

A Review of *My Archipelago*, poems by Kathryn Rantala

Kathryn Rantala's most recent volume of poetry, *My Archipelago*, is now available at Amazon, from Sandy Press, Santa Barbara, California. The Edmonds, Washington, poet is also the author of *The Finnish Orchestra*, *3 Letters & Julius*, and other works of poetry, as well as collections of fiction, most recent among them *A Little Family*, from Spuyten Duyvil in 2023. Daniel Borzutzky has said of her poems, "In these shimmering poems . . . the mind and the word and the body move . . . towards a re-envisioning of human life and nonhuman life with a poetics that is thoughtful and surprising and rigorous . . ."

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One finds everywhere in Kathryn Rantala's recent collection, *My Archipelago* (Sandy Press, fall 2024), sensuous pleasures for the eye and, overwhelmingly, the ear. Her title is apt for the small islands of verse, which sit lightly on the page—their short measures and airiness, a refreshment in the midst of the terrible density and noise of our contemporary life. She achieves a quietude in these poems, which is not the silence of a cloistered vision, although early on, we encounter the apparition of a nun distilling olive oil or spirits:

Margharetta at the Still

First cold press
the dew
doe
sing of veil
in the travertine
*
dawn
the dimple sloe

wimpling wet electrics
rush the down drone
done
domine
domine

drip coil gullet of the long way

The poem exemplifies the whole of her compositional method in *My Archipelago*: short bursts of sound and fragmented images that create a wholeness, which has only an implicit narrative and whose meaning is not necessarily apparent. She has said elsewhere, acknowledging an early influence, “. . . the way to meaning [for me] is more intuitive than utilitarian. I owe a debt to W. S. Merwin, whose early work is nearly totemic in its investigations of doubt, quest, and vacancy.” “Margharetta at the Still” is a portrait rendered with feelings; indeed, Rantala’s poetry is very much about feelings—hers, for the subject at hand, conveyed in highly stressed lines, whose lyricism is strained almost to breaking. But it does not break. To read this poet’s work is to be aware of the articulation of words—how they are assembled in the mouth from syllables, consonants, and vocables. Her lines are richly textured, a quality that makes them a pleasure to say aloud or in the mind.

Wandering Aengus

Hazel burst brilliantine

moons woodsfuls

the outside others

son the sun

the linnet-limbed

at deep dappled core

could not stay in

*

green-gray waves above the spiny urchin

all the little

all the little

arc deliberates the damp dim hair

*

And so we arrive at another major influence on this volume and her six previous ones: Gerard Manley Hopkins. As Rantala has said of him, “The plainly felt love and joy he took in words (and lavished on them) . . . their articulation . . . and the emphasis he placed on their parts, as well as his ecstasies and epiphanies, early on these rigors disciplined my lyrical imagination.” She quoted from “On a Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People” as an example of his music, which delights her: “A juice rides rich through bluebells, in vine leaves / And beauty’s dearest veriest vein is tears.” And also this, from Hopkins’s ecstatic “God’s Grandeur”: “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” The electricity and freshness present in the poetry of this nineteenth-century iconoclast, whose “sprung rhythms,” organic forms, and concentration on “thingness” can be felt everywhere in hers. Often, his poems seem on the verge of dissolving as he wrings out every superfluous atom of sound to make a lively and living thing. Writing in the twenty-first century, fretted by breakneck rhythms and a harrowed sensibility, Rantala composes lines that are even more torqued, more “sprung,” than Hopkins’s and seem to atomize as we read them.

The phrase “wimpling wet electrics,” in which the medieval rubs up against the modern age, is characteristic of her poetic strategy, which, I hasten to say, does not feel like a strategy. Rather it

passes over us like a sound wave carrying the particularities of diverse times. Rantala's late husband was a renowned anthropologist, and she accompanied him on many field trips abroad, which were also trips into the remote past of the Hominid. It is, I think, the experience of what lies buried, of the strata and deposits left by time on a grand scale, that informs her work, as in this piece from the book's "Coordinates" section:

41.7498° N, 12.6485° E

[Gandolfo, Italy]

morning evening blue orange Tuscany

Bologna

gold and red

Venezia enmasked

floods and

south the Minotaur

and

no end to it

I said earlier in this appreciation of *My Archipelago* that her poetic line—short, varied in length, and muscular—is charged with her feelings toward her subjects and, in particular, the words she summons and sets on the page—*stage* would be equally appropriate. (Her true subject, I think, is language.) And yet the product, the poem, does not seem subjective; at least, the emotions do not appear to be her own. They belong to her creations and, as such, are objective—i.e., objects. As in poems by William Carlos Williams or George Oppen, one feels them to be objects made with words upon a white page.

Confessional verse or its contemporary incarnations are still with us, and I, for one, welcome this other mode of expression, one that is, at once, cool and hot, like that of her third major influence, Wallace Stevens. Unlike him, however, she eschews symbols. She treats us to richly variegated, painterly surfaces, which, nonetheless, sound the depths of the human spirit and collective mind. (Reading *My Archipelago*, I am made to think of paintings by de Kooning or Joan Mitchell.) Her exacting verses can best be seen—and heard—as acts of unfolding, of emotions and thoughts (her work has those, too), of coming into being, all caught in the present tense. “The Dinner Party” is an example:

Sag-lipped candles

basking

flasks

the floor on fire

goodbye to the other

goodbye to the other

sill of the evening

*

guests let out

the yard in eely sweat

pings with moons

I serpentine

a scuffed ball

Rantala has, as a mature poet must, surmounted her influences to create a personality of language all her own. You may want to know of whom, of her contemporaries, I am reminded when I read *My Archipelago*. It may be that I am not so well read in their work as one should be who takes on a critic's role. All I can say, in this regard, is Kathryn Rantala's poems are very much her own. She is a poet who walks through the world and history, intently looking, listening, and feeling. What a fine adventure she has made of her life, as she sits and composes at what she calls *Due Balconi*, in Edmonds, Washington, a short walk from Puget Sound, where my favorite poem in *My Archipelago* may have arrived like an Annunciation:

The Land of Chinoiserie

Alive the succulent crustacean

red box

fisted bee

the hinge of paper

nothing to the steep light

That "hinge of paper," which is the poem, connects one disparate thing with another, and by her movement of the hinge, the poet reveals, seriously or playfully, the world and its operations from surprising vantages. To see and hear afresh, to make the world anew, are what we want, mostly, from poetry. These are Kathryn Rantala's gifts to her readers.

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Norman Lock is the author of many novels, short fiction collections, stage and radio plays. He received the 1979 Aga Khan prize for fiction, given by *The Paris Review*, as well as fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the New Jersey Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, in poetry. The twelfth and final novel in Lock's *The American Novels* series, published by Bellevue Literary Press, will appear in July 2025. Joyce Carol Oates wrote of it: "Norman Lock has created a memorable portrait gallery of American subjects, in a succession of audaciously imagined, wonderfully original, and beautifully written novels unlike anything in our literature."