The Sieve And The Vessel

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Mimi Khalvati, *The Meanest Flower*, Carcanet, £9.95, ISBN 9781857548686;
Adam Thorpe, *Birds with a Broken Wing*, Cape, £9.00, ISBN 9780224079440

Imagine you were blindfolded, and then offered a wine-glass containing water. Your mind and tongue would anticipate wine: sensory receptors and cultural conditioning conspire to make a momentary fiction of your senses. Sip the water and your mind would experience a hallucination of taste. So with poems, their shape and weight – the cut of their crystal – predispose a reader to a shaped experience of some kind: form's fiction. It takes a remarkable poet to allow expectation, hallucination and reality to swirl simply and harmoniously within the poem's vessel:

> When you wake to jitters every day, it's heartache.
> Ignore it, explore it, either way it's heartache.
>
> Youth's a map you can never refold,
> from Yokohama to Hudson Bay, it's heartache.
>
> Follow the piper, lost on the road,
> whistle the tune that led him astray: it's heartache.
>
> Stop at the roadside, name each flower,
> the loveliness that will always stay: it's heartache.

> Why do nightingales sing in the dark?
> Ask the *radif*, it will only say it's heartache.
>
> Let *khalvati*, 'a quiet retreat',
> close my ghazal and heal as it may its heartache.
> ('Ghazal: It's Heartache')

As Theodore Roethke believed, "Form is not regarded as a neat mould to be filled, but rather as a sieve to catch certain kinds of material". Forms are not mere vessels with which to contour language. Mimi Khalvati has made the shapes and sieves of poetry her life's work. In *The Meanest Flower*, the glass is broken: it must be melted and re-blown every time she writes. Yet to make poems as impressively – as inevitably – as Khalvati does is to invite into a poet's working life a superposition of states of uncertainty and certainty; and those auditory states can be as coincident as they are dissonant. Good poets, like nightingales, sing in the dark – in more senses than one. I am reminded of Nadezhda Mandelstam, speaking of her poet husband in *Hope Against Hope*: "I imagine that for a poet auditory hallucinations are something in the nature of an occupational disease [...] a poem begins with a musical phrase ringing insistently in the ears; at first inchoate, it later takes on a precise form, though still without words". In the ghazals, sestinas, sonnets and sequences of *The Meanest Flower*, the poet makes harmonies of her hallucinations.

Within Khalvati's inner-ear, precise forms create a "chance choice" of language; they ramify the potential directions of both the poem and its language, and at the same time ramp down other possibilities. The motes of language become particles in a quantum superposition, simultaneously possessing more than one value – and that could be a quite astonishing number of values – as well as valencies of meaning and sound. Khalvati writes in 'Motherhood' – a sestina of resounding energy and possessed dexterity – "There shall be room, time, space, for everything [...]". At the same time, the ramping down of possibilities suggested by the form is what gives the poem 'Motherhood' such a palpable charge.

As Don Paterson wrote in the last *Poetry Review*, what emerges in the finest poetry can be "an honourable echo of nature, of its balance of correlated and uncorrelated, of randomness and self-similarity". *The Meanest Flower* is resplendent with such honourable echoes and honest balances. It is a glorious, vigorous and assured performance. I think it is Mimi Khalvati's most-achieved book: which is saying a great deal, given that

this poet's work has been so signally generous and accomplished throughout the past twenty years. In these new poems the contours of form are not simple verbal patterns or the aural equivalent of after-images in the art of versification; their contours of form create and evoke the contours of real emotion. This is a very poignant as well as pleasing book. Khalvati makes poetic form reach humanly towards the reader, the living hand of the poem held always towards us:

> …Poetry's on the run.
> From exhaustion, the inability
>
> to imagine a larger world and one
> too sick to be hurt into words. Be kind,
> sweet April, you with your mouth, first vowel, open.
> ('The Meanest Flower: xii')

To imagine a larger world, some poets turn to prose fiction and creative nonfiction. Adam Thorpe is prolific, publishing poems and novels consistently for the past two decades. The quality of work in both fields has been exceptional. *Birds with a Broken Wing* continues this unbeaten run. The book is an elegantly structured book of life-studies. The poet's sense for danger and precarious happiness is apparent on every page, not least in the wonderfully evocative poem 'Drombeg Stone Circle' in which the writer and his wife receive a mobile phone-call from "our son in Corsica, wild-camping with a hammock". It's the kind of poem where the roof – along with the sky – is threatening to fall in. Thorpe's new poems are alert with the possibility of transformation, and of horror. Early in the book we meet the young Thorpe in Beirut in 1958 in a poem that recalls Michael Donaghy's 'Shibboleth':

> On a sick-making mountain drive
> we were stopped by men with guns.
>
> One waved a photo of President Chamun,
> demanding our views. I was much too young
>
> to know that if, in the hills of Lebanon
> above Beirut, you got it wrong you did not live.

My father raised his hands and cried,
'Ah, mais oui … Chamun! Chamun!' –

not knowing they loathed Chamun, the Druze.
They only waved us to the rest of our lives

because they saw, not wild admiration,
but hands thrown up in mock despair –

and laughed and clapped as we sped from there.
('Two Beirut Poems: I. *Ambiguity*')

Life, as Thorpe knows and experiences it, can turn on a single word or chance occurrence: "you got it wrong you did not live". Can writing fictional prose teach you something more about the possibilities of poetry, or expose its limits, even its possible traps? For certain writers, poetry may inhibit or hobble choice and exploration of subject. Some poets also turn to prose, as they would to teaching, to eke a living. Adam Thorpe is a case apart because he has always divided his time between fiction and verse – and has done so without dividing his vocation.

David Morley's new collection of poetry is *The Invisible Kings*, a PBS Recommendation. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Warwick University, and has been awarded a National Teaching Fellowship.