

Book Review - Dart by Alice Oswald

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What interests me most about Dart, is the fine line between poetry and prose, verbatim and imagination, dreams and reality. Alice Oswald moves between all these mediums with great skill. Or rather her voice moves with the river. Is it her voice or the river's voice we are hearing? Or is it many voices? . She starts by striding out like Leland at the beginning of a long journey on the windswept moor above Okehampton with an old man, the anonymous walker. Is it Tiresias? Struggling to read his map near Cranmere pool and ends with Proteus a seal watcher in a cave on the coast. In between is all manner of thing and person, myth and reflection. The river keenly observed amidst the 'huge rain coloured wilderness' starts out at the source 'this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound' and soon becomes 'a foal of a river'. This sets the pace of the poem, it is a sound map, the longitude and latitude of many varied voices charting the rivers perilous course. The young river 'eels in glides and in each eel a finger width of sea';

Second to appear, apart from the river is Jan Coo, a watery green man, or is it a boy who drowned and came to a soggy end but still haunts the woods. Then 'Bed and Breakfast' at Postbridge, the chambermaid and the clapper bridge, a heron and an eel, the reflection of the river, 'the elver movement of the running sunlight' a quirky mixture of the beautiful and the mundane. Then the fly fisherman 'I've paid fifty pounds to fish here and I fish like hell. I know the etiquette, who wades where.' And the salmon, 'it takes your breath away, generations of them inscribed into this river'. This phrase gives the true nature of the poem away. It is akin to an illuminated manuscript. We are dealing not just with voices but pictures as well, and herein lies the true craft and mission of the modern poet. To re-interpret the landscape for the urban mind. No easy task, but one that Alice Oswald is keen to develop.

She covers water bailiffs and tin miners at Hexworthy, the joining of the two Darts, East and West at Dartmeet 'two wills gnarling and recoiling and finally knuckling into balance'. Her journey gathers speed and picks up the King of the Oakwoods 'I saw you rise dragging your shadows in water' the sense of sacrifice, canoeists carried downstream like insects 'pondskaters and water beetles, neoprene spray-decks and multi-coloured helmets';

At every turn a new gurgle of voices, the full force of the river, weaving its history about us. Here Alice is at her most powerful. It is this mixture of keen natural observation mixed with the dull glint of reality that makes this a special poem. Here you have Buckfastleigh woollen mills, wool graders bemoaning dags, tin extractors extracting silence, swimmers savouring the water as if it was champagne. Drowned voices dreaming and the water abstractor, Jan Coo and the sewage treatment worker, the milk factory, the stone waller, the salmon poacher and the boat builder, oystermen and crabbers, ferry men and pilots. Alice even manages to slip in a naval cadet or two.

This is real poetry getting to grips with a real world. She has done the river justice. Heartily recommended.