

Fire Stations / review by ANDREW NEILSON
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Fire Stations begins with a nativity scene, that necessary precursor of the Stations of the Cross, for the title of this volume is as much religious pun as call of alarm. Our poet arrives in '1965':

The egg ferments, the one cell splits in two:
again, four: again, eight: sixteen: thirty-two.

Until finally, what was a "tiddler, mild water-scorpion" hits:

Full term: seismic waves, electrical storms,
the twelve-hour haul of not being born,
between two worlds — induced. I make it late,
this bloody, headlong drop towards the light.

A stylish enough way to begin your debut collection. Jackson is a Scot, and a serious one at that, whose metaphysical concerns place him alongside the likes of John Burnside, Don Paterson and Robin Robertson.

Take the sequences, 'X' (subtitled 'Ten studies for the Christ-figure') or 'The Temptation of Saint Anthony'. The short poems of which each sequence consists are hermetic, with clotted meaning and striking, emblematic imagery:

Fever holds me high in its wings.
You my companion, architect of shadows,
tell me what appetite will serve. I know.
Your eyes are a hornets' nest of light.

The sun shakes its yellow rings.
A thorn-tree buds with gold coins.

('3' from 'The Temptation of Saint Anthony')

When Jackson is not contemplating religious themes, he writes poems such as 'Schopenhauer's Porcupines' and 'David Hume Considers the Moon'. This makes for resolutely unfashionable verse and like the poetry of Robin Robertson, Jackson's work seems — *dated* is too pejorative a term — more at home in the attitudes of British poetry in the 60s and 70s than in poetry post-Muldoon and the New Generation promotion.

This is not necessarily a bad thing of course — far from it, as poetry and fashion have rarely been happy bedfellows for long. A glance at the fortunes of many of the New Gen since their flash in the pan is instructive. Jackson then is ambitious in his attempts at courting the revenants and reviving some of the rituals of the not so distant past.

Who are the revenants, the presiding spirits, in question you may ask? Well, at times Jackson's verse resembles the style of late Lowell (in *Notebook*, say) writing with the concerns of his earlier self (the Catholic angst of *Lord Weary's Castle*). And the three great H's are present and correct — the Heaney of *North*, the Hughes of *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Crow*, and most vitally of all, the Geoffrey Hill of

King Log and *Tenebrae*. Jackson at his most ambitious seems to aim for something of Hill's sublime lyricism, with sonnets in 'X' clearly indebted to Hill's astonishing sequence 'Lachrimae or Seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans':

Sister, for our comfort, I'll say this:
our good Lord lactates upon the Cross,
his breast unbuttoned. Suckle. Ample grace
will half quench, half stimulate such thirst.

(‘Letter to my Sister’ from ‘X’)

whatever crime was consummated there
with you the blank slate, the virgin bride,
remember: men at root are polarized,
switching from snow-white to pure terror;

their gifts, the long-stemmed orchid and the sword,
a pornographic pin-up of a god.

(‘The Man of Sorrows’ from ‘X’)

The problem with this is that while these poems are good, as *Fire Stations* as a whole is good, they lack the extra dimension that Hill at the height of his powers would bring. When Hill writes hermetically, the sensuousness and otherworldly music of his verse draws the reader in with or without understanding. Jackson on the other hand, for all his acuity and elegance of language (which reminds me of the last line in his poem ‘The Christmas Pet’ — “scoring things with precise horns”), lacks that especial conjuring in the ear which would give his work the elevation it so obviously aspires to. Which is, I say again, not to dismiss this collection. *Fire Stations* is a debut after all, and as such is thoroughly welcome in daring to do something a little different in the often moribund world of British poetry.

And Jackson also has more interest in everyday life than the poems quoted so far would suggest. When he brings his particular way of seeing to more mundane subjects, he produces some noted successes. ‘The Christmas Pet’, already mentioned, is a fine piece of sinister wit; as is ‘Maryhill Road’. ‘Filing’ is a moving poem that has a surprising directness, placed as it is among more oblique work. ‘In Memory of R.D. Laing’ is in many ways the most ambitious poem in the collection, and as such its rhetoric is perhaps too heightened, but the end result is undoubtedly memorable.

Settling on a key poem in *Fire Stations* is difficult, as there are many contenders clamouring within its pages. Perhaps ‘Phineas Gage’, about the railway foreman in 19th century Vermont whose frontal brain was destroyed in a grotesque tamping rod accident.

Frontal brain destroyed, the healing's mixed.
His friends confess: *Gage is no longer Gage*.
Once business-like, mild-mannered, now profane,
irreverent to fellow men and God,

His work revealed by thunder, and the rod,
or living mercy — Gage remains unfixed.

This seems to best encompass Jackson's concerns with religion, violence and the mystery of personality. *Fire Stations* is a bracing alternative to the average debut and it will be interesting to see where Jackson's voice takes him next.