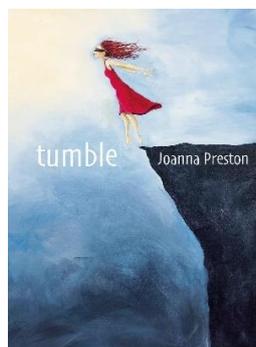


S J MANNION

*tumble – Joanna Preston*

(Otago: Otago University Press, 2021)  
ISBN 9781990048197. RRP \$27.50. 88pp.



*tumble* is Joanna Preston's second collection and is a potent yet subtle brew of poems and flash fiction. The cover is aptly chosen, it has a whiff of whimsy but any trivial connotations are rescued

by the colours of sea and sky and slate, and that bold streaming splash of scarlet which shows she means business. (And she does.)

While it is an undoubtedly learned read, it wears its erudition lightly as a feathered cloak, a *kahu kiwi* perhaps, there is certainly a combination of writerly authority, integrity, power and prestige in these pieces.

To my mind, "Lijessenthoek" – 'He said he felt the grip of the other man's / hand tighten briefly, and then let go. (p. 37), "Census at Bethlehem" – 'Her sin, / her single *yes* – she bloomed with it, / she drank the rise sun.' (p. 46), and "Matadora" – 'Fetish, kneel at my feet. / You are vessel, you are chair / for me to straddle, yes / you are drum. / *Now come.*' (p. 65), show a

complete mastery of the craft; there is restraint and risk here, they are richly emotive yet erudite and intellectual. They are utterly quietly beautiful too.

That's another thing about this collection, there is not the merest hint of pretension. This is a poet who does not over work the work. She does not seem to be trying, or to be reaching, the words are well within her grasp. They fly to her, and they land and then sit on the page without stretch or strain.

Take this,

I lose my hands. Break concentration  
and they're not where I expect them to  
be.

Stupid. It takes all my skill to hold onto  
a knife, say, and a conversation.  
Nerveless fingers, white with pressure.

("The disembodied woman")

as perfect a description of disembodiment as any I've read. The next verse, a tell, a confirmation of whom she spoke, (I knew it in my body) and the whole piece, a fitting tribute to the troubled and tragic triumph that was Marilyn.

And then there's,

... Her embrace  
does not bear thinking of –  
it will crush you.  
Darling.'  
("Margaret of Finchley")

It's that 'Darling.' that does it for me. Sheer genius. Again, I knew of whom she spoke, long before the 'Notes' section at back; the skill of story being so evident.

This skill is also marked in "Chronicle of the year 793". Who doesn't recognise the fear of hunger and darkness told here, that collective memory echoes in us all, beneath language even.

What we have to share, we give,  
but so many are hungry.'

... a great flock of birds blackened the  
sky.

... And now again! Strange, how their  
wingbeats sound like oars.'

The image here is both visual and aural, reading  
this a fully sensory experience.

As is the almost avian sense of movement to the  
sequence of these works. A feeling of flight  
from past to present to future, from this world to  
that, under and over and above and beyond. A  
bright strangeness to them,

But still more like a city astir at night,  
lights blazing  
from every door – and no traveller,  
crossing  
the darkness could be certain if these  
were beacons of welcome,  
or a city preparing for war.'

("Astonishment")

The book is split into three parts, a true trinity in  
which each part is both individual and integral  
to the whole. In a nice complete touch, the  
collection is both hailed and farewellled by a  
small 'simple' piece. One opens with

---

**'This is a poet who does not over  
work the work... the words are well  
within her grasp. They fly to her,  
and they land and then sit on the  
page without stretch or strain.'**

---

'The things we prize. Innocence, / the sleeping  
fire that speaks.' ("Female, nude")

and the other closes

'... the tumble and the weight of  
it.' ("Nightfall")

the traverse.

This device of sorts works for this collection,  
similar to the way that spoon in "The  
Messenger" does,

its haft slips into your hand  
gladly, like mine,  
returns the faint warmth  
of fingers and thumb

helpful as a wife.

Yes, if you're that sort of wife. This is good  
work, indeed. Read it and reap.

To review books for *a fine line*,  
please contact Erica Stretton,  
[reviews@poetrysociety.org.nz](mailto:reviews@poetrysociety.org.nz)