

Flamboyant Coincidence

Ange Mlinko, *Foxglovewise* (Faber) £10.99

Reviewed by Rowland Bagnall

As an asthmatic, I'm sensitive to changes in the air. Though never severely or dangerously difficult, my breathing is affected by humidity and sudden cold, pollen and wood smoke, perfume and cats, cigarettes, aerosol, dust and exhaust fumes. This may explain why my experience of reading *Foxglovewise* was one of noticing its atmospheres, 'thick / and perfumed as an unguent', 'clammy with muscat fug' – where even 'The great refinery of sunset / leaves smoke and bilge in the sky'.

From 'thermal curl[s]' to 'smudgy cigars', Mlinko's poems swirl with thickening agents, the air abuzz, 'electric with bees', flitting with 'Hummingbirds and butterflies', the sky, from time to time, amassing monstrous Texan thunderclouds, 'spurting electricity', whipping 'sulfurous wind'. Meanwhile, constant sound and music: whether 'the selfsame / chime' of 'owls and church bells' or the poems' tide of different languages – Greek and Spanish, snatches of Latin, a flurry of 'old Scottish names' – or simply 'the crowd-roar' and 'announcer's commentary' blaring from an airport bar, Mlinko's poetry is a cacophonous environment, where palm trees 'start up like a band in a sudden breeze', flooding 'the gutters of the ears'.

The fullness of the air in *Foxglovewise* brings Bishop's 'Florida' to mind, especially her 'Thirty or more buzzards [...] drifting down, down, down', 'like stirred-up flakes of sediment / sinking through water', a viscous, liquid atmosphere, slow and subtropical. A current resident of Florida – 'the state with the prettiest name', according to Bishop – Mlinko appears drawn to the indeterminate nature of the landscape. Indeed, her latest poems (Mlinko's seventh collection, though her first in the UK) are published in the same breath as a new critical monograph, *Difficult Ornaments: Florida and the Poets* (2024), an exploration of the impact of the Sunshine State on a succession of writers for whom 'Florida was an exotic detour', 'sensually intriguing, but also an abstraction that could be worked out in verse'. 'The terrain is always shifting', notes Mlinko in her introduction: 'Poised between drought and flood, gardeners actually water their lawns in the rainy season.'

As with her previous collections, *Foxglovewise* reveals Mlinko to be a restless traveller, roaming from place to place, resistant to permanence. ('[A]re you like the hawthorn tree, / always the same thing in the same place', read lines from Louise Glück's 'Matins', deployed as an epigraph, 'or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent, first springing up / a pink spike on the slope behind the daisies, / and the next year, purple in the rose garden?') Grouped into sections, the poems in this collection are divided by a symbol resembling the prow of an ocean liner, the kind familiar to travel posters from the 1930s. Several of the best poems here take place in Scotland;

listening to the *Iliad* on headphones in a rural cemetery, the poet feels as though she stands 'in two foreign countries at once'. Elsewhere, the poems are full of expats and migration routes, charting complex family histories, American myths, alive to the fact that even 'To remember is to cross / Through no-man's-land / Into an imaginary country', to borrow lines from A.E. Stallings, Mlinko's friend and correspondent. In *Foxglovewise*, Mlinko is especially attuned to the relationship between a place and its accruing past, where 'Memories [...] surface as a kind of automatism'. As she asks on this collection's final page, 'Are we bound / to the soil we're *born* or *consigned* to?', a relative, perhaps, of Bishop's own question of travel: 'Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?'

For all Mlinko's voyaging, it is the thick, swampy abundance of Florida – its 'disquieting kaleidoscope' of exotic plants and creatures – that takes centre stage. There is a sense of paradox about the place, at once beautiful and slightly gruesome, home to 'voluptuary' hummingbirds and 'emerald frog[s]', shrouded 'in an ecstasy of coastal mist' but also under threat from hurricanes and muddy flooding, trees affected by 'huanglongbing' (a disease producing 'Grotesque oranges'), the fort at Dry Tortugas slowly 'sinking peu à peu'. Bishop's own poem of Florida is tugged between the same extremes, a 'state that floats in brackish water, / held together by mangrove roots / that bear while living oysters in clusters, / and when dead strew white swamps with skeletons', later picturing 'the monstrous, endless, sagging coast-line', 'delicately ornamented'.

And yet, this swampiness creates a pleasing tension in Mlinko's poems, present in her (delicately ornamental?) use of form, her beautifully constructed stanzas, the fluidity of her controlled experiments, her Paul Muldoonesque rhymes and half-rhymes that 'slow the language roaring down the page' (confessor/hairdresser; Miami Zoo/peekaboo). Present, also, are Mlinko's trademark flourishes of unpredictable, flamboyant (i.e. *flamingo-like*) vocabulary, sudden polysyllabic mouthfuls that catch us off-guard; 'amphibrachic', 'melismatic' and 'sacerdotal' surface in the opening poem alone. While these sophisticated structures and (*Write it!*) sesquipedalian encounters can be flummoxing, they are equally delightful and often impressive, like watching the performance of a sculptor or an acrobat. More than this, they seem deliberately to slow the pace of Mlinko's writing – and our reading – to that of the Florida swamp, 'semiotically rich', a reminder that the language of poetry is a thicker substance than the stuff of prose, generating meaning at a different speed.

What the enforced slowness of Mlinko's poetry reveals, to me, is something of the nature of coincidence, the

powerful unlikeliness of almost everything that happens, 'Factored into sight by a hairs breadth, / or the turn of the tide': the echoes of history, accidents of evolution, the sheer, surreal coincidence of one word, thought or incident now rhyming with another 'out of magical thin

air', a form of enchantment, 'As if / a production of Ariel and Prospero / were pending'. These are difficult and ornate poems, though ones which help us, in the words of Seamus Heaney, to hear 'a music that you would never have known / To listen to', so 'Listen now again'.