



The Invisible Kings David Morley Carcanet, £9.95

for *Envoi*

By Judy Kendall

A book of Romani poems by a partly Romani poet is a thing to buy for itself, but these repay more than a cursory curious peep into the exotic, hidden, forbidden. The images, the origins, the mixing of languages excite and intrigue. The poems are often wordy, but this wordiness is woven through with secrets. And behind an even stronger silence lies. Poems like *Sèsi o Lety U Pisku* make this clear as the same lines nearly repeat again and again to reveal unbearable glimpses, partly unbearable because they are only glimpses, of what occurred at this concentration camp for Roma from Bohemia. Fables and fiction are represented continually as Morley works to ‘restring the yarn’, as in *Fiction*, and even more strongly in *Smoke, Mirror*, where the apparently false fortune-teller is changed into a proper soothsayer as

Levering against one man’s memories, Penny overhears the singing
of his dead wife.

Bears gives us Romani place names as the bears’ old route through England is recreated. Lincolnshire becomes ‘the Flat Duck County’ Herefordshire becomes ‘Apple-water County’, Canterbury becomes ‘God’s-Town’ and for an instant here I am transposed to the post-apocalyptic syntax of *Riddley Walker*. Oxford becomes ‘a Town Made of Readers’ and Manchester becomes ‘the Sharpers’ Town’. But this is a language and culture half lost as well as half hidden. ‘A sleeping sickness leaks through our language’ says the poet in *To Feed the Dead Who Would Come Disguised as Birds*. And the charm thickens further in other poems, especially when the language and syntax remains apparently simple and accessible, as in *Kings*:

I dream backwards half my life. The same snowdrops by the river.
I watch her pick a penèrka of flowers before I speak with her.

She will sell these in the city. I tend ten shire-foals, they
with their full maws of shootyahà, much prone to bengipè

nibble the air near her, nudging, nosing at the bouquet.

Where the book appears to halt a little is in Morley’s use of physical shape. Too many of the poems resort to a simple centring device, which seems to belie the deeper, more delicate and more complicated difficulties they address. And the tree shape of *Sycamore*, while delightful, also disturbs as it refuses attempts to read in other ways than horizontally.

But perhaps Morley’s use of these simple shaping devices is deliberate. It certainly appears to mirror his advice in *Kings* about how to approach his use of Romani, advice that by the time I came to it I had already experienced as the way into the earlier poems. He writes that

the Romani language offers an opening, not a fence, between fields of language. Romani contains so many words and phrases from other languages; language is absorbed as it is travelled through. The words are pronounced exactly as they appear, and their meaning is best caught by reading the story at a canter, and without leaning too hard into the glossary.

However, a difficulty with physical presentation also appears in the magnificent, glorious yet painful *Ludus Coventriae*. I needed the introduction in order to penetrate the poem, and still struggled at times to read the spatial coding of the fragments, although in themselves they remained hugely powerful, especially the moment of explosion as Coventry disintegrates in 1941 into

‘Moleskin gloves and polypropylene; ° head of a mallard;’