, paranoid response of the persona is figured metaphorically as rancid milk or cheese in a refrigerator. Our persona is no angel-in-the-house, serving up first the rancid foods, and

Lastly

I plank down a plate, which holds
my recalcitrant heart, pulsing and steaming, completely given over
to this love; careful of it. (p.12)

While the poems (for example, ‘Leave me Be’, p.19, ‘Bitten’, p.13, and ‘some contradictions that beset the ex-wife’s brain’, p.48) sometimes remind one of Sylvia Plath’s poems in *Ariel* of eloquent abuse mixed with elements drawn from fairy-tale, they are much less uncompromising, more human and humane. Far less angry, and no less real for being so. Another poem that focuses on the inevitable gaps in intimacy is ‘Unspoken’ (p.11) in which a close friend is hurt to discover a failure to disclose the deep shameful secret of having surrendered a child. Even with young children, one senses a respect for their difference, otherness. This is motherhood and lover-hood being redefined, as a need for private space and as a space in which imagination and empathy, vivid but momentary, are the temporary bridges between autonomous selves. But there is also a laughing acknowledgment of the costs of this separateness.
The poems also flow into another stream in modern Irish feminism, in presenting the self in comic mode, as properly lustful, greedily seeking enjoyment in sex. Eileen Sheehan’s gambits are not as outrageous as her sister poet’s, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who by the way pins her endorsement of Eileen Sheehan’s poetry to the blurb-cover of the volume, and so invites comparison. The quotidian pleasures of flirting with men on buses, in mini-series, and at the hardware shop (‘Confession’, p.16) are not permitted to undo marital fidelity, though the converse is also allowed, sexual jealousy (‘Primitive’, p.18, ‘some contradictions that beset the ex-wife’s brain’, p.48), and marital bonds are clearly negotiable in this volume. I was also delighted by the gently humorous ‘The Sister of Martha Rejects Her New Man’ (p.44):

He was arse in the air  
picking marrowfat peas  
off the floor

when she knew  
she would leave him.

Life is too long  
to spend with a man  
who’s obsessed  
with white, shining tiles  
and cobwebs in corners.

What recommends this poetry collection is its gentle, laughing feminism, its plain-speaking, its capacity to seek out the discomforting gaps in relationships and find a way through and forward, and its capacity to find the elegant, understated metaphor. A poet to watch.

Frances Devlin-Glass, Deakin University.

Frances Devlin-Glass is an Honorary Associate Professor at Deakin University (Melbourne Campus) who teaches and researches in Irish, Australian and feminist Literature and theory.