

Don't look back

Deryn Rees-Jones, *Quiver*,
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Deryn Rees-Jones's book-length detective-story poem plays with concepts of authorship and influence. It is reminiscent of a Paul Auster novel in that layers of storylines echo and double-back on each other, both inviting and evading interpretation. As is the case in so many of Auster's stories, the narrator is a writer. Here, the writer (Fay) discovers the dead body of her husband's ex-lover, Mara, and tries to solve the mystery of her murder. She is also battling with writer's block, and her attempt to discover who Mara was becomes a search for a kind of muse. One of the poems which gets written along the way is central to the book as a whole, and takes its title, "Quiver".

"Quiver" tells the story of the hunter-goddess Artemis, also known as Diana, and the boy-hunter, Actaeon. The main source for the story is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* but other versions are mentioned, such as Titian's "Diana and Actaeon". The writer of "Quiver" playfully draws attention to the fact that this is a retelling of a well-known myth by using five false beginnings: "let's start with the stag"; "let's start with the head at the feet of the huntsman"; "let's start with ... a young man", and so on. She then echoes Ovid by naming each of Actaeon's hounds, which in this version become iconic women, almost a female canon:

Millicent, Sylvia,
Christabel, Emily, Angel Virginia, No-nonsense Simone,
Glorious Gloria, Unblushing Germaine;
Fierce Luce, Brave Julia, La belle Hélène.

Artemis would appear to head the list: she famously turned Actaeon into a stag when he discovered her bathing naked in a forest stream, and caused him to be torn apart by his own hounds. In Ovid's version, as the goddess of chastity, her motivation is to prevent Actaeon from telling anyone what he saw, which of course doesn't work: each time the story is retold, her nudity is described all over again. Lethal though she is, Artemis cannot subvert "the male gaze". But in this retelling, a new perspective is introduced, personified by a character called Faith. Faith – "airing the flex and taughtness of her limbs" – does not mind being seen. Her name is deliberately close to Fay, that of our narrator/detective. She wants to return the stare:

what she wanted
was to look at the man without fear or shame
with an image of herself with which to begin.

The impulse to re-examine stories and storylines recurs throughout the book. A pair of cartoon-strip policemen “practice their clichés till they know them by heart”. In “Flashback” a remembered photograph of Mara turns into a false memory of her preparing a meal. A return to the scene of the crime finds the writer asking herself: “What do I want? / For words and worlds / to unwrite themselves?”. And when she has to tell her husband about Mara’s murder she faces the impossibility of conveying her news in these breathless lines: “how will it be when / I have to tell him / when this narrative arrests / and the past opens / and time wobbles / and what I have to tell / becomes at once too long, too short?” (“The Story of a Life”).

The husband, Will, is a geneticist, and, with two pregnancies occurring in the story, links are made between the birth of an idea and a biological conception. A pregnancy unleashes creativity: “A life flutters and turns inside / words spill across an empty page”. Myriad reproductive techniques are praised in “Beatitude”, from spirogyra’s conjugation to “the cool pipette”. “Clone” is not quite a clone but a variation of Paul Muldoon’s parison “As” (from *Moy Sand and Gravel*). It even contains a cheeky acknowledgement of its progenitor –

As....

... Moy becomes moi
so this becomes you –

and climaxes in biological conception –

As...

vagina becomes penis, flowering in the shadowy womb
so this becomes you.

Set-piece poems such as this are skilfully interspersed throughout the narrative, providing a break from the story without diminishing the reader’s desire to know what happens next. This elastic structure allows for a refreshing variety of tone and pace, and the book opens with fluid, economical free verse that places the reader right in the position of the narrator:

a blackbird opens its feathery throat
pulling the sky and the skyline closer
so hedgerow and barbed wire and railing,

the crunch of my footsteps on glistening paths
rise up together, clash and unite,

when suddenly I stumble, hit the ground.

(“The Cemetery”)

At other, scene-setting moments, unusual images help to pin down a sense of place and atmosphere. The kneeling congregation at Mara’s funeral is “a row of question marks interrogating darkness, / a shaft of sudden light”. There are also pleasing refrains that help to reveal the arc of the story. Part III opens with the last line of the first poem: “Everything’s still”. And twice we’re invited away from the pull of what-happens-next to observe the season: “Green shoots spike the frost / like secrets, promises that haunt us” (“A Change in the Weather”).

Happily, this subtle storyteller complements rather than replaces the Deryn Rees-Jones of *The Memory Tray* and *Signs Around a Dead Body*. “Relics”, the penultimate poem, is a characteristic love poem which meanders through the quietly beautiful images of stars and snow that suffuse these earlier collections. Perhaps it also reveals a way in which Fay, at least, can acknowledge both male and female influences in her writing:

And so the soft straightforward night
begins with snowfall, snowdrifts – or do we just imagine that –
as winter’s ending colours us, imagines us as people
we have never been. And though a thousand different stories
quiver in a moment – a hand unclasped, a darting word unsaid –
I don’t look back. Familiar in a dream
somewhere, my cheek pressed to your shoulder,
our lives grow up between us. Like the glistening bones
of martyrs, saints, you hold about your person,
I remind you, as we drive “This is our tale”,
and words our only keepsakes of the Bluebird’s journey home.

JANET PHILLIPS

