

# Review of *Bone House* by Moyra Donaldson

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by Seán Hewitt

In her introduction to Moyra Donaldson's latest collection, *Bone House* (Doire Press, 72pp, €12), Paula Meehan calls up a similar imperative of scope crystallised into a single life, centering the importance of the lyric: "The exploration and interrogation of private memory", she writes, "especially through the mitochondria of the matrilinear legacy is so precise and exact that the poet's life... becomes mirror to a whole culture of religious and social woundedness." Following her 2019 collection *Carnivorous* (Doire Press), Donaldson continues her exploration of spectrality, the looping of memory and the present moment, attending to the festivals of Beltane and Samhain, so that often these poems confound time and feel poised between worlds, knitting all the tenses of experience into the lyric "now".

There are weaker poems here, where the thought feels slightly unfinished (as in *Daughters Who Dance With Death* and *Prayer to Black*) and, unusually, the collection finds its strength in the middle section, shirking the usual editorial wisdom of bookending works with the strongest poems. That said, when Donaldson is at her best, she is startling and unsettling. In an ekphrastic poem after Rembrandt, her eye for image and inference condenses into a sense of inevitable tragedy focused through the figure of the mother:

Mary's face is an exhausted moon,  
shadows under her dark eyes

and it is with reluctance  
that she parts her cloak  
to reveal the infant  
sleeping, oblivious in her lap.

In Amsterdam, the artist  
inks a new plate -  
*The Descent From the Cross*,  
the dark night over Golgotha.

This attraction to violence, and to what another moving lyric calls *A Sudden Shaft of Light*, where a "demented mother"

suddenly and briefly recognises the speaker, has a surreality too. Visions pull together various impossibilities which seem to cluster a traumatic history into Donaldson's own experience of loss:

News has come through -  
in the morning my father is to hang -

my mother draws the curtains  
for we have been disgraced -

my father, dead thirty-eight years,  
is to hang in the morning.

For all the book's darkness, however, there are moments of comedy and tenderness stitched through the collection. There is an attention to a sort of mysticism or religiosity, of passage between the dead and the living, the present and the lost, which can by turns channel tortuous images and bright ones, as in the collection's final poem. *Hearing*, in which a singing bowl is struck in front of a listening baby, draws out a smile, and seems an image of the mind cleared of its otherwise brooding receptivity to spirits "as concentric rings / of pure sound fill the ordinary day / with what could be prayer".