

# *Deformations*

## by Sasha Dugdale



Poet, playwright and translator Sasha Dugdale has published five collections of poems with Carcanet, most recently *Deformations* in 2020. She won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2016 and in 2017 she was awarded a Cholmondeley Prize for Poetry. She is former editor of *Modern Poetry in Translation* and poet-in-residence at St John's College, Cambridge (2018-2020).

### Reviews

'*Deformations* includes two large-scale works related in their preoccupation with biographical and mythical narrative. 'Welfare Handbook' explores the life and art of Eric Gill, the well-known English letter cutter, sculptor and cultural figure, who is known to have sexually abused his daughters. The poem draws on material from Gill's letters, diaries, notes and essays as part of a lyrical exploration of the conjunction between aesthetics, subjectivity and violence. 'Pitysad' is a series of simultaneously occurring fragments composed around themes and characters from Homer's *Odyssey*. It considers how trauma is disguised and deformed through myth and art. Acting as a bridge between these two works is a series of individual poems on the creation and destruction of cultural and mythical conventions.' (description, Carcanet)

'Sandwiched between *Welfare Handbook* and *Pitysad* come a handful of shorter poems, which share the longer sequences' dark and troubled world-view. A couple feel trapped by their neat conceits: "Temple Song", a biblical scene subversively rewritten as a dramatic monologue, à la Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"; and the synesthesia-heavy "Pigment" ("violet-black is the mortal colour", yellow "is the debased colour of survival", etc). The rest, though, are exceptionally strong. In these smaller pieces, Dugdale shows a keen sense of how one perfect word can elevate a line. Just look at that "hurriedly" in her description of a hare: "When the sun was bright she could see through the hare's hindlegs/ its thin skin, thrown hurriedly over bone and tendon". It's the sign of a poet utterly in control of her gifts. This

may seem a strange thing to say about a book so filled with unreliable narrators, but in *Deformations* Dugdale proves hers is a voice you can trust.' (Tristram Fane Saunders, *The Telegraph*)

### **Girl and Hare**

There was once a girl and she had a hare  
as a pet. It was so long and brown and soft.  
It stretched its body next to hers on the sunlounger  
where she lay in her oversized sunglasses,  
little and freckled. The hare had the tautness of game  
its hindquarters were round solid  
but she could nest its paws in her hand  
ring them with her fingers as a poacher might  
but tenderly.

When the sun was bright she could see through  
the hare's hindlegs,  
its thin skin, thrown hurriedly over bone and tendon,  
the light pulsed red and sombre as if the hare  
itself contained

a small convex sun like a red blood cell.  
Hare had a narrow breast like hers, rosed with fur,  
and little childish shoulders  
but forearms like a strong man's,  
the sinews and fibres twanging  
soundlessly

as it shifted.  
Now it lay still, although hares never sleep, its lip moving  
gently and its amber eyes  
waxing and waning.

It lowered its lids, for a moment it looked sly, knowing.  
Hare is apparently drowsing. The girl removes her glasses,  
places them on the hare's face  
and closes her eyes.

This is hare's moment: as long as her, and as old.

### **Think of a Utopian City**

Think of a utopian city  
Think of its binding walls and its symmetry  
The age of attack and repulse is past  
but the sympathetic walls remain  
purposeful (unlike those sprawling lines of slums  
that rise like scales all over the downs).

Think how all have a function in this city  
And are dressed in different colours:  
ultramarine, lead tin yellow, Verdigris.  
We work hard, but when we are not working  
we congregate in profile against arcades  
and fall in love with the truth.

Some are bakers, some butchers,  
some are makers of shoes, or windows, or brushes.  
The streets are harmonious, they smell of woodshavings  
rising bread, and cake. Women assist the  
slaughter of pigs, the curing of parts.

Every so often a prophet opens a top window  
Or an angel lowers itself like a stagehand.  
A baby is born at intervals and placed in a trough  
for safekeeping.

## **Intimacy**

Just as when you unearthed a nest and all the tiny bodies  
curled together touched the air and began their disintegration,  
  
clutching like children or lovers, and still furred or feathered  
but only for that moment, already extinguished, near extinction  
  
beginning to break apart, just as morning haze disperses  
when the sun tips the hill top, so much dust held in simulation  
  
and now disbanded, I know nothing means nothing,  
that substances transform, still some shapes touch more than others:  
  
nestling things exhibiting proximity in death. To have a mouth  
and press it against another's wing, to spread a wing and cover  
  
over a sac of flesh, that fools me, makes me soft and hurt,  
the ache shaped from love for what is not, and worse,  
  
for what will be no longer, so mourning is double-vapour  
rising from false intimacy between one corpse and another,  
  
already gone, all of it, a loosening image of life and love  
an attitude struck by the dead, their dry palms  
  
cupping air. Even so let fools rehearse it while they have  
breath. The shiver when a touch catches us unaware

you carrying me to bed curled in your arms,  
the still-warm mess of sheets, limbs, hair.

## Discussion Ideas

- ‘There was once a girl and she had a hare / as a pet’. What sort of narrative does this introduction set you up to expect? Is this expectation met or confounded by the poem?
- There is a lot of putting on and taking off of glasses in ‘Girl and Hare’. What is being seen or looked at?
- For whom is the city a utopia in ‘Think of a Utopian City’? The one who conceives of the city, or its residents?
- This is a poem in a sequence based on the writings of Eric Gill, the sculptor who was a member of a number of artists’ communities. What do you know of his notions of utopia? How does that inform your reading of the poem?
- Have you ever seen as many commas on a page as in ‘Intimacy’? Phrases and clauses and lists pile up – how does this syntactic complexity relate to the simple central phrase ‘I know nothing means nothing’? Does it mean nothing, ‘you carrying me to bed curled in your arms’?

## Other books by Sasha Dugdale

*Joy* (Carcenet, 2017)

*Red House* (Carcenet, 2011)

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