

Lowland by Will Kemp, Cinnamon Press: 80pp Paperback £7.99 ISBN 978-1-907090-94-3

The initial phase of Will Kemp's second collection feels like a bird's eye view of the flatlands of the East Anglian Fens and Holland which locate the emotional landscape for his journey through childhood and a first trip over the North Sea (Part I Fenland). This is followed by his student days when he first sees and falls in love with Sventje, then just as quickly loses her (Part II Holland) and leads to an overwhelming sense of loss and what might have been (Part III Waterland).

This is a sequence then, and there are mini sequences within it. Of course Kemp isn't the first to write a sequence about love and loss – it's been done in sonnets by Petrarch and Shakespeare, and in our own times by Douglas Dunn (*Elegies*) and Christopher Reid (*A Scattering*), these last two being about the death of a partner. I had forgotten that one of Dunn's *Elegies* is called *Reading Pascal in the Low-lands*, so there may be a nod, conscious or subconscious, to this in Will Kemp's choice of title. One is also reminded of the Lesbia poems of Catullus, which chart the rise and fall of a relationship deeply felt and lamented, and with a named, or pseudonymous lover. Here, I'm assuming (always a dangerous thing to do) that Kemp's poems are autobiographical; they certainly encourage such a reading.

Scene after scene unfolds, sometimes to be revisited, as in film – "I was always on the outside looking on" – and the lowlands are ever-present, rather like Thomas Hardy's heathland in *The Return of The Native*. The vocabulary used is predominantly Germanic in origin rather than Latinate, with a sprinkling of Dutch words and names that enhance the sense of place. Sometimes it could almost be a translation from the Dutch.

Kemp is not out to shock with striking images. This is a subtle narrative using the limited palette of the Dutch Masters; there are poems entitled *Girls by Vermeer* and *Ravens over Cornfields* (which possibly refers to *Wheatfield with Crows*, painted towards the end of Van Gogh's life). Brueghel lurks behind *Landscape with no Figures Skating*, and is present in *The Massacre of the Innocents*. The colours used are predominantly yellow, brown and Delft blue.

The brown Amstel slapping the side below,
December sky blue as the day we met.

At heightened moments of joy the spectrum expands, as in *Thinking of You*:

...all the flowers swaying
in time with the chorus girls
as the world came into colour,

and my personal favourite, *Walking with animals*, (not about Dr Dolittle, but it might almost be) is positively psychedelic –

...And everywhere
that Florida of colour: azaleas, orchids, evergreens

out of a child's giant picture book of the zoo.

The poem strikes a rare note of optimism:

And we are still there, with tigers, zebras, bears –
not one snarling, no thoughts about the father –
all walking to that island above the rising water.

After this exhaustive tour of the lowlands, Kemp can move on to higher ground. His third collection, *The Painters who studied Clouds*, is due from Cinnamon in 2015, so it seems things are looking up.