



John Gartland, Gravity's Fool

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An established playwright and novelist, John Gartland's poetry debut proves him to be as proficient a shaper of verse as he is of fiction. Combining narrative with astute characterisation and the poetic staples of imagery and metaphor, Gravity's Fool is snapshot storytelling at its finest.

Gartland's lines have the relaxed cadence of speech, yet are meticulously composed, structured to best reflect tone and subject. In 'Nothing but the River' the water is described as 'running high and fast and hungry', the repetition of 'and' mimicking current, pulling the reader along. Another example is the line 'waiting, smoking; studying how to sweat.' in 'From the Island'. The repeated word endings and semi-colon drawing it out, mirroring the subject's anxious expectation.

Gartland often uses rhyme to increase fluency and rhythm, a technique which sometimes backfires. In 'Laura Running' for example, the reader finds themselves forcing stress on the last syllables of security and rosary to rhyme them with glee, which stilt the flow. On the whole however Gartland's rhymes are fairly unobtrusive, only rearing their heads in comedic verse like 'Chez Parnassus'. This piece is not only exemplary of Gartland's wit, but his appreciation of poetry as a spoken art. His use of consonance prevents the rhyme scheme grating whilst ensuring it remains complete to the eye:

Housman's unpacking a Shropshire lad

and the Brontes are writing a panto.

Sappho gives tongue to the girl's she's had

and Ezra's reviewing her canto.

Milton's dressed up in his laurels and shades,

For biking it down to the post.

Sylvia says "No John, you're putting
the stew on!". Thus, paradise is lost.

Word-play is Gattland's passion, ranging from brazen rhyme and repetition to convey a drunken racy mindset in 'The Watchable Bar Owner':

[...]

but you know you have

the trick of it

you surely have the trick,

the trick

with her fingers in your mouth

to lick

to subtle punning of the title 'Oedipus Wrecked'. Informally this introduces the wine-soaked revelry of Oedipus's wedding celebrations. Yet also hints at his impending ruin, as he fulfils the prophecy he would kill his father and marry his mother.

In Sophocles's version of the tale, on discovering their true relationship Oedipus blinds himself with brooches from his wife's dress. This outcome foretold by Gattland's bride who:

[...]

possessed by merriment, pressed grapes

into the eyes of my satyr's mask,
pressed until they burst upon me
like the manic laughter of the court.

By comparing images within the scene for his simile, Gartland keeps the poem contained, strengthening the foreboding atmosphere. A similarly ingenious approach is seen in 'Slide', where a cliché is used to describe clichés, drawing attention to the speaker's lonesomeness:

Hypnotic the highway,
uncaring the ground,
the clichés of loneliness
fresh as a wound.

And a dawn cut with death
and the blue fog of yearning;
the slide of her absence,
the dirge of a steel string.

Loss is a recurrent theme in *Gravity's Fool*, prominent in the sub-section *Magnetic North*; a series of prose-poems concerning his childhood and father's death. Although not technically as accomplished they have a curious intensity, born from the need to tell of these events and the desire to step away from them. A feeling again palpable when he writes of the Irish troubles. The following extract from 'Dublin, Low Tide' shows Gartland able to detail this peculiarly domestic conflict, in all its complexity and ugliness:

Manic fiddler, beetling priests,

a lonely farmer's genuflection,
wild dancing of decline,
disintegration, chalice of malign
time-honoured hatreds;
and dipped in holy water,
are the rosary beads and shooter
sharing darkness in a bag
in a club where drunks sing rebel songs
and a butcher in a balaclava's
vomiting a flag.

This disdain for conflict is mixed with shame in 'Unfinished':

We drink again and each seeks privately
for something we can learn
from barbarism other than
corrosive hate and scorn
and each seems unsuccessful
in the enterprise.

We drink, but no one makes a toast.

We do not raise our eyes.

This is one of a number of poems set in Thailand, where Gartland now lives. The humid bustling streets to the clientele of Bangkok's shady bars, portrayed through sharp characterisation and use of the senses. From 'Getting it wrong':

The universe contracted to the smells
of gun oil, cloying aftershave, and fear;
to whisky on his breath.

The words I needed fled

'What do you see?'

He jabbed the barrel in my face.

'What do you see?' he asked.

And it was near, 'I think I see my death', I said.

Death is personified in Gartland's work, described in 'The Paranoid Hour' as lizard-eyed, riding a motorbike with a holy book strapped to its gas tank. Death's relentlessness is again encountered in 'Retrospective', wherein the speaker realises there is no way 'to beat back his reactionary, philistine approaches, / to face him out of closing for the kill.'

Interestingly when his 'cold handshake' is met in 'Frozen', Death is not pursuer but preserver, immortalising the girl as 'forever young and lithe'. The speaker's resentment clear:

[...]

She'd already made her move,

refused outright

this role we're left to play,

time's dogsbody.

It is not subject, speaker, or even mortality within Death's icy grasp here, but time itself. Inertia and this slowing or stopping of time is again explored in 'Pines at Hitchen' and 'Untitled Acts Unknown Places':

The maestro's last great symphony

of place and act had time as its only notation.

The angry crowd, enraged that nothing was original, halted it

before its conclusion.

It was as he intended.

A stasis is created by the maestro; in never finishing this 'last great symphony' it cannot be the conclusion of his work. Just as Gravity's Fool is not the end of Gartland's. As he revealed with his opening haiku 'Driven':

Those headlights in the

mirror are your death, so keep

your foot on the gas.

it is in his nature to keep the proverbial pedal to the metal. If he manages to shake those few awkward rhymes, I have no doubt a second collection would be an exhilarating ride.