

# Jade Cuttle reviews Jane Routh, Samantha Walton and an anthology of Somalian poets

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## **Listening to the Night**

Jane Routh  
Smith/Doorstop, £9.95

## **Self Heal**

Samantha Walton  
Boiler House, £10

## **So At One with You: an Anthology of Modern Poetry in Somali**

ed. W.N. Herbert & Said Jama Hussein  
Poetry Translation Centre, £12

**Listening to the Night** (Smith/Doorstep) by Jane Routh, her fourth full collection, presents a startlingly vivid perception of place. From a deceptively spacious mid-terrace house in *A full renovation project with many period features*, guarding secrets that span generations and hoarding four years' worth of post, to the finer threads of detail in *My neighbour killed on the road*, where familiar grey feather is pressed into the tarmac with heart-wrenching precision, nothing worth noting escapes Routh's roving poetic eye.

As ramshackle wooden garages, roadside motor junk and even the endless mystery of the A65 shuffle their way into the frame of focus, these poems are propelled forwards by an avid wanderlust and appetite for place, one that keenly dodges the picturesque. Inquisitive and unstoppable, they search for poetic inspiration in places you might not expect,

peeking beneath flagstone and pavement, scouring the sewers and basements for clues. Rather than place being just a backdrop, or yet another decorative scaffold, Routh's poetry gets right under its skin, a rare quality which is articulated most clearly in *On the flightpath to Ireland*:

Something about shortening day lengths  
like clockwork under these endless clear skies;  
something about the dryness, the strange lack of wind  
and no frosts, that matters too

[...]

the whole flock milling in confusion  
as if - in spite of its shelter, berries and haws -  
this vivid landscape triggers alarms

As though brought to life by hand gestures and gentle shoulder taps ("but no, look" the speaker exclaims), our gaze is redirected to the rarely seen but scintillating undersurface of scenery. The title suggests as much, **Listening to the Night**, tuning into its unspoken tales. "There are many darknesses", begins the poem from which the collection takes its title, *Lately, I've taken to listening to the night*. "I remember reading how cold air curves sound waves / towards earth. Still nights are the widest." In spite of this enchantment, Routh is anxious not to embellish the known truth of a memory. The language is openly cautious about being led astray by "memory's / murky mutability" (*All summer long*); or elsewhere, being cast

in the glow of deception with “the fools’ gold weight of nostalgia you hoard” (*Elegy for a book*).

– why do we do this, write so much about the past?  
Why do we harry odd fragments of childhood  
we can fire, briefly, with detail (real or invented),  
backs

turned firmly on whom we’ll become  
(*Against memoir*)

Skirting past these perils of invention, Routh’s smooth, elegant lyric is much like the stones it celebrates, “leaning / on the edge of eloquence, purpose / self-evident to their builders, / but gone [...] Things are never what / you expect” (*She thinks she sees the swallows leave Cairn Holy*). The magic somewhat falters towards the end of the collection as the poems embrace a more fragmented structure, undercut by the minimalistic urgency they seek all of a sudden to endorse, as in *the old coat* or *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. Still, they manage to sustain their alluring sense of mystery and close with an unfaltering “faith of some sort” (*November mood music*).

**Self Heal** (Boiler House) by Samantha Walton, her debut collection after five pamphlets, offers a boldly experimental meditation on poetic artifice. It picks away at the prized notion of nostalgia with similar devotion to Jane Routh in **Listening to the Night**, especially in *Be happiness: now*, when “memory is a patched-up and slumping mattress”. Nonetheless, mistrust is all-consuming here, expanding beyond the conflicted boundaries of memory to encompass, more critically, the very concept of language itself.

“I’ve been trying to write a poem for you / that’s lacking in lust, that has a point of reference outside of itself”, opens the second poem, *Poem for you*, the most dramatically interrogative in the collection. “I’m being devastated by the hard lines of words / and the absorbing whiteness of it all”, Walton confesses. Like violent black holes, these poems find themselves unfailingly sucked into the central singularity of their struggles, their failed metaphors and misfirings, and it’s a fascinating sight to behold.

it was supposed to say something about form,  
about meaning filling  
up its neat preformed box and the relatively limited  
materials we have to work with and way language  
ultimately blocks  
communication

The speaker, assertive as ever, even goes so far as to shift the blame on to the reader, “it’s not me, it’s not you, it’s / really the reader who’s being a brat”. The self-referential tendencies occasionally slip into self-deprecation, “this is me at full stretch and this is the best you’ll ever get [...] I’m only good for my carbon [...] I’ve been winded like a horse / stashed in the out-buildings like a corpse / strung up like road kill meat, free and illegal”. Negotiating a rite of passage between passé and present, failure and success, real and imagined, the linguistic framework breaks down under the weight of expectation. Even at a structural level, poems like *Be happiness: now*, set up an expectation in form only to fray away at the edges. Still, there’s always a sprinkling of comedic relief, whose sparkling humour strikes us off-guard: “if you were in love with me / you’d shut the fuck up about it” (*Poem for you*).

Half-way through the collection, we stumble upon a surreal animal sequence which, in one poem, beckons a cow to milk the speaker, rather than vice versa, then chases after white gold fish swimming through the blood in another. As *Midges* dangles off the poetic suggestiveness of a single word, simply, “interference”, and *Octopus* settles with the equally sparse wordplay of “a bad idea all round”, ‘Animal Poems’ is the most playful section of the book, whose brevity is both bold and refreshing.

The eighteen poets and twenty-five poems of **So At One with You: an Anthology of Modern Poetry in Somali** (Poetry Translation Centre), a dual language anthology, ed. W.N. Herbert & Said Jama Hussein, celebrate the centrality of poetry in Somali culture. From the high culture artefact of the *gabay* to the work-song or *hees hawleed*, these poems offer a fascinating insight

into the deep attachment Somali people have to verse.

The period selected extends from the 1960s to the present, and the scope of poems chosen is wide-ranging, spanning generations and gender, a range of religions and themes. Whilst each Somali poet tends the fire of an individual poetic voice and often political agenda, there are certain parallels which draw them together. The very name of the anthology, **So At One with You** is emblematic of their shared interests: the collective rebuilding of a shattered society.

Whilst Canab Guuleed mourns the loss of the rural environment in *Dhaqan-goob (Lamenting the Lost Heritage)*, Asha Lul Mohamud Yusuf mourns the less tangible loss of free speech in *Xaqa Suxufiga (The Writer's Rights)*. One of the most passionate examples is Maxamed Ibraahin Warsame "Hadraawi"'s ode to justice and equality in *Daalacan (Clarity)*.

Anyone who tries to rob you of your rights,  
whether by brazen thievery  
or clandestine kleptocracy,  
by hideous trickery or with  
light fingers in the light of day,  
the pettiest of selfish pilfering,  
they can't grasp how well-founded Freedom is –  
both the moon and its full clarity  
which will never dim.  
I carry its fire, and am  
its emissary.

These poems condemn hypocrisy and corruption, championing freedom in its place. As Xasan Dahir Ismaacil 'Weedhsame' writes towards the end of the book, "to be a poet is not only to write a well-structured poem but includes being a committed voice for the voiceless and underprivileged."

Many hands have toiled over the translations in this anthology, which complements the collaborative spirit of Somali literary culture. Its pages feel like patchwork as poems are trailed by

a variety of credits, including the likes of Clare Pollard and Daljit Nagra. As W.N. Herbert and Said Jama Hussein write in the preface, drawing attention to the tradition of memorisation, recital, and call-and-response in Somali culture, "everyone is involved in a Somali poem".

The anthology is enriched further by essay contributions from Dr Martin Orwin, whose reflection on translating Somali poetry takes us deeper inside the poetic experience, whilst an essay by the prominent contemporary poet, Weedhsame, opens out more broadly to consider the state of contemporary Somali poetry at large. The Orwin essay is particularly insightful when it comes to understanding the impressive fidelity of these poems to form, unlocking new dimensions of appreciation. We learn, for example, that poems like *Saxansaxo (Rain's Breeze)* by Xasan Xaaji Cabdillaahi "Xasan Ganey" or *Dareen Guud (Inclusive thought)* by Xuseen Sheekh Axmed "Kaddare" obey the rule of the *jiifto*, a short-line form that requires at least one alliterative word in each line. Other poems, like *CAKU TV-ga! (Ugh! Television is disgusting)* by Axmed Shiikh Jaamac or *Dookh (Taste)* by Asha Lul Mohamud follow the long-line form of the *gabay*, whose two hemistichs (half-lines) demand an alliterative word in each part. The astonishingly complex patterns behind these poems gesture to the long-overlooked level of Somali poetic craft.

**Jade Cuttle** graduated from Cambridge with First-Class Honours in Literature, and is now completing the Poetry MA at UEA. Deputy Poetry Editor at *Ambit*, Jade's criticism is published in *The Guardian*, *TLS* and elsewhere. She's written for Radio 3 and BBC Proms.