

Kapka Kassabova *Geography for the Lost* (Bloodaxe Books, 2007) £7.95

This collection contains some great poems on ghosts, loss, disorientation and ‘not arriving’, one being the aptly titled ‘We Are the Tenants’. The imagery is often strong and startling, as in the wonderful ‘Earthquake in Hong Kong’ where “shark-fin vendors washed / the evening of its fishy slime”, and in ‘Theresa Goes Home’. Theresa, beaten up so that her unborn baby dies, “digs out roots with human shapes, / and cries their names deep in the dark red soil.” Interestingly, however, despite the fact that Kassabova uses the phrase “the worst” more than once in these poems, she rarely defines it further, suggesting uncovered areas to be explored in later collections.

One of Kassabova’s strengths is her fearless use of rhyme. The first poem ‘Geography for the Lost’ is bound by rhyme to chilling effect, a counterpoint to voices that “don’t know what has brought us here”. However, rhyme is a perfidious beast, and in this as in a number of poems where Kassabova uses rhyme, the rhyme sometimes weakens the poem. In the otherwise imaginative ‘Lying with the Ghosts of Berlin’, obedience to the rhyme scheme forces inversion in the first stanza.

Repetition is another two-edged sword for Kassabova. In ‘The Argentine’, use of repetition to express a lack of understanding has a stultifying effect. Would silence have achieved the result more gracefully? Even the splendid ‘Theresa Goes Home’ suffers a little from over-repetition, and ‘A house we can never find’ spoils its last line by re-using, in a similar manner, the title. However, the repetition in ‘I go my way and think how’ and ‘The Quick Life’ is marvellous, poignant and thrilling, because in both pieces it counterpoints the rhythm, singing with and against it and so enriching the poems.

Setting aside the refreshingly achronological ‘Self-portrait of Anastassia in 12 random snaps’, the poems that work best depend upon an explicatory tone. ‘Postcard from Paradise’ includes phrases that suggest a meta-narrative, emphasising the extra-worldliness and distance of the speaker: “There’s nothing like”, “The situation is like this”, “Moreover”, “In other words”. Similarly ‘From Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina’ works so well because its main device allows Kassabova to indulge her propensity to fill in gaps. Such explication is itself part of the poem, working with and not against it. However, explication is the downfall of poems such as ‘The Travel Guide to the Country of Your Birth’ - a neat idea that is overdone. The length of the lines and the excessive guidebook-ese swamp a rather slight lyric. Even ‘Self-portrait of Anastassia in 12 random snaps’ suffers slightly because of the way its achronology is signposted by “random” in the title. One of the poems that intrigued me most in the book resists that temptation to explain - the mysterious ‘Suicide Honeymoon’.

The brilliant closing essay on language gives insight into Kassabova’s approach to poetry, and her strengths and weaknesses. Here, she bravely delineates her polyphonic experience of language and lack of linguistic identity in words so engaging, heart-searching and lyrical that it begs the question as to why she does not write more biographical prose. She would surely produce some magnificent writing.

Judy Kendall