

This is Yarrow **by Tara Bergin**



Tara Bergin earns her place on the Next Generation list by virtue of her debut [*This is Yarrow*](#). She writes with a Grimm-like matter-of-factness about sex and violence, folklore and the fantastical, but never veers to the wrong side of fey. In 2012, Bergin completed her Newcastle University PhD research on Ted Hughes' translations of János Pilinszky with a particular interest in how translation affected Hughes' own work, focussed on his collection *Crow*. At Newcastle, she also became involved in the study of the Bloodaxe Books archive which is kept there, and has contributed to a film about its riches.

At the Garage

Ask me:
have I fallen in love with the mechanic?
Perhaps – perhaps, for a moment.
He doesn't know what it is.
It's his hands –
so thickly black with engine oil,
so hard-working, and in such high demand.

Ask me:
is there violence in the dirt?
Perhaps – perhaps, for a moment.
Like a criminal's thumb which gets
held firmly by the prison officer
and is then rolled hard onto gummed paper
so that we know, we know, that he is done for –

and even the backs of the mechanic's hands,
as well as the palms, are all inked black,
and everything they touch will be evidence of him –
the keys, the white receipt, my own hand
or cheek
were he to touch it.

Ask me, ask me how that makes me feel!
My cheeks turn pink with the thought of it,

while his blushes, if he had blushed,
would be hidden behind grease –
a soft deep dirt that is soft and thick
like the ink in tins that etchers use.
It makes the whites of his eyes whiter,
and the blues bluer –

Yes, perhaps I am almost in love with the mechanic.
But it is terribly awkward, face to face.
It is terribly awkward to be in such close proximity
to the mechanic, and the dirty girl on the calendar
who is always there, just visible from the small window
where I go afterwards, to pay.

This is Yarrow

In this country house I had a dream of the city
as if the thick yarrow heads had told me,
as if the choked dove had told me,
or the yellow elder seeds had made me ask –
and in the dream I went up to the dirty bus station
and I saw the black side of the power station
and as if the brown moth's tapping at the window
made me say it I said, do you still love me?
And when I woke and went to the window,
your tender voice told me: this is yarrow,
this is elder, this is the collared dove.

At the Lakes with Roberta

Our guide
(with whom Roberta has already been ingratiating herself
in a horribly forward manner)
has taken us to Windermere,
and tomorrow will take us to Grasmere.
Of course I am eager to see,
first-hand, as it were,
the sources of inspiration,
but I fear Roberta's behaviour
shall spoil the entire experience.

Speaking bluntly: she is far too light-hearted;
rather superficial if one may say such a thing,
and she *flatters* him, that's the point,
she flatters him with her incompetence.
I'm afraid I find it unseemly.

The fact is,
if she continues to distract our guide from his duty as guide,
there will be a breach between Roberta and me.
The fault will lie with her:
it's perfectly clear she came only to enjoy The View –
while I can hardly bear it, you see;

I can hardly bear the weight of this poetic air,
the air that WW breathed: such steep atmosphere.
There's nothing for it: one must simply never travel
with one's female companions.

And now, look:
our guide is daring to quote from 'To the Small Celandine'
(never a favourite of mine)
and Roberta's foolish gasps of pleasure hang on the mist.
It's unfortunate, really, that he has been quite so taken in,
so swallowed up by what one might call
a rather ordinary attractiveness.
And clearly I shall remain ignorant for the rest of the tour
about the more – intimate – details
of a poet's life.

Discussion Ideas

- Mary Douglas in her 1960s book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* famously traced the idea that what is regarded as dirt in a given society is any matter considered out of place. What is the dirt doing in 'At the Garage'? What is dirty, who thinks it is, and why?
- Are you a mechanic? What do / might you feel about this poem if you are / were a mechanic?
- 'At the Lakes With Roberta' is about, among other things, poets and their audiences. Who might Wordsworth himself have sympathies with – Roberta or the voice of the poem? Is the poem a commentary on Tara Bergin's own audience?
- Have you been to Wordsworth's house at Grasmere? Or to the historic house of any writer or public figure you admire? Was the air notably more 'poetic' or charged? What are we looking for in these houses?
- What's the difference between the 'chokered dove' and the 'collared dove' in 'This is Yarrow'?

Tara Bergin was born and grew up in Dublin. She moved to England in 2002 and currently lives in North Yorkshire. In 2012 she completed her PhD research at Newcastle University on Ted Hughes's translations of János Pilinszky. Her poems have been published in *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *Modern Poetry in Translation* and *Poetry Nation Review*, as well as in Carcanet's anthology *New Poetries V*. She was awarded the Seamus Heaney Prize for Poetry in 2014. *This is Yarrow* (Carcanet) is her first collection.

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