

Gail Ashton, *Ghost Songs*

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Gail Ashton is no weak presence. In refracting her poems through a rich chorus of voices, from the realm of fantasy through to family, she has created a strong and varied collection. Its range and air of female communality, combined with Ashton's frank post-modern tone and dark wit, easily makes *Ghost Songs* the most promising debut I've read this year.

Her writing is mildly reminiscent of Duffy in *The World's Wife*, of Vicki Feaver, Angela Carter and Jo Shapcott. In her piece 'Mrs' in fact, Ashton adopts the voice of Noah's wife, the speaker in Shapcott's popular poem 'Mrs Noah: Taken After The Flood.' The two personas however could not be more different. Shapcott's speaker is passionate, representative of sensuality so strong it could launch the ark again. Ashton's wife is trapped by the rising tide and a loveless marriage:

[...]
I see the lamplight glistening on the street,
and wonder. By bedtime he's a face on him
like thunder and I know I'm for it.
The bed creaks, an old ship straining
its mooring. He hammers away, not a word.

In the yawning expanse that is my life
are the shrieks of rainbows and an ocean
clamours at my door

I don't think I can do this anymore.

This extract is typical of Ashton's style. She works with the sonic qualities of verse rather than line lengths or syllable counts, conjuring rhythm through rhyme and alliteration. Her close vowel pairs in the penultimate stanza add pace, whilst the vowel echo in mooring/word/clamours, ripples through the verse, mimicking the oceans waves.

Even though Noah has no voice, it is his wife who lacks identity. Her resignation echoed by the speaker in 'On the Edge': "I will dissolve into air, / a breath on the ether. / I don't think either / of us will notice." The neat consonant rhyme forces attention onto "either" emphasising the effect of her husband's negligence. Ashton directly tackles such disregard in 'Letter to Anne Sexton':

Those fine instances of casual
obliteration are the worst,
don't you think, a steady accretion
of *missus*, *love*, *cunt*,
a looking over and an overlooking.

Identity and motherhood is another prominent theme. 'For our mother's babies' seeing the body reduced to a mere casing:

[...] his fall from the shell
of body expected each time
you inspect the dregs in the toilet
pan for some scrappy mess
to call your own.

Ashton has a penchant for such grisly declaration. The distraught Marquise in the 'Story of Griselda' imagines "dogs with her children's bones, / their jaws rhyming with her own / gnawing grief." There are some equally unsettling images in later sections; "a five year old bagged like mince" and little Ellie dismembering a teddy, as she listens for her father slipping between her sheets.

Ghost Songs is not bed-time reading; even her Cinderella is sadistic and rebellious:

Let them slice off their toes
and cram bleeding stumps
of meat into shoes of glass.
She lingers but once to hurl
her Diazepam into the fire.

Ashton is not the first to try and return the fairytale to its darker roots, but her take is fresh and contemporary. Cancer-ridden Rapunzel, once the star of shampoo ads, sits in a ward watching the monitor spin out the thread keeping her alive. Sleeping Beauty is anorexic, literally dying to be the "cutting edge of chic". Ashton's deliciously wry plays on the traditional imagery make the fairytale sequence for me the highlight of the first section of *Ghost Songs*.

The second section, *In/Out of Dark*, tones down the former's overtly feminist leanings to focus on familial and intimate relationships. Ashton's acute observations and crisp imagery remain evident in this extract from 'Welsh Misery':

You watch stars skulk at
The edge of a holiday
window and lights flinch

on the opposite
shore. When the tide turns, rain starts
Up its snivelling

[...]

You sleep with night pressed
into your eyes and the sound
of its thin grizzling.

Ashton tends to address the reader directly, engaging them through use of the senses and unusual turns of phrase. Her understanding of the links between narrative, form and tone, (which she builds here through pathetic fallacy) exemplified in my favourite piece from the final section *Songs* called 'Sound Tracks I':

I got God at the Rainbow chippy on the corner of Wilbrahim
Road in amongst my saveloy and jumbo chips and the stink of
vinegar. Smudgy ink shrieks the coming of the Lord, this
Thursday at 8. Macca snatches at my crotch and tells me he
can't wait.

The composition is intricate but seems as wonderfully off the cuff and nonchalant as the speaker. Pace is conjured through the internal line rhymes, cadence by the vowel echo in Wilbrahim/chips/stink/vinegar. Unfortunately not all Ashton's verse/form matches are as successful. Her line breaks sometimes seem rather arbitrary, resulting in verse which on first reading can be hard to follow.

As 'Sound Track I' indicates, *Songs* has the same dark undercurrent as the previous sections, but it is lightened through music. Lifted by tunes drifting from canal barges, laughter breaking into song and the childish innocence she projects onto the reader in 'Sex Education':

Your mother gets the Basildon Bond
notepaper from the sideboard
and sketches an enormous
droopy you-know-what
with a sad ruck of what
she says is skin on the end.

It is through little touches of comedy, affection and nostalgia that Ashton manages to maintain a necessary balance. Neither lingering on female concerns (which would alienate the already wary male readership of women's poetry) nor being so macabre as to be rejected as needlessly obscene or employing shock tactics. Those after sun-kissed fields of wild flowers and burbling brooks however should look elsewhere. Ashton's view is not rose-tinted. Indeed, why should it be? Poets are primarily storytellers after all, chroniclers of the good and bad, the heavenly and horrific. Ashton's poetry allows all ghosts to sing.