

Fire Stations / review by STEPHEN KNIGHT
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Fire Stations presents a compound of high and low culture: Petrus Christus and Schopenhauer, Opal Fruits and cult Scottish band The Blue Nile. This usually signals a writer with ludic tendencies, but there is very little in the way of fun and games in A.B. Jackson's carefully assembled debut. The book is somewhat portentous in concept — its title refers not to municipal buildings but to a fiery motif encompassing Hell and the essence of life — while its detail verges on the doom-laden: the sky above Edinburgh, for example, is “a slate-grey blue beyond routine / bankruptcy, the government of loss.”

There is something of the hauteur of Geoffrey Hill about Jackson's controlled, staccato verse — “we, in our static / paradise of todays, whitewash our recent // pasts with our recent wallpaper” — so the twenty-one-line single sentence of ‘The Chemical Wedding’ near the end of the book comes as a welcome exhalation after so many pages of clenched jaws. Jackson's terse versification can make for hard going when it describes grim material. He observes the incontinent inmates of an institutional home, forbiddingly opens one poem “Oncology Centre. Cast-iron cabinets / of case histories . . .”, and even uses a wedding as an opportunity to note the detritus of shrivelled balloons and beer.

Although there is none of the playing to the gallery endemic in contemporary verse, there are, thankfully, flashes of lugubrious humour to accompany the devout imagery. ‘The Christmas Pet’ introduces a sinister creature patrolling “the small circle of indoors // scoring things with precise horns” and the Yeatsian ‘Maryhill Road’ uses the correction posted on an electronic bus-stop display to droll effect: “I will wait the extra minute / and go to Correction / to catch the unwavering scent / of brimstone.” The work of a skilled poet, *Fire Stations* is an admirably demanding volume, albeit one with a rather medicinal taste.