

*Stone Milk*

Anne Stevenson

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An epigraph from *Piers Plowman* waking on his May morning on the Malvern hills alerts us to the presiding influence of mediaeval dream poetry on Anne Stevenson's new collection, her fourteenth, issuing in her seventy-fourth year, and inevitably concerned with reflections on ageing and mortality but also on the after-life of poets. The book falls into three sections, the first a long sequence, "A Lament for the Makers", the second a group of shorter poems including the title poem, and the third a witty and amusing rewriting of Euripides' *Medea* but all informed by the same thematic concerns.

Poets can approach old age 'and then the only end of age' in a variety of ways. Declining a Yeatsian rage Anne Stevenson achieves a kind of zestful serenity (the oxymoron is intended) and her observation: "Most of what we write/time will erase", coming from a poet with such a long and distinguished reputation, might make the prize-seeking tyro pause. Those lines come from "A Lament for the Makers" written to the memory of Philip Hobsbaum and celebrating the poets she has known and who have gone into a kind of dream underworld where she can engage them in dialogue: Peter Redgrove, Hugh McDiarmaid, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin and many others. It is a celebration of poetry but also a recognition that "most of what our bones say/has been said before". One might be tempted to deploy the word 'ripeness' but there is a lively, witty, sparky quality to the writing in this collection that makes that not quite *le mot juste*. Stevenson is particularly at home in the short three line stanza which she handles with consummate ease, sure of her craftsmanship, and, though the "Lament" fills a third of the book, it fairly rattles along. It also deposits memorable apothegms such as: "What is poetry but passion/in immutable form".

The most interesting of these dream-encounters is with Peter Redgrove who informs her that: "Life after death,/you see, is nothing like/what we expected". Down there in Hades ordinary mortals "slip from the noose of their names" but the poets, "who insistently/insinuate ourselves/through art into memory", are condemned to linger in a Limbo on the left bank of Lethe where "we inhabit/the versions of ourselves/that you devise and call our reputations". Stevenson - biographer of Plath - knows all about the shallows and reefs of poetic reputation ("I could not believe/fame had undone so many") and its relationship to the work itself. Frances Horovitz, movingly conjured up in another of these dream-sequences is also the dedicatee of another poem, "Orcop", the Herefordshire village accidentally visited on a cold March day, where her stone is in a graveyard where children are playing. Horovitz is recalled in life, when on entering a room "all senseless chattering would cease/shamed by your dignity". Stevenson finely balances in these elegiac poems a due recognition of loss and a vivid sense of life still going on. In a poem to John Lucas, a fellow-septuagenarian, and still the right side of Lethe, she is lighter and wittier with some forgivable fogginess about the iPod ("The verb 'to party' isn't quite the same/As putting your manners on and *going* to one").

The title poem, "Stone Milk" is set in a Swiss maytime landscape: "If stones could be milked, these fleeting rivers of melt/would feed us like flowering trees," Stevenson writes, about being

suckled by Mother Earth. She movingly confronts the late recognition that while “naturally what I want and need and expect is to be loved” she finds, as she grows older, that these hills comfort her more adequately: “Not the milk of kindness, but the milk of stones/is food I’m learning to long for.”

This fine, and finely crafted, collection ends with a joyous *jeu d’esprit*, a version of *Medea* in which Medea calls Euripides to account and demands that the script be rewritten to her satisfaction rebuking him for the lies his “misogynous mind” has invented about her. It is a delight.

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