



Helen Hail, *May Hill Poems*

Three years on from her first collection *Fire and Ice*, released as part of bluechrome's widely applauded *Hobo Poets* series, *May Hill Poems* marks a change of approach by Helen Hail. Containing new and previously printed work, this short self-published pamphlet brings together pieces inspired by rural Gloucestershire and the most recognizable of the Malvern peaks; *May Hill*.

Although geographically focused, her poems are wide in scope and far from simply bucolic. *May Hill* is a vantage point from which Hail contemplates the nature of relationships, tradition, love and loss.

The most affecting poems are those on war such as 'Ninety Days', a tribute to Edward Thomas, and the lament 'Soldier Boys'. A piece reminiscent of Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge' in its implication that the soldiers' sacrifice is rendered all the more futile by their ignorance of the land they are fighting over:

We look back towards Gloucestershire

from somewhere in France.

We never heeded history or geography

ran wild in the woods and on the hill.

Hail employs anaphoric verse for her last stanzas:

and we bend our longbows

and face the French cavalry

and we load our muskets

and face Napoleon's cannon

and we fix our bayonets
and face the German bullets
and there isn't stone enough in Gloucestershire
to carve all our names on it.

An effect used predominantly in celebratory poetry, Hail's choice to use it here is inspired. In playing off the traditional use of the repetition, she creates a contrast between the buoyant rhythm of the lines and the horror they imply. A clever juxtaposition, it forces home her message that although the enemy and weaponry may change war does not. It is a cycle of violence and terrible loss.

Hardy's influence is also detectable within the shifting rhythms of Hail's lines. Most comfortable without metrical constraint, Hail mainly writes in free verse utilising the nuances of beat and rhyme. For example, in the first stanza of 'England' where the internal rhyming simulates the sing-song tone adopted when talking to small children:

Slowly he explained, as to a child,
"You see when you are a refugee
you leave everything."

Hail's lexical and syntactic choices are carefully considered, working to reinforce her images. Such as with the description of roads in the haunting 'Twelfth Night (Or What You Will)':

white and dry with a glitter of frost,
or black and slick and salted,
[...]

The glittering of frost underlining the course texture of the first path, whilst the partial consonance in the second line makes it roll over the reader's tongue, slippery as the route it describes.

Readers familiar with Hail's writing will know that horses play a prominent role. With 'May Morning Ride On May Hill', the study of the horse's movements and use of the senses draws the reader in whilst allowing Hail to subtly detail the scene:

and the verges are lush where I guide you

to muffle your hoof beats.

Your ears prick at the clash of sticks[...]

Green man is in danger of losing his willow

to your questing lips[...]

Hail grapples with the notion of change through consideration of seasons. The evolution of opposites; setting sun to rising moon, intangible mist to solid wood, in 'Winter Solstice' superbly conveying transition:

I set us up between

the rising half-cheese moon

and the setting sun

to consider

the folds of mist and woods

and the river turning to the sea[...]

Unfortunately not all the poems display such imagination. The description in 'Our Hill' of it being 'shrouded in fog, /or bitter cold /with spooky patches of snow' is tired and unremarkable. In places the writing is not tight enough. The poem 'Flung'

sounds forced, as though structured to fit the rhyme scheme. The tongue-twisting line 'Hawthorn froths, sunbeams through beech leaves sway' from 'Villanelle' another such example.

This latter slip could almost be excused considering the villanelle is the most intractable of forms. It is a single fault in an otherwise commendable piece where Hail demonstrates her technical skill by manipulating the structure of the repeated lines to prevent them palling.

The wavering standard of May Hill Poems is its failing, and due to it being a 'themed' collection Hail is in danger of limiting her readership. A shame, as on form she can produce evocative and memorable pieces and a second full collection would certainly be worth the money.

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