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Stephen Knight

Home Truths

Was It for This

By Hannah Sullivan

(Faber & Faber 112pp £12.99)

Toys/Tricks/Traps

By Christopher Reid

(Faber & Faber 96pp £14.99)

This Afterlife: Selected Poems

By A E Stallings

(Carcenet 240pp £15.99)

Hannah Sullivan's poetry is exceptional in the specificity and candour with which it draws on autobiography and retrospection. *Was It for This*, the follow-up to her T S Eliot Prize-winning debut, *Three Poems*, is a second instalment of life writing, its title pointedly taken from the opening of Wordsworth's two-book version of *The Prelude*. In three long pieces, Sullivan considers new motherhood in the shadow of Grenfell Tower, contemplates reaching the midpoint in her life as she turns forty-one and returns to subjects explored in her first book: her time in New York in her twenties, the death of her father and the birth of her first child. Rented, bought or inherited, the home is a key motif, most troublingly in 'Tenants', where the theme in places seems to resist poetic treatment ('Before the fire, the firemen weren't informed/That rainscreen cladding might be flammable') but which closes with the devastating image of 'sprinklers turning in the garden squares'.

'I wanted all of it again to do again,' she says twice in 'Happy Birthday'. The granular detail of her writing is a clutching at the moment, or a desire for the restoration of the past. The result is unusually dry-eyed pathos. Sullivan records the names of places, brands and medications, and, with a precision worthy of Elizabeth Bishop, she captures 'peanuts rattling in their woody skin' and postnatal discharge 'the texture of a custard dim-sum bun', and recalls the varnished slats of the airing cupboard in a childhood home 'speckled with perfectly formed drops of shining dark brown'. Robert Lowell declared that 'memory is genius' and he is evoked, too, in the book's most striking feature, the 52-page title piece, which, with its predominance of prose, recalls '91 Revere Street', the memoir at the heart of Lowell's seminal *Life Studies*.

The collection murmurs with anxiety: Sullivan is haunted by the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire and drawn to images of claustrophobia – YouTube footage of a man trapped in an elevator for a whole weekend; descriptions of the MI6 employee found decomposing in a hold-all; women creating ad hoc workspaces during lockdown. Lacking the brio of her first collection's 'You, Very Young in New York', *Was It for This* is a necessarily sober work.

Toys/Tricks/Traps is also autobiographical, though Christopher Reid is a more circumspect poet than Sullivan. Opening with the poet's infancy in Hong Kong, the collection extends to his boarding school years via periods in Egypt, Sri Lanka and the Home Counties. Thirty years Sullivan's senior, Reid writes with an English reserve born of a 1950s childhood. It would be a stretch to call the enterprise Wordsworthian, though it has modest 'spots of time', Reid recalling wind-up toys, childhood illness, conkers, I spy, the school play. The collection includes 'Nebuchadnezzar', written when Reid was eight years old, his precocity revealed only by the appended date of composition. There has always been a childlike quality to Reid's poetic voice – the air above a desert road 'went wibble-wobble' – which is all the more endearing now he is in his seventies. In 'Mystery of the Two Ages' he identifies his psychological age, the age he was happiest, as eleven. And yet, addressing his incomprehensible younger self in another poem, he asks: 'Were you ever truly a child?/The company of other children/never much took your fancy.'

There is no yearning for youth in Reid's retrospection; nor is there a desire to dig deep into the past. 'Mirrors', in which the poet sees his face becoming his father's, concludes with the hint of a tricky relationship, while, on the facing page, a poem about schoolboy rugby ends, 'That's me there, hesitating to tackle.' This is good manners in action: Reid is discreet, reluctant to embarrass even the dead. As well as his subjects, Reid also considers the reader – 'You have to work at the job/if you want to be listened to' – hence the elegant craftsmanship of these sixty-nine poems, which delight in rhyme and operate with the lightest of touches, qualities which make his poetry such a rare pleasure.

Toys/Tricks/Traps includes a poem paying tribute to Lucretius, so Reid might consider the classicist A E Stallings a kindred spirit, her work as a translator including a version of *De rerum natura*. Born in the United States but now living in Greece, Stallings is the most European of American poets, her virtuosity a continent away from the casual approach of her stateside contemporaries. Favouring the monologue and advancing a cast drawn from classical mythology, including Arachne, Apollo and Persephone, she is a half-glimpsed presence in her poems, referring to herself it seems in the second or third person. Is she the faded blonde in a hair salon at the winter solstice asking for a colour adjustment, 'For rays of honey to eclipse the grey,/And for the light to lengthen just a little'? Is she the young daughter fishing with her father who would 'rather have been elsewhere, her look told'? In the end, it doesn't matter. These are fine poems that do not depend on a straightforward connection between writer and subject. We can enjoy Stallings's verse for the pleasure of a rhyme expertly clicked into place, for the sophisticated music of the phrasing, and for the wit of machines mourning the loss of people and the poet consoling a friend for breaking an ancient pot: 'it must mean something to survive the weather/Of the Ages – earthquake, flood, and war –/Only to shatter in your very hands.'

It says a great deal about the consistency of Stallings's writing that some of the many poems in *This Afterlife* that seem ripe for anthologising appear in a section of previously uncollected work. 'Song: The Rivers of Hell' is that rarest of poems: one that seems always to have existed:

INDENT The Rivers of Hell in flood
Course through my veins like blood –
I'm intimate with four –
But there's one river more:

Kneeling at its brink,
Still I could not drink
The waters of Forget.
At least, not yet, not yet. INDENT