



***Gleam* by Sarah Broom. Auckland: AUP www.press.auckland.ac.nz (2013). RRP: \$24.99. Pb. 64pp. ISBN: 9781869407704. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Sarah Broom is the author of *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Macmillan, 2005) and published her first

collection of poetry, *Tigers at Awhitu*, with Auckland University Press/Carcanet in 2010.

In her second collection of poems, *Gleam*, Broom, who died in April 2013, brings to her poems the deep questions about mortality. Here, she offers a range of moments, perceptions, experiences, memories, often seemingly simple, yet always felt and personal. The full moon, a storm, the wind, stars – these are Broom’s subjects. The title poem of the collection refers to the “gleam of their hands” – hands of doctors, nurses, her loved ones and all those people who help her - reaching out and giving comfort:

the long gleam of their hands, all reaching out,
the teeming voices, the shafts of blue light,
the smell that is not a smell, the mask
and the underbelly, the fine soft hands touching
gently, moving me just a little

The poem explores the various moments of a sense of transience, and many poems in the collection as a whole are about the transition from one state of being to another. For example, “if I could land” ends with

and the one cry that does not ease
but folds the darkness into itself
and bears it till morning

Some poems celebrate love, despite the pain the poet is undergoing, as we see in “vigil”:

after we said goodbye
I could feel you for days
Like a live fur coat
put on backwards,
my chest warm,
my back already
feeling the cold

Broom is a subtle and skilled poet. Her verse is unrhymed and free, but it is stitched together with a rhythmic and phonological power that gives its lines their vibrant force. Look at “disorder in the night”

the wind scours the inside of my mouth dry –
its one of those dark, edgy wins,
not cold, but with a lick of madness

Note the strong rhythm and the patterning that makes the language hum – as it should, for this is a poem about the extraordinary experience emerging out of the chaos of ill-health.

Here, in human tragedy, comes the tension that interrogates the relationship between faith and disaster, and in Broom it moves beyond sound into a place that occupies both prayer and sorrow as in “the skeleton dances under the stars”:

when I raise my arms
the darkness pours down
from around the stars
and drenches me

when I spin
the grey clouds
whiskering the moon
skitter round my head

These are poems which reward concentrated reading, and the cumulative effect is meditative. Broom is attentive, her eye and ear intensely tuned, so that light and sound – subtle and luminous – are often partners in a poem. The intensity of many of these poems grows out of the knowledge that the poet is seriously ill. The moments of her suffering are preserved in her words. Place, light, sound, pain, beauty and love weave a dance through poems that evoke a gentle power, treading a path between rejection and acceptance, between darkness and light.