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REVIEW: 'Delights in bones': Chris Beckett on Anne Ryland's 'Unruled Journal'

Review of *Unruled Journal*, by Anne Ryland
Valley Press, 2021
£10.99

Like Ryland's previous two collections, *Unruled Journal* is a delight. Not always an easy one, but if there is such a thing as serious delight, this is it! The way that Ryland uses language (not only English but German and Polish too), and the sounds we make, the words we use, with all their local colour like haar, hinny, mardy, nither, many of them native to the north-east English coast where she lives – lock the poems into their landscape and communicate not only a meaning but the pleasure that the poet feels in using them.

Ryland also delights in bones. I never imagined I would too but with Ryland showing me the way, I do. The very first poem introduces a skeleton called Agnes, who sits on a bench looking out over the river. Agnes is not some sort of poetic description of a skinny woman, she is a bare structure of bones, so we see 'the jigsaw pieces of her skull', and hear her breath which is 'the wind passing through her bars'. Is she a real thing, a sculpture perhaps, or an image of the poet's own body stripped to its chalky core? Whatever she is, Agnes 'at her most osseous' is a wonderful companion, 'incurably informative'. I am reminded of a character in Patrick O'Brian's brilliant sea novels who 'has recently published his *De Ossibus*, a work that caused a considerable sensation...among those who delighted in bones'. Ryland goes on to converse with other disembodied women, like the singing stones of Duddo, asking for their 'Neolithic counsel'. They do not sing for her this time, but her pleasure in bones returns later in the collection when she discovers running and 'the workshop of her chest reveals itself' and she cries: 'Bless all fifty-two bones of the feet and ankles, the intelligent shoes that cushion each landing...'

Ryland really communicates her enthusiasm for running, not only as one moving body but in groups, their 'bum-sculpting leggings', those 'downhill women/ fleeing the kitchen' (Women and wifies and lasses and bairns) who become a community that I the reader feel I'd also love to join. Maybe I already have.

The pleasure of bones, breath, movement is a constant theme in the book. It is also very hard-won, against the paralysis of physical wasting and grief, what Ryland turns to a German word to express: 'Trauerarbeit', the work of grieving. For Ryland's mother suffered 'a four-decade sentence' of Limb-Girdle Muscular Dystrophy, described in an eponymous poem which is detailed and distressing. The disease naturally affects her father too, weathers him like a fragment of glass in its tide and turns him into 'the ruinkeeper' (Portrait of My Father as a Ruined House). But Ryland's father is given respite from his 'stream of rusty grief' by a wonderfully flirty tea lady (The Tea Lady on Stambridge Ward). And Ryland's body, she is surprised to see – 'this body, built by her', the 'stairless' mother – enjoys 'a refurbishment' and 'Lycras its way out of oestrogen-plunge'. In the marvellous last poem of the book (Running, I become), Ryland sprouts ten-metre legs and a pinhead, becomes significant to dogs, identifies with geese, 'redrafts' herself on the running border between England and Scotland, between languages, grief and happiness, the shifting sands of physical and emotional life.

Running (that word again!) alongside the personal are historical, European, Second World War pieces, also some very moving versions of poems by Hilde Domin and Leon Zdzislaw Stroiński which echo and develop the themes of other poems set in the now, in England. Linguistically, German 'sh' sounds of 'Schlaflied' and 'Der Schwebende' echo 'blether', 'nither', 'swither' from an earlier Northumberland poem. 'Trümmerfrau', after a head and shoulders sculpture by Max Lachnit, is a rubble woman perhaps harking back to the Duddo stones. Equally, the astonishment of seeing the hinges of her 'winter hand' in the first-ever human X-Ray (Anna's Left Hand) mirrors Ryland's own joy at her fifty-two bones of the feet and ankles.

And in the centre of the book, Ryland places an evocative series of poems addressed to the original owner of her writing desk, a Mr John Millar M.A. of Laggan. As any poet knows, the place where you write, whether it is in a notebook or computer, is special and this desk calls to Ryland, it is an 'inkling of prayer', a 'seduction'. At it, she can 'dream-write' fresh beginnings, soft endings. It is her nest, her sanctum where she writes 'in her unruled journal'. There is indeed a journal-like quality in Ryland's poems, you get a sense that each one is grounded not only in a body or activity, but a particular event, something that happened today, for example, or on an afternoon in 1935, either here, or over there. And the fact that the journal is unruled feels significant too: the poems find their own best shape/lineation on the un-lined page, which sometimes means prose; or maybe it suggests that they are not 'ruled' by the issues they confront, such as time, displacement, grief; or just that they are unruly, and therefore open like Agnes' wind-blown skeleton, to all sorts of joys and pains which accompany us through life.

Either way, Unruled Journal feels to me like the perfect slightly offbeat title for a collection which, as Moniza Alvi says on the cover, is 'full of subtle interweavings', a book of personal wisdom, physicality and delight.

Chris Beckett is a poet and translator, winner of the Poetry London Competition in 2001 and shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award in 2015. He has two collections from Carcanet, *Ethiopia Boy* (2013) and *Tenderfoot* (2020), plus the first-ever anthology of Ethiopian Amharic poetry in English, *Songs We Learn from Trees*, which he translated and edited with Alemu Tebeje. He is a host of the long-standing Shuffle reading series and a proud trustee of the Poetry Society.