

Review of 'Inside the Brightness of Red' in The North magazine, reproduced with kind permission of the author, John Killick, and publisher, The Poetry Business.

With Mary MacRae we come to the most substantial of these collections in terms of bulk, and also the most elusive. It is elusive because there is a reaching out, a yearning even, for what is impossible to achieve (a continuation for someone who was dying) and what is impossible to express (the flux of experience, apprehensions of otherness). Many of these poems, on the one hand burgeon with colour, and on the other are filled with images of almost-absence, often connected with rooms. Here are examples of the former:

More and more what matters
is the blue's unburdening centre

*

The ginkgo leaves are falling, small yellow
hearts, like love-letters slipped through a window

*

By the wall the tree peony's in flower
for the first time, its white
crinkly-paper head, gold stamens
unwrapped like a present

and of the latter:

Glimpsed through the half-window
or the crack of the hinge-gap

*

Now his room's in a frame, like sky
and trees reflected in a mirror at strange
intimate angles, somewhere empty
other people live, afterwards.

*

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.

The subject-matter of *Inside the Brightness of Red* is wide-ranging: childhood and parents, parenthood, plants, creatures, landscapes, works of art, and, of course, the cancer that kills. The forms, too, are varied: sonnets, ghazals, a villanelle, a glose. However ineffable the apprehension, the expression is tightly held by the form chosen. Clearly Mary MacRae was a major talent who had already attained maturity. It is symptomatic of the crazy poetry world in which we live that this absorbing, profound collection has been brought out by the smallest of the four publishers represented here and is little known. It is an achievement that should be celebrated.