

‘The heart at night’: Poem-response by Katharine Towers

On *Noctuary* by Niall Campbell

Fathers stand in all the corners of these half-lit rooms.
Up late with the world, they agonise or suffer doubt
or watch and wait, as if the soreness of the new might fade.
They itemise the terror of the change.

Poor new father in a half-lit room.
He shows his freshly-opened heart and, oh, he is alone.
Still, he has language: the poem’s small fire.

*(Crusoe: his different life in the same
old world. He loves his strange island.)*

The father’s not an archetype, although the company he keeps
is of a kind: the axeman and the railwayman, the poacher and the lamplighter.
They’re all in love with dark’s dark risk and jeopardy.
We might say that darkness equals honesty.

It’s winter all the time.
There’s snow and cold, no flowers or sunshine.
We’re in an old dim film and we must watch and listen carefully.

*(Horseshoe Crab: always and always
the same, and snug in its tough armour.)*

The father’s tasks are simple: there’s something monkish
in the way he’ll stand to cool a bowl of food by the back door
or tramp the forest looking for kindling –
also in the fretful ponderings of how he might have lived
a lesser life without the change of fatherhood.

*(Glasgow: a football with one
last game in its saggy skin.)*

If we’re anywhere we’re in an old undamaged world
where the simple is truth, the truth simple.
Rock, world, door, bird
wall, tree, skiff . . .
There’s comfort in the single syllables of unembellished things.
*If the road seems long, it’s because it is.
I told the rain that I was cold.
The morning broke, I kissed his head, and stood.*
Bathos does its work because the words are plain and good.

*(Poacher: his hands everywhere,
helps himself to everything.)*

Small pleasures in the skilful pruning
of an apple tree, *fresh oranges at midnight*,
throwing a dice and guessing it right.
Not childish things but stays against anxiety.

*(Packhorse: stomping on the wet track
and, oh, the ending is a glorious glory.)*

Where opposites collide or contradict
the little crash is like a riddle
solved by the poem's music.

The work has its fires, made from ordinary
sticks that we might overlook, left to flare.
They're the work of trust: yes, language
will find the best way to the burning crux.

What could be more bold or private than a father
standing in the dark beside his sleeping child?
These small poems do the deepest work of soul and heart.