Leaves Borrowed From Human Flesh **by Abigail Ardelle Zammit**
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Through her first two books – *Voices From the Land of Trees* (2007) and 2015's *Portrait of a Woman With Sea Urchin* – Maltese poet and critic Abigail Ardelle Zammit established herself as a poet of considerable power, intensity and depth of emotion, with a strongly feminist core, and a hunger for experience in all its glorious if often painful variety. This volume, which culminates in a section commemorating her compatriot, the investigative journalist Daphne Caruano Galizia, who was notoriously assassinated in 2017, gives further weight to her reputation as a respected, albeit hitherto under-recognised voice in European poetry.

The collection is propelled by a sense that to be human we must keep voyaging, both outwardly and inwardly, back and forth in time, between myth and reality. This permanent, fully energised inquisitiveness ('gorging on dopamine', to quote one poem) takes Zammit zigzagging from Iceland to Panama, Aboriginal Australia to Chile's Atacama Desert, Ovid to a range of contemporary writers including Deryn Rees-Jones and Mikhail Bahktin. It also materialises in an audaciously broad range of styles and forms, encompassing ekphrastic poems, a fluidly modern version of villanelle, erasure, words scattered across pages in leaf-like manner, and fluctuations between portrait and landscape presentation.

Like its predecessor *Portrait of a Woman*, the book, appealing constantly to all the senses, is alive with colour in particular. This stanza from 'Bush Diary' is characteristically rainbow-like:

> Caves whose hues break
> into waves, rusts
> terracottas, grooves
> oranging into belief—
> bright ambers, pale pinks,
> the reds of lichens
> dotting the rock-face,
> ironstone staining
> your hand—

I strongly agree with both Helen Ivory, author of *Constructing the Witch*, who has marvelled at Zammit's 'alchemic' language and the way her 'poems as spells rise up from the page', and fellow poet Jenny Grassl's description of *Leaves Borrowed*'s offerings as 'deft travellers across space and time, carrying music and shifting shapes with which to imagine the female body and experience.'

Zammit has stated that in her work she allows herself 'to be visited by otherness', focussing on poetry as an act of compassion. Central to these aspects of her work is one of the collection's finest poems, 'My ears—antlers carved from light', with Zammit viscerally and tenderly imagining a Roman woman, from the first half of the fourth century, who describes her own funeral:

> I hear sobbing, the scrape of a spade,

The long cry of a chough.

Soon comes a typical instance of Zammit's sensuous earthiness:

I taste soil in my mouth,
lapis lazuli, then the thud of a stone—
they are laying me down.

However, the woman's spirit is not dead – she may be *laid* down, but she is not *put* down – as she recalls a life of proto-feminist resistance:

Lapis manalis will close eyes, lips,
those softer parts which would not
yield to a husband's calloused hands
but spat a child's head, then another,
and another.

'Softer parts' may seem coyly euphemistic, connoting the supposedly weaker sex, but in case we've been lulled into cosy sentimentalism about conjugal relations, the firm refusal of 'would not / yield' and the indignant ferocity of 'spat' soon put paid to that notion.

Like so much of Zammit's work, the poem is 'part-elegy, part-warcry,' in the words of Rohan Chhetri. The spirit of resilience extends beyond the grave, particularly with regard to generations of men who have impacted the woman's life:

Let no man visit me in the afterlife.
Neither my father, nor my father's father.

One senses the full force of 'Let no man': not merely the 'wish subjunctive' form (equivalent to 'May no man'), but the more direct, militant meaning of 'do not permit, under any circumstances'. (It's later echoed in 'Ode to a Pound of Flesh' , through the even more powerful 'Let no man set foot on you again', where sexual conquest is chillingly parallelled with imperialistic invasion.) The poem's ending makes clear that death will provide a release, and relief, that the woman could never find in life:

If life has dealt me its scorpion blade,
only death can leave me light

with the final, alliterative words implying both that she has been disburdened of a heavy weight upon her, and has been granted a way out of darkness.

The feminist thread is picked up in many later poems, such as 'What Is It to Be the Blind Woman at the Helm', where resentment against a faithless lover makes the focus more contemporary:

I think of you

freighting your body from one
girl to the next, each name

surrendered to memory, and the
lies you told between pairings …

The embittered speaker recounts how

You came back to me
with the hum of betrayal

deep in your throat, and my own flesh
cleft like this river's—

where that Emily-Dickinsonian long dash – replicated many times in this collection, and here reinforced in its impact by the judicious enjambement – very much enacts the 'flesh / cleft'.

Female inner torment is examined, albeit in a different context, in another memorable poem, 'Seven Women in a Thatched Roof Hut', set in Armila village, Panama. The profound suffering of the isolated women is born of frustration at their inability to escape the confines of their village, and their lives, as they self-examine in search of a solution:

And all this time we've been rummaging
through ourselves in the dark, our body's
engine almost stalling, wanting to walk
somewhere beyond the village,
the dirt, relentless, settling inside us.

That inward delving is in itself a form of metaphor for Zammit's poetic quest. As she expresses it in a fascinating two-way interview with Jenny Grassl, for Tupelo Quarterly, 'I look outwards to be able to look within, to dig deeper into what it is that ails me into writing/being.'

Yet although these examples may give the impression that Zammit's perspective is undeviatingly negative, many other moments suggest a more hopeful view. When the murdered Daphne first appears, she is portrayed as defiant in death:

Ice cracks beneath
my boots, fails to blot out the memory

of a woman, blasted—burnt pieces of
what she used to be

assembled for the autopsy.

Just as her body is put together, so her place in history is restored, cemented. The assassins' objectives prove counter-productive, as Daphne's fame, and her potently anti-corruption message, are globalised, rather than extinguished. In the collection's penultimate part, dealing exclusively with Galizia, Zammit opts to use erasure-style blackouts on many pages, partly as a direct reference to 'Black 17', the organisation behind the murder, but mainly as a satirical means of reinforcing the spectacular failure of the bid to silence the outspoken reporter.

The volume's fourth and final part draws upon Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as the mythical Daphne is juxtaposed with her very real namesake. In perhaps this section's standout piece, 'From

Myrrha and Cinyras Book X', Zammit reiterates the humanity-nature nexus that runs throughout the collection, alongside the frequent imagery around trees, with a broadly optimistic takeaway based on the importance of language and communication:

> —But, come,
> break loose
> voice—
> warn, probe,
> draw closer—
> name guilt in speech,
> cross open fields—
> transform her marrow,
> her blood to sap;
>
> and tree
> envelop
> her breasts—
> she will be
> remembered.
> Come forth words;
> trunk bends and
> moans; boughs
> speak, deliver
> body to form.

'She will be / remembered'…those words could allude to Daphne, to the ancient Roman, to the Everywoman addressed throughout the volume, but I feel they should also apply to Zammit herself, who deserves tremendous credit for this inspirational collection, as do Etruscan Press for backing her formidable talent and commitment.