

‘Beatitudes of syntax’: Review by Jazmine Linklater

Kalimba by Petero Kalulé, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* by Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* by Denise Riley

Kalimba is yet another beautifully produced book from Guillemot Press. Its cover illustration – bright yellow – of the titular instrument playfully positions the reader as musician, set to embark on the piece. Without any biographical information contained within the book itself, Petero Kalulé remains a mystery – making for a freed, freeing reading experience – bar what becomes obvious from the text: that this is a writer in love with language, and a musician in love with rhythm.

Kalimba contains a delightful mélange of languages, mixing words from East African languages with European, Indian, and Celtic words. There are poems on clothing, Shakespeare, dementia; on nature; in Spain, the Sahara, in places of worship. Each poem seizes its opportunity to explore life through music, rhythm, and religion(s): key themes Kalulé plays throughout. ‘to play drum / is to talk with the spirits, the gods’, he writes, and referenced are the Yoruba Orisha, Xango, the Talmud, the church and bible, spirits and djinns. These poems are also populated by musical and literary historical figures. In these pages, ‘James Baldwin is jamming’, we are ‘listening to Duke Ellington’s *Warm Valley*’, and elsewhere, ‘when / Monk & Sonny play, / beatitudes of syntax s wing fractal’.

The book opens with an epigraph to the American poet and musician Cecil Taylor, whose presence is carried through the collection, culminating with the free jazz frenzy of ‘Cecil’s dance’:

so dance dance Cecil tra-
nce !
go on
go on go on. & carry sky

declutter our dreams conquistador, you

‘[O]ur dreams’ are often what *Kalimba* writes for, and the potential for collaborative poetic creation with the reader is noted from the very beginning in the collection’s dedication:

that these notations
may vibrate
close
in
y/our hands

and in ‘Collective noem’, the only poem in the book to use no English words and, to me, impenetrable:

Full stops set out from their line ends have a staccato resonance, and poems often end with a colon which reads as a repeat symbol, urging the reader back to the poem's beginning. *Kalimba* itself is music 'as sound circular / projects'; its poetry 'it is rhizomatic; /elliptical'. 'Drum / Ngoma' even offers a coda at the end of its first section, and the more essayistic style of 'Transcribing Noise' operates almost as an ars poetic, urging the reader to really practice their listening, to carefully pay attention:

one does not casually-“pop”-listen to the noise . it demands a
farsightedness in the present that can only be played by more-ear.

[. . .]

the listenable

is singable, is breathable, is danceable, is is :

meditation, elaboration, consummation, affirmation,
interrupt ion . . . h e s i t a t i o . . .

This is a joy to read – expansive, challenging and satisfying. Kalulé is a poet as in love with language itself as he is with music, and the huge vocabulary, the rhythm and experimental notation of *Kalimba* is testament to an artist challenging their art. I think Kalulé's own epigraph from Cecil Taylor is the perfect way to summarise the book: 'Part of what this music is about is not to be delineated exactly. It's about magic, & capturing spirits.'

It's an intriguing prospect, being asked to review a text originally published seven years ago – especially one as widely written about as Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*. Back in 2012 I was still unaware of Riley as either a philosopher or a poet, but in the years since, discovering her work has been – for me as for so many people – affirming, altering, and I am hugely grateful for it. That Riley's work has been picked up by a big publisher like Picador – who have put out a new *Selected Poems* alongside the essay – will hopefully propel her work towards a much wider readership.

Originally published by Capsule Editions, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* is newly introduced by Max Porter, author of *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. Much of Porter's introduction is clear and apt, as in his summarising, for example: 'It is an essay about minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years'. The same could be said for his elucidations of Riley's practice as a whole: 'there is a gorgeous, no-nonsense technical virtuosity while dealing with strange and painful things'. Yet there's also something amiss: Porter's introduction feels skewed in how personal it is, discussing his own book, his own losses, and his own experience of reading *Time Lived*. Riley writes, 'I'd rather have steered clear of all autobiography', and I'm not sure what it does to a philosophical tract such as hers – which endeavours to speak to a breadth of experiences, while working out of its writer's own inevitable involvement in the events and concepts at hand – to be prefaced by a largely autobiographical response. Even in sharing some of Riley's most outstanding lines, which cut to the quick of her thinking-feeling, the framing

of Porter's action makes for uneasy reading: 'I was looking', he writes, 'for a single line as good as this: "I work to earth my heart."'

This line comes from Riley's initial notes after her son's death, transcribed at intervals from a few weeks up to three years after the death. The notes are highly personal, yet even here, during these initial thought formations, Riley's thinking is broad – not tethered to a speaking 'I' but also already addressing 'you', both inviting the reader's identification and distancing her empirical self from these utterances: 'you will endlessly witness the instant of your child's dying'. And already, the notes reach out to more collective gestures too: 'We can forgive ourselves for the death of our children'. Later, in the postscript that develops these initial ideas, her pronouns seem to shift, and the second-person mode is used to unpack those feeling ('You've slipped into a state of a-chronicity'), whereas 'I' is reserved for the writer's struggle: 'How, then, can I struggle to convey this distinctive experience of living inside a new non-time – while in the same breath I want to save it from being treated as unapproachable, and exceptional?'

There are moments in Porter's introduction where these opening gestures of Riley's text are closed down. It is disconcerting, for example, to read that 'her asking is so deftly personal, and so clear, it reminds me (this can't be coincidence, or a wishful trick of tonal transference) of my mum. And of my grandmother. It is a way of speaking that is part and parcel of maternal authority and experience'. I have a hunch, perhaps because it is so true of me as a reader, that the idea of anything essential in 'maternal authority and experience', especially coming through a writer as vocal about the instability of such roles and categories as Riley, might make many squirm. In writing about his own loss so specifically, and hoping to translate what he identifies as 'maternal' into something else he deems 'paternal or fraternal', Porter effectively reroutes the openness Riley had written into her stance already. For example, in response to her own question (posed above), she writes:

That, straightforwardly enough, might be a matter of allowing the myriad specificities of different losses their differing temporal impacts. A chronic or terminal illness, for example, may force on its sufferer a vehemently transformed kind of time. That will possess its own particular charge, not to be flattened into a false equivalence with other kinds of changed temporalities.

Throughout, Riley's precision is breath-taking – Porter, precisely in his turn, writes of her 'brilliant exactitude'; the 'scalpel-fine touch of a literary surgeon' she exercises. Her perceptual clarity reveals what so many think of as poetry to be fundamental to her understanding of the world. Two weeks after the death, for example, she writes: 'how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that's briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death'. A month after: 'how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is clean as a strip of guillotined celluloid film.' Indeed, she writes, 'Nothing "poetic", not the white radiance of eternity', but something more integral 'about what is describable, and what are the linguistic limits of what can be conveyed'.

As ever, when reading Riley's poetry and prose in tandem, they unlock one another, and *Time Lived, Without its Flow* offers key passages on rhyme, metre, and poetic repetition which illuminate sections of her most recent collection, *Say Something Back*. Picador's new *Selected Poems* includes the whole text of that collection, a decision that has meant that Riley's best-

known poem, 'A Part Song', has lost the much of the page-space it was afforded in original publication, with more sections squeezed onto pages, and somehow some formatting falling away (the final section, for example, is now left-aligned where it was previously centred), somewhat altering the reading experience. Similarly, the landscape orientation of certain poems to preserve their longer lines is, while in principle a good decision, a little cumbersome to manoeuvre in such a thick book.

The selection of poems is only somewhat expanded from the *Selected Poems* published by Reality Street in 2000 – where it is also worth noting that the long lines were accommodated by a broader page. This wider selection comes mostly from the early work, and the best thing about this new publication – aside from the opportunity it brings to reach more readers – is the inclusion of some of the most delicious lines, characteristically cutting and wry, as in 'such face bones':

it is the 'spirit' burns in &
through 'sex' which we know about

saying 'It's true', I won't place or
describe it It *is* & refuses the law

and 'Ah, so', where: 'I found some change in my trouser pocket, like a man'. Reading *Selected Poems*, especially alongside *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, reveals afresh Denise Riley's long-standing commitment to language: interrogating it, exercising it, and navigating the ways in which it crosses us. In tracing her suspicion of all things ostensibly definite or settled throughout this selection of work, what becomes clear is that unpacking all of it, via poetry, is paramount.