



THE FOSSIL-BOX
by Richard Marggraf Turley

reviewed by Nigel Humphreys (The Hawk's Mewl 2007)

I found the Fossil-box very much like eating a rich meal – wonderfully exotic tastes exploding on the tongue to begin with (you sit back knowing you're in for a feast) and then you take that one forkful too many which says you've had enough and you have to push your half-consumed meal away. There is no doubting Turley's wizardry with language, stretching the remit of words to good effect in most cases. The opening lines of the first poem Blakeney for instance:

I've returned to the forest's legerdemain,
its green conjury, for new paths
through the gravity of trees

However many of the poems in this worthy collection become a roller-coaster of image and one feels the need to get off from time to time and take a breather. The first section of the poem concludes:

. . . Deer and hare, scoped
by goshawks flapgliding
over scoriae and clinker ?
Or other, older company.

Is this overdone, one may be tempted to ask? The first section in the collection is entitled Vorrest (forest dialect) presumably to set the ambient temperature of the Forest of Arden for the reader though the vernacular is hardly sustained beyond the title. Blakeney a long descriptive poem divided into eight sections and rich in detail but somehow it leaves me without a feel for the woods. Viney Hill which follows – again a sectioned descriptive poem – is more successful. It's subjective but visual so that the reader can take much from it vicariously joining in the poet's love of place. There is a distinct sense of tour.

Thirty-nine pages into the collection and we are out of the forest at last (Phew!) and into the eponymous Fosssil-box which opens impressively with a sustained metaphor to be chiselled out. The Egyptian Monologues are undemanding – difficult to see the point of them as in Pharaoh's Sandal-Bearer which concludes:

may your life
seep like silt into
the bank of un-
rememberable dreams

These are followed by a clutch of what I call snapshot poems – very well written, descriptively vivid but without extension so that we learn little about ourselves through their images. I particularly liked Sunbreak, Ode, Gathering, Tintern Parva, Ploughcrows, Hub Caps –

The fat kid runs in huge shapes
before the sculptured steps.
His horizon pulls like this
and that, a fluid belt of ballast.

Hub caps

There is a sense in these poems that the poet is holding back a little his dexterity with language back and they are better for it:

Crows that clatter behind the plough
smell the worm in the uncovered
evening, sense my small presence
between hedges.

Ploughcrows

The poems about Giants are innovative curios. Aubade is typically eloquent but does it actually say anything? Debouching and Anning I found both obscure; and some images simply work too hard and defeat the poetry as in Segments 1 of the Llanrhystud Suite:

Again gulls pull time-
consuming arcs,
folding the distinct air.

Does the cleverness work against the heart in this poem as others?

That said there is no doubt that Turley is a master wordsmith and very talented. I would be keen to read some of this work which has more substance, i.e. when he has something to say which matters. One gets a bit tired of descriptive poetry for its own sake.

The fare is certainly good but it's best to let time linger between the courses.