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WIDE ANGLE / CLOSE UP

Maureen Boyle, *The Work of a Winter* (Arlen House, 2018), €13.  
Ciarán O'Rourke, *The Buried Breath* (The Irish Pages Press, 2018), £18 hb.  
Eithne Lannon, *Earth Music* (Turas Press, 2019), €12.

The title of Maureen Boyle's *The Work of a Winter* refers to more than just the book's eponymous poem sequence. These are poems which have been painstakingly crafted over time. There is nothing hurried here; in their intricacy, these poems demand a reader's careful attention, offering much reward in return. In 'Incunabula', a deceptively taut sequence recalling a family history by turns poignant and charming, the poet roots us firmly in the Northern milieu of her upbringing. Observations on grief and attitudes to women are captured with particular insight, with the blame over a child's death carelessly attributed:

... It took years for her to tell of this and the  
months that would pass in the high house that should  
have held a baby – my aunt brutal in accusation  
that walking to her mother's in the village was to blame.

In a winter-themed collection, fireside tales abound, and Boyle gives voice to a number of protagonists, demonstrating the dramatic potential of poetry; how the excavation of trauma is not solely the preserve of the confessional poet. Boyle clearly feels a duty of care towards these voices. Stand-out poems include 'The Witch in the Wall', with its earthy surrealism, and 'Weather Vane', a deeply empathetic act of ventriloquism which recalls a pregnant woman incarcerated in a convent, cleaning roof slates as a punishment:

I talk to my baby up here.  
We're not supposed to but the wind  
takes the words away.

The collection ranges widely in its subject-matter, from childhood memories to Irish history, to the legacies of Irish educators abroad in the form of the titular sequence, which addresses the work of Micheál Ó Cléirigh, chief compiler of the *Annals of the Four Masters*. Through the use of a number of sequences, Boyle creates a through-line whose sinuous movement fittingly invokes the knot-work illuminations in a manuscript. In the final section of this sequence, the culmination of this ambitious historical project takes on a transcendent note:

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A flock of great white butterflies bedding down  
to winter in the walls had mistaken the heat of our fire  
for an early spring and come back to life too soon.  
No angels then, but marvellous still. Is that what death  
will be, I wonder, a gentle waking into the warmth of  
God?

This collection marks the debut of a talented writer who has spent time honing their craft. It will be interesting to see if Boyle's next collection retains *The Work of a Winter's* wide-ranging, panoramic approach, or perhaps chooses to 'zoom in'. The more closely-themed work in this collection suggests the latter also lies within Boyle's abilities, and it will be interesting to see what challenges she sets herself next.

In a generation of young poets with a marked preference for academic archness and high/low culture mash-ups, Ciarán O'Rourke blazes a singular trail. *The Buried Breath*, one of the first collections published by The Irish Pages Press, is a debut demonstrating a social conscience and a sustained engagement with world literature. From the striking cover image of migrants struggling on a foundering boat to O'Rourke's series of responses to figures such as Miklós Radnóti, alongside his energetic and fluent translations of Catullus, this is a collection which merges an eclectic range of interests. In 'Postcards from Palestine', the challenging task of giving voice to a war-torn nation is achieved through a poem which builds in intensity through four sections to an impassioned plea for empathy:

Remember my words,  
as if they were warmed by the blood in my wrist,  
as if they were cut from the coil of my tongue.

The task of weaving these strands together is achieved through O'Rourke's strong instinct for metre and rhythm, favouring regularly stressed short-lined tercets which lend the poems a strong musicality. They also allow little room for indulgence of any kind, leading to a singular kind of clean-boned poem; strong at the core yet delicately rendered, with lines such as 'History is one / disaster, feeding / off another, or: // what poems are made / to witness/ and withstand', from 'The Killing March', arresting the reader with their elegant directness. If the choice of this form married with the typographical choices occasionally leads to a relatively brief poem feeling rather drawn out over a number of pages, the freshness of the language keeps the reader engaged, as in 'Guatemala, 1967', a poem in memory of Otto René Castillo, which begins with the memorable lines:

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Say nation  
and the deer and moon  
unlatch a shadow;

the darkness  
quicken;  
a candle blows.

O'Rourke's translations and 'variations' warrant special mention as an exercise which may seem unusual for a debut author, but here these intimate engagements with poets both ancient and modern allow O'Rourke room to flex creative muscles within set forms, leading to an intriguing merging of the poet's singular style with that of his forebears. This series culminates in O'Rourke's own poem to Catullus; an invigorating torrent of language:

Catullus, dawn-young and delicate as rain,  
I thank a thousand gods I never met you.  
For days you've lingered, brazen on the corners,  
hot-fingering your puny cock, screaming love  
to some piss-pale heaven, under which love poems  
burst impossibly from life-embezzled beds.

A poet who approaches both the ancient and the modern with the same insight and sensitivity, O'Rourke surely has a long and distinguished poetic career ahead.

By contrast to the wide-angle lens through which the previous two poets view the world, Eithne Lannon's debut *Earth Music* is concerned with a more private universe, where her miniaturist's sensibility can illuminate a series of epiphanic moments. This is a collection which revels in language and its ability to render the everyday beautiful. Rather than engaging in the narrative tradition, these poems are word-pictures or captured moments of reflection. In 'Enough', the first poem in the collection, we encounter Lannon in meditative mood, eager to capture a moment of transformation, where 'currents below' ...

carry on their secret life, ruffling  
wavelets to a sandy paste,

lifting bubble-scuff to a frothy spin  
of airborne river breath,

and the moment of a life  
that stays with itself

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in that moment, is surely  
enough.

A kind of manifesto for what follows, the language here is luminous, vivid, full of fresh and surprising imagery which immerses the reader in the poem's moment. North Co Dublin – Loughshinny in particular – is rendered as a living presence in poems such as 'Loughshinny Bay' and 'Loughshinny Trilogy'; the latter poem delves into stories of the locale in a rush of vivid, musical language which breathes life into the bay's history, lending past events a tangible urgency:

and they say death by drowning is simple,  
like a silk cloth gliding to the ocean floor—

these men were desperate, their fear lunging  
from the frantic yawl to the dense harbour wall

and no one can reach them.

At times, the close focus on language and beauty mean that the reader might miss the grit at the poem's heart; that concrete happening which sparks the poem and tethers it to the world of the real. Poems such as 'On Millennium Bridge' and 'May 28<sup>th</sup>' strike closer to the heart, the concrete details of the real world puncturing the beauty of the poems to create intriguing juxtapositions. 'Before my sister's death' introduces a directness of tone, while maintaining the delicate, almost surreal lyricism common throughout the poems here:

I stepped suddenly  
into the clear halo of her eyes,

their blue light inscribed with endings,  
the recent cold of her future

carved into its edges, colour stretched  
to the brink of where darkness begins.

Here, the marriage of the concrete and the conceptual anchors the poem emotionally for the reader. Lannon is a poet of great linguistic facility, whose work is suffused with the numinous.