

## Poetry Anthology Review by Paul Catherall

*Linear Hymns*, a collection of lyrics and poems – by  
**Giles Paley-Phillips**

This poetry anthology is 'narrated by a twenty something man still trying to come to terms with the death of his mother to leukaemia when he was 6 years old'. Profits from the book are also donated to a leukaemia charity.

The book contains around forty poems, split into three sections entitled 'The Change', 'The Pause' and 'The Warmth'. The first part seems to dwell on the writer's feelings at the time of his mother's illness and passing - seen in poems such as 'Dr. Zivago' and 'Storms on the Cemetery.' The second part of the book seems to concern the grieving process, whilst the last part dwells on the aftermath and the poet's coming to terms with his loss in later life.

The poems themselves are abstract rather than lyrical, written in a style reminiscent of the expressionist poets Sylvia Plath, Francis Berry and Roy Fisher. However, whilst the expressionist poets often reflect on conceptual issues of mortality, it can be seen that Paley-Phillips' response conveys a range of reflections on bereavement localised around his own personal loss, with each poem devoted exclusively to this experience. It is this thematic consistency which lends the book so much appeal, with each poem drawing on its own individual subject matter, whilst also adding to our wider perspective on the author's experience conveyed through the work.

In the first section of the book, 'The Change', we are presented with scenes from the illness and passing of the author's mother. The poem 'Dr. Zhivago' seems to parody the medical world, the 'saintly, even faintly amused' doctor contrasts with the naïve, child-like faith of the speaker. The innocent expectations of the poet as a child are clearly portrayed. Another poem, 'Terminal Orchid' presents a contrast to the Zhivago poem; the poet's mother has approached a 'soothsayer', although we are unsure if this is simply an

acquaintance or an actual fortune-teller, the soothsayer reassures that 'You'll carry on, just fine'. This is confirmed by the speaker's ironic comment that 'she'll look a million dollars, in that grey hairpiece we found'. The poem ends reflecting on the strength of the poet's mother and despite all these self-deceptions and empty reassurances, the poet has been 'Taught so much by your strength...'

The poem, 'God Bless Sympathy', reflects on the 'continuing game' of the author's mother in being the object of sympathy; the author considers that sympathy is just a social convention, an expression resembling performance played out 'even when it's not in key'. Another poem in this section, 'The jewel encrusted panda sleeps alone' contains personal imagery which obviously has some special meaning for the poet. We can only speculate if the panda is a toy or other special object which featured in the author's relationship with his mother. The author hints that his mother is now in a place of dreams, possibly reflecting on a coma or other state of unconsciousness, 'You sleep now in dreams I've made, I put them there before night appeared'.

Later poems in this section seem to reflect on the passing of the author's mother. 'Storms on the Cemetery' seems to reflect on the relationship between time and our lives, 'Time has had its good fun, a happy place to be.' The final poem in the section 'Your last dance before Christmas' is a melancholy reflection that the poet's mother is not present at Christmas time, it is '8 days till Christmas' and the poet considers '...if you'd been here, what would it have been like?'. The poet wishes he could see his mother 'dance one last time'.

In the second part of the book, 'The Pause' the poet seems to express his sense of mourning. The poem 'Might be Tomorrow' is an emotional expression of loss - 'I miss you as much, as much as I can miss someone.' The poet is 'scared' that he has forgotten details of his mother, 'touched your hair and face, but this I can't remember.' The poet seems to reflect on his young age at the time of his loss, re-enacting his relationship with her through vivid memories 'I'm going to leave my room now and when I do please smile.'

Later poems in this section seem to reflect on a period of being lost or without sense of purpose, this is most evident in 'Wooden pillow vacation' where the poet appears to shed prior emotions, possibly living rough to escape conventional life and the emotions that accompany this existence; the image of the sea, a destructive metaphor heightens this sense of ablution:

'I've taken to sleeping around,  
On benches along the seafront.  
Their all-wooden pillows,  
Feel pure and undiscerning.'

However, the last poems in this section convey a greater sense of the poet's reconciliation with his loss; poems such as 'Some flowers rest' reflect on the poet's tender memories of his mother as a child, picturing her as 'an angel' in a winter landscape, 'Snow touches my forehead... I remember my angel.'

In the last section of the book 'The warmth', the poet presents his feelings on his mother's loss as an adult coming to terms with his own life. These later poems suggest a grieving process which has occurred long after the loss itself, since the poet can only now comprehend and organise his thoughts as a mature individual. The poem 'Life started yesterday' suggests this sense of delayed morning; the poem suggests the poet has only recently found a voice to express his feelings:

'Lie on a pillow of poems.  
The motion of life is slow.  
I'd forgotten how to talk  
And the sound of my own name.'

Another poem 'All-star cast' reflects sombrely that the author's mother is just a member of his 'family tree', however for him, she is a member of an 'all-star cast'. The poem 'the enchantment' also conveys this sense of reconciliation, suggesting that the poet has reconstructed a precious image of his mother, 'We'll hold you tight like splintered glue, fall in love with every little you.'

In conclusion, the poems express a very personal and emotional perspective on personal loss; all the more vivid due to the fact they are written in direct response to the poet's experience as a young child. We have the impression that the poems represent a form of expression which the poet has only recently discovered as an adult, being unable to process these raw feelings as a child. Whilst some of the poems may appear difficult, they are almost all based around individual metaphors (suggested in the poem's title), this image often represents or expresses some part of the poet's feelings in dealing with his loss, so each poem contributes to the wider perspective we have on the poet and his experience. This is a very touching collection of poems and well worth the effort to explore and enjoy.

The book is sold in aid of the Leukaemia Research charity.

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Giles Paley-Phillips can be contacted at:  
<http://www.gilespaleyphillips.co.uk>

Also see: <http://www.myspace.com/gilespaleyphillips>