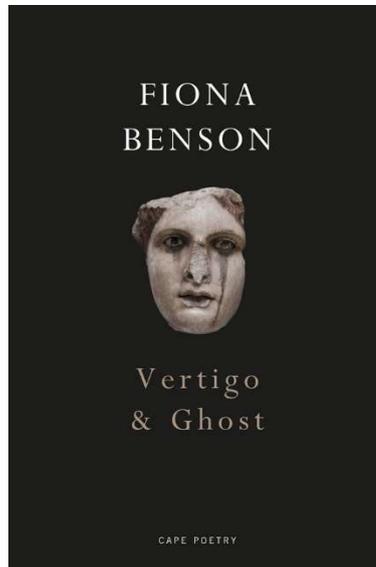


Vertigo & Ghost **by Fiona Benson**



Fiona Benson received her PhD from St Andrews' University. She won an Eric Gregory Award in 2006 and a Faber New Poets Award in 2009. Her first collection, *Bright Travellers* (Cape 2015), was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. It won the 2015 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the 2015 Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry Prize for First Full Collection. Fiona lives in Mid Devon with her husband and their two daughters. *Vertigo & Ghost* (Cape) is her second collection.

Photo © Gareth Franklin

Reviews

It is the Zeus poems that will get *Vertigo & Ghost* talked about, but the second part of the book is much more than a coda. It starts off traditionally, with poems on a naturalist theme ("Spring broke out but my soul did not. / It kept to sleet and inwards fog") but soon a smart sequencing becomes clear. We move from nature to humanity via the animalistic act of childbirth with "its kingdom / of excrement / and offal", and then to parenthood. This may be well-covered terrain but Benson finds new approaches: "In the Milk Days of Your Youth" is about the mystery for an only child of the arrival of a new sibling, "your parents somehow gone". The reader is always being subtly moved on, and the book ends where the personal meets the political, in a series of poems that are looser and more flowing in their language. (*The Guardian*)

This desire for breaking through to some version of heaven, the 'heart's own kingdom' as per 'Two Sparrows' is forlorn. In part that's thanks to the speaker's being 'wheeled and governed', to her locus of feeling and control always being external, and to poems which are as good a portrait of depression as any in recent years ('like a bound and stifled fly, half paralysed,/drugged dumb, its soft and intermittent buzz,/its torpid struggle in the spider's sick cocoon' – 'Fly'). It's also partly to do with the atmosphere of danger, or permanent threat, in which these speakers operate. '[A]lways some woman is running to catch up her children', games of hide and seek are training for concealment, and the certain fear voiced in 'Wood Song' takes a few readings to announce itself, but is there in its lack of question, the feeling this isn't conjecture or parable: 'Daughters, when they come/we will hide...'. There is no 'if', here, and one feels the redundancy of explaining the 'they', because there is always a 'they'. The best that can be hoped for, among all the controlling, external forces and mental unease pressing in is that there might be moments, as in 'Beatitude (Ah Bright Wings)', where one is 'a compass to the currents, briefly healed'. Benson here shows us the real, terrifying world in musical, natural scenes which are immediately memorable, whose dark fruit is brewed from sorrow and the condensing pressures of inescapable love. To quote the final line of the book, 'Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all'. (*The White Review*).

'Ace of Bass'

That was the summer
hormones poured into me
like an incredible chemical cocktail
into a tall iced glass, my teenage heart
a glossy, maraschino cherry
bobbing on top as that rainbow
shimmered through me, lighting me up
like a fish, and I was drunk,
obsessed, desperate to be touched,
colour streaming from my iridescent body

as the wide summer night threw open its doors
and called us into the evening to sit in its loveseat
and gossip about boys, though we'd have fucked
anyone back then – each other, had we dared,
right there on the tennis courts – all us unparented girls
released from the boarding house to *practise our backhand*,
desire between us like a shared addiction
in its crooked spoon, desire and the holding back,
the terrible restraint

as we listened to the top 40, or our three CDs
till the batteries ran down, till the asphalt's grit

had pressed its intricate red pattern on our thighs,
and we talked about who's done what with whom
and how it felt, all of us quickening,
and sex wasn't here yet, but it was coming,
and we were running towards it,
its gorgeous euphoric mist;
pushing into our own starved bodies at night
for relief, like the after-calm might last,
like there was a deep well of love on the other side.

'(Zeus)'

days I talked with Zeus
I ate only ice
felt the blood trouble and burn
under my skin

found blisters
on the soft parts
of my body

bullet-proof glass
and a speaker-phone between us
and still I wasn't safe

thunder moved in my brain
tissue-crease
haemorrhage

I kept the dictaphone running
it recorded nothing
but my own voice
vulcanised and screaming
you won't get away with this

'Eurofighter Typhoon'

My daughters are playing outside with plastic hoops;
the elder is trying to hula, over and over -
it falls off her hips, but she keeps trying,
and the younger is watching and giggling,
and they're happy in the bright afternoon.
I'm indoors at the hob with the door open
so I can see them, because the elder might trip,
and the younger is still a baby and liable to eat dirt,

when out of clear skies a jet comes in low
over the village. At the first muted roar
the elder runs in squealing then stops in the kitchen,
her eyes adjusting to the dimness, looking foolish
and unsure. I drop the spoon and bag of peas
and leave her frightened and tittering, wiping my hands
on my jeans, trying to walk and not run,
because I don't want to scare the baby
who's still sat on the patio alone, looking for her sister,
bewildered, trying to figure why she's gone –
all this in the odd, dead pause of the lag –
then sound catches up with the plane
and now its grey belly's right over our house
with a metallic, grinding scream
like the sky's being chainsawed open
and the baby's face drops to a square of pure fear,
she tips forward and flattens her body on the ground
and presses her face into the concrete slab.
I scoop her up and she presses in shuddering,
screaming her strange, *halt* pain cry
and it's all right now I tell her again and again,
but it's never all right now – Christ have mercy –
my daughter in my arms can't steady me –
always some woman is running to catch up her children,
we dig them out of the rubble in parts like plaster dolls –
Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all.

Discussion Ideas

- A soundtrack to begin with - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d73tiBBzvFM>. Is there a connection between the song and the poem 'Ace of Bass'? What do you think about their worlds of imagery – the cherries and rainbows of the poem, the pearls and lipstick of the song's video? Do they work for you as symbols for the tumultuous feelings invoked in the poem?
- Is 'Ace of Bass' a poem you'd give to your daughters? What about your friends' daughters, or your daughters' friends? What about sons?
- What does the word 'vulcanised' mean? Who is Vulcan? What does this word do in a poem about Zeus? How close to or far away from the concerns of the classical world is this poem?
- Read 'Eurofighter Typhoon' out loud to each other. What effect does the length of its sentences have on your reading or your understanding of the poem?
- 'Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all' – the last line of the poem, and the last line of the book. How does that conclusion have meaning or use to you at this point in history?

Other books by Fiona Benson

Bright Travellers (Jonathan Cape, 2014)

If you liked Fiona Benson, try ...

- Clare Pollard
- Karen McCarthy Woolf
- Michael Symmons Roberts

Fiona Benson online

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/1073946/fiona-benson.html>