Gathering strange fruit. Cencrastus, Summer (48). p. 41. ISSN 0264-0856

Copyright © 1994

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

Content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/90672/

Deposited on: 12 February 2014
Gathering Strange Fruit

Valentina Bold

‘Second Language’: confused by phonetic similarities between a kettle ‘De-fruher’ and ‘der Fuhrer’. As is stated in ‘La Luna’: ‘I don’t want/to lose this foreigness’.

Sunset Grill also explores ‘foreigness’. Rouse is an ethnographic observer. She portrays xenophobia adeptly in ‘England Nil’, in which a group of football supporters in Germany chant: ‘Who won the war/Anyway? Who naked Dresden?’ ‘A North London Planetary System’ brings the gods up to date in a modern city: ‘Venus on Holloway Road’ in ‘blonde provincial mac’; ‘Saturn at Horsey Road’ is ‘on his portable at the Ozu café’. A Seedsor version, then, of similar material to MacDiarmid’s ‘Bonnie Broukit Bairn’.

Technical facility is demonstrated in pieces like ‘Miss North Crawley’ of 1971, a cautionary tale. A beauty queen, Viv, is murdered, dumped in a field outside Crawley. The corpse is described with compassionate control:

‘...year on year, the drifts of her hair And her small perfect teeth Bleach in the air.

Rouse’s finest work has a clinical precision. Perhaps this reflects her nursing background, featured in ‘Round’. Nurses were: ‘Out until 4 o’clock dancing, they’re back on the ward at half-seven’. This is both medical round and roundelay; the chorus, with variations, ‘I can’t get up no’.

The second half of Sunset Grill is mainly set in America; the poet is liveliest here. ‘Virginia Arcady’ introduces her muse, ‘taller than a man’, rising from a creek: ‘She talked low, reproachful, pretty:’ Said I don’t love her enough’. The title poem vividly recreates an institution: ‘EAT$ blinks red onto the parking lot’ ‘Springfield, Virginia’ describes how:

Along the wooded road lightening bugs flared Like drunkens with matches, seeing their way home, And whispertails naged the sleeper Until a dawn as pink and blue as ltmus paper.

There is an engaging self-confidence about Rouse, though her hero appears on occasion. ‘Memo to Auden’ opens vigorously: ‘Wystan, you got off to a wrong start/Being neither Catholic nor tubercular’. Rouse ends the poem, and book, provocatively:

P.S. Myself I have too much to learn Of voice and sense. You used this metre, Don Juan too, but in our day It’s not exactly a world-beater. Still, “subtle” can mean convoluted And for our little chat, it suited.

Together, these three writers deserve wholehearted recommendation: MacInnes for her elegiac qualities, McNeill for her understated power; Rouse for stylistic versatility.