

I'm with Stupid!

Emily Skillings, *Tantrums in Air* (The Song Cave) £15

Reviewed by Rowland Bagnall

'As I set out to write – as I wrote – I asked myself, *am I stupid?*' So begins the second poem (beginning on the second page) of Emily Skillings's second collection, *Tantrums in Air*, a book preoccupied by doubts about the Self and what it has to say. Proceeding with the same pleasingly unpredictable variety and slanting language of her debut, *Fort Not* (2017) – a collection of delightfully un-easeful poems that map the feeling of a lack of feeling in a culture of ambivalence, 'a paralysis / brought on by the glimmering / bounty of the everyday', writes Skillings, where the logic seems curved, 'always slightly off-center' – *Tantrums in Air* mounts an investigation of imposter syndrome, the poet's nagging sense (both a deep anxiety *and* badge of honour) 'that I am a ridiculous person // who will never be like the others.'

With a self-deprecating humour that seems only partly tongue-in-cheek, Skillings adopts a frequently defeated poetic persona, 'part ghost, part sponge / a lump of pure refusal'. 'Crushed again!' jibes one poem, 'down in the dirt / where I have always belonged.' 'Can I record you?' asks a filmmaker in 'Screen Test', 'I'm making a documentary for my class on the subject of giant losers.' These doubts are the result of a pervasive sense of aftermath. While Skillings's poetry is playful and often genuinely funny (which not all 'funny' poems are), the collection strikes a strangely elegiac tone, born of the uncertainty of what to do next, of how, exactly, to continue in the wake of certain losses. Chief among these, perhaps, is the loss of John Ashbery, for whom

Skillings worked as an assistant until his death in 2017; shortly afterwards, she edited *Parallel Movement of the Hands* (2021), a book of his unfinished work. Whether caused by grief, exhaustion, writer's block, anxieties of influence, even professional intimidation, *Tantrums in Air* explores the many obstacles to writing, 'The lawn strewn with what / You can't entirely say', concludes 'Daphne', a striking image of the poem-in-(everlasting)-progress. 'And if I had to diagnose / my own poems, or even myself', reads a passage from 'A Draped Urn', one of this collection's highlights, 'I might say that they (or I) / do not know what side // of anything they (or I) wish / to exist on.'

Nevertheless, the poet finds a route through this uncertainty, discovering a way 'To keep sane and remember / The surreal order of things'. For Skillings, this involves seeing the world for what it is, frequently 'Dull as anything / But beautiful, certainly, / In its way', a delicate attentiveness to 'where little nodes of language cling, / lichen-like, to what will have them', note lines from 'Rose-Crowned Night Girl'. Skillings's poems enact the gentle tug-of-war that takes place between thought and observation, a casual braiding of the two together – like a double helix – a mode of steady accumulation and association that brings James Schuyler's poetry to mind, in which attending to the mundane can produce the mundane's opposite. Skillings's preference for the everyday, for the soft drifts of the mind responding to phenomena – as in the ghostly smudge of photocopied

fingerprints that prompts the unspooling of 'Emily' – appears to signal her suspicion towards the overly-wrought, overly-thought, even overly-serious aspects of capital-P Poetry. Indeed, 'At the faculty party,' she writes, 'I walk away from the conversation about Mr. Heidegger, whom I do not understand, toward one about furniture, which I think about all day.' I am reminded, reading Skillings, of a comment by Ashbery on the painter Jane Freilicher, praising her 'democratic urge to avoid the solemnity of "privileged moments" in

favor of a feeling for how nature and object just keep plugging along – it's that, perhaps, that makes them ultimately important to us.' After all, writes Skillings of the wild variety and repetition of experience:

There is no finish on the day
it just kind of slumps over
and there's another one
to stab you like a cartoon predator
with a blade of straw[.]