Mary MacRae, Inside the Brightness of Red (Second Light Publications, 2010), 96pp, £8.95, ISBN 978-0-9546934-8-0, reproduced by the kind permission of the author, Martyn Crucefix and publisher, Acumen.

Mary MacRae's 2007 debut collection was titled *As Birds Do*. It is true that birds feature variously in that and this, her sadly posthumous new collection, but if we are unaware of the earlier title's provenance, we might anticipate no more than a delicate, poetic take on the natural world, the kind of thing that fills so many small magazines. But MacRae alludes to the moment in *Macbeth*, when Lady Macduff and her son contemplate death. The mother asks, "How will you live?" and the son, with a wisdom far beyond his years, replies, "As birds do Mother . . . . With what I get I mean". MacRae's poetry is full of such emotionally-charged, vital identifications with natural creatures and, more profoundly, with the sense that what can sustain us in life must be derived from everyday common objects.

As a title, *Inside the Brightness of Red*, also flirts a little with poetic affectation, but once inside the book's covers, it is MacRae's precise, even astringent, penetration that is so impressive. She reads the world around her and finds spiritual meanings. It is no surprise that R.S. Thomas supplies the epigraph to this new collection: "It is this great absence / that is like a presence, that compels / me to address it without hope / of a reply". So a poem called 'Yellow Marsh Iris' promises to be a naturalist's observation then startlingly wrong-foots the reader with its opening line ("It's how I imagine prayer must be") and proceeds to its seamless business of combining accuracy of observation with an emotional and intellectual narrative. She studies the flower stems crammed into a glass vase:

> their stiff stems magnified
> by water, criss-crossing
> white, pale green, green
> in a shadowy coolness

We are reminded that there is a kind of intensity of observation that succeeds in prising open our relationship with the outer world in such a way that while encountering the Other, we more clearly glimpse ourselves. MacRae concludes her process of "looking and looking" at the flowers that has given rise to the sense that "they seem to hold / all words, all meaning, / and what I'm reading / is a selving, a creation."

MacRae's visions are almost always peripheral, fleeting, askance. The unfolding of daffodils – which, in a quite different age, Wordsworth could contemplate steadily and then stow away for future use – here can never be more than something

> waiting for us somewhere in the wings
> like angels,
>
> your darting after-image
> between the pear-tree
> and the brick wall.
> ('Daffodils')

In the same vein, MacRae has Bonnard, paint his mistress, Marthe de Meligny, and declare that his sensibility is triggered by "looking askew". The visionary moment occurs only when "Glimpsed through the half-open door / or the crack of the hinge-gap" ('Bonnard to Marthe') and this collection's editors (Myra Schneider and Dilys Wood) have drawn it to a close with yet another such moment: "Turning back to look through an open door" the narrator sees an ordinary room "utterly transformed, / drained dry and clear, unweighted" ('Un-Named').

It may be that this ability to be sustained by scraps and glimpses, the sense that the self is most fully resolved in a lack of egotism, in its encounter with ordinary things, can diminish some of the sting of

mortality. In a poem like ‘White’, MacRae manages to celebrate again the ordinariness of familiar things while at the same time sustaining a contentedness (or at least an absence of fear) at the prospect of the self’s vanishing: “You can disappear in a house where / you feel at home; the rooms are spaces / for day-dreams, maps of an interior / turned inside out”. Rather than Macbeth, it is Hamlet’s resolve to “let be” that comes to mind as this calm, accessible, colourful and wonderfully dignified poem concludes:

Let
it all go; soon the door of your room

will be locked, leaving only a slight
hint of you still, a ghostly perfume
lingering in the threadbare curtains and sheets.

But MacRae’s contemplation of her own death, most likely, was no such safely distanced envisaging. Dying at 67 years old, she’d had only 10 years of writing poetry, but it had evidently become a vessel into which she could pour her experience without ever abandoning herself to artistic ill-discipline. ‘Prayer’ is almost too painful to read. The narrator is emerging from the “thick dark silt” of anaesthetic to hear someone sobbing and a second voice trying to offer comfort. As her befuddled perceptions clear and the poem’s tight triplet form unfolds, the second voice is understood to be saying “’Don’t cry, Mary, / there’s no need to cry’”. The collection’s title poem can bluntly report that “the cancer’s come back” yet artfully balances such devastating news with the landscape of Oare Marsh in Kent where colours “are so spacious, / and have such depth they’re like lighted rooms // we could go into” (‘Inside the Brightness of Red’).

For MaCrae’s interest in and skill with poetic form, we need look no further than the extraordinary glose on a quatrain from Alice Oswald (the earlier collection contained another on lines from Mary Oliver). For most poets, this form is little more than an exhibitionist high-wire act, but MacRae’s poems are moving and complete. Her use of poetic form here, particularly in some of these last poems, reminds me of Tony Harrison’s conviction that its containment “is like a life-support system. It means I feel I can go closer to the fire, deeper into the darkness . . . I know I have this rhythm to carry me to the other side" (Tony Harrison: Critical Anthology, ed. Astley, Bloodaxe Books, 1991, p.43). Appropriately, in ‘Jar’, she contemplates with admiration an object that has “gone through fire, / risen from ashes and bone-shards / to float, nameless, into our air”. Here, the narrator movingly lays aside the wary scepticism of the Thomas epigraph and rests her cheek on the jar’s warmth to “feel its gravity-pull / as if it proved the afterlife of things”.

This inspiring collection contains a short Afterword by Mimi Khalvati who MacRae frequently praised as a critical figure in her work’s development. Khalvati lauds her as “a poet of the lyric moment in all its facets”. She judges MacRae’s ten years work as an “extraordinarily coherent” body of poems, suggesting that, among the likes of Oswald and Oliver, MacRae’s work is “modest but not lacking in ambition”. For me, her two collections certainly exhibit a modesty before the world of nature that is really a genuine humility, allowing both the physical and spiritual worlds to flower in her work. This was her true ambition, pursued in full self-awareness and one that, before her sad leaving, she had triumphantly fulfilled.

Martyn Crucefix
December 2010

www.acumen-poetry.co.uk