

Review of `The Territory of Rain` by Elizabeth Rimmer

`The Territory of Rain` by Elizabeth Rimmer. Published by Red Squirrel Press

In the `The Territory of Rain` Elizabeth Rimmer has conducted an ambitious three part investigation into what a `territory` can mean. In part one of the work she investigates a particular place, well known and acutely observed, set within the time of seasons. In part two her investigation widens, we move from the concrete reality of her home place, to other sorts of territory, places where the human and non- human natural world merge. A place of interfaces, where our attempts to create civilised existence merge with the more violent world of instinct. Here emotion constantly threatens to overwhelm our bids at order. In part three the territory expands again ranging further afield, to other places, homes, ruins, other histories, other people to which she is rooted. Places where in the past the dead existed comfortably and uncomfortably with the living, but all the time creating knowledge.

In `Walking the Territory`, the first section of the volume, we are in a physical world . This is a place of water in many forms. As she says in the title poem of the section;

"In this place I write
this terrain- how a water shapes it
through rain stored up in peat banks,
the weight of ice, its grinding slowness,
how rivers swell and drain,
lay down and shift the sand and clay
build and transform."

In this territory, environments, form from water , rocks and vegetation. Places like Blanket Bog:

"Blanket bog clothes the land
like a black melancholy, "

In a central section to part one, `River Calendar`, Elizabeth Rimmer gives us a sequence of twenty four pieces, as she takes us on a cinematic tour of her home ground, through the seasons. Where in spring:

"The curlew`s first spring song
rises from the mud, faint as river mist.
Like dragon- fly wings it strengthens,
brightens in the budding sun."

Where August is :

"The month of small green birds
blown like turning leaves
between privet hedge and rowan,
weighting the slackwire stems
of meadowsweet over the pond."

Here in winter :

"A spider spins diamonds
over a pile of leaves
blown into the porch."

There is much more lyrical beauty to be found here but this author is much too intelligent to believe that lyricism is always enough. She knows that the lyrical can spin a romantic mask on reality. In the interesting, `Explaining a Few Things to Neruda`, she meets his scepticism with her own self awareness that all is not right with the environment:

"In those fields we have no lapwings,
no hares, a stillness of yellow rape,
and wheat after barley after wheat.
The skylarks song is quenched in rain.
The moon rises over green absence."

In the second section of the volume, `Covered by the Forest`, the exploration of what a `territory` can be expands. We move from the concrete reality of her home place to other places where the human is submerged into nature. No longer the neutral observer striving for the accuracy of the descriptive word, but a participant in, and in dialogue with, nature itself. This is a territory of emotion where humanness becomes a part of the natural process. The results can be complex even conflicting. In `Covered by the Forest` the poet becomes the forest environment:

"I do not flinch now from the small blows
of squirrel and tree creeper on my hardened skin;
ant and caterpillar are welcome to my bark.
Sun and wind and rain speak world to me.-
I hold it all in my wide-spread boughs."

Other hybrids emerge, triumphant Daphne, the sinister Huldra-Folk, the mysterious Selkie, the many sided Madonna, the mother with dementia, or is that the quality of being possessed by some other being. Here the poet can become a hawk, looking at the land. The land itself can become a living thing as in `She Sleeps`:

"Hills slump, a rubble of broken teeth,
weathered wrinkles, nubs of rock, the fields
a lumpy pelt over discarded bones."

The land is also a thing that can be heard. In `Land Speaks` the :

"Land speaks of summer and winter
in the language of warbler and waxwing,
in rose and ivy flower, mist and lightning,
tree rings, lichens and weathering stone."

All this is appropriate for, as Elizabeth Rimmer points out in `Rewilding`, it is our physical destiny to reunite with nature. Our ultimate physical territory is to take our final place in the natural process:

"This is not death, this timely passing away,
the long slow compost enriching the soil,
the quiet dismemberment of bones
leaching potash, the hair thatching nest.
This is the quiet repayment of debt-
dust to dust, ash returned to ashes,
life to the living."

In the final section of the volume, `Walking to Jerusalem`, the poetic investigation of the multifaceted meaning of territory is concluded in a suite of fifteen poems. The epigram for this section is a quote from St John of the Cross:

"In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not
thou must go by a way that thou knowest not."

Following this injunction, that to find knowledge one must explore the unknown, Elizabeth Rimmer visits the past, homes, workplaces, even objects, like the `Grey Mug`, whose interrogation sparks memory, that repository of an even greater territory of knowledge. The mug allows the recall of the time she was a young woman in Edinburgh:

"Everything was still to happen,
all my future was in my hands at last.
It is still here after thirty years.
I hold in my hands a grey mug
full of my unregarded past."

She also visits people; a grandmother, a man in a church, an old couple in hospital, survivors of wars when honour meant something, recollection of whom, now organised and embedded in the mind, forge self knowledge. In a meditation on a `Sea Henge`, an object again embedded in a natural landscape, she sees an echo of her own, and of course our own, situation:

"I wait for the tide and a wind
screaming with gull cries
to take me out between the layers
between memory and reflection,
between the glass and the light."

The final poem, and the title to this section, takes us far from Elizabeth Rimmer's natural home. In `Walking to Jerusalem`, are we on a real pilgrimage or an imagined one, a journey remembered or constructed or perhaps both? A city of the mind, another ultimate destination, perhaps another part of our universal territory:

"City of light, city of slaughter.
Not one stone standing on another.
Not this, not that; neither here nor yonder.
The place where God lives. Shalom.
Salaam. The place that breaks your heart."

An appropriate ending to this encyclopaedic survey. Explorations conducted in liquid worlds, where liquidity creates landscapes full of life. Explorations in the worlds of natural processes, where nature becomes imagination which in turn becomes myth. Explorations of the past, the unknown 'other country', where memory becomes the process of discovering knowledge. All told with precise, and beautiful imagery. You will enjoy walking with Elizabeth Rimmer in her 'Territory of Rain'.

c Keith Parker 2016