Kym Deyn reviews Rebecca Hurst, Richard Skelton and Josephine Balmer

The Fox's Wedding
Rebecca Hurst, illustrated by Reena Makwana
The Emma Press, £10

The Giving Way
Richard Skelton
Guillemot, £8

Ghost Passage
Josephine Balmer
Shearsman Books, £10.95

Once upon a time, there happened to be a strange and wondrous book, filled with goose girls and needles, dark winding forests and sly foxes. In this book it is always midnight, and golden keys glint in a patch of moonlight. The book is ***The Fox's Wedding*** by Rebecca Hurst, illustrated by Reena Makwana, but let's put the details aside for a moment and imagine this book tucked into the corner of an old library, discovered on a late-night walk. You're staying with your maiden aunt for the summer in her rambling country estate, and the sound of the owls hunting in the overgrown lawns and the nightingales calling from the topiary mean you're unable to sleep. So, you light a candle and go wandering in your nightgown until you find this book in the stacks, cover worn, the author lost to time. You sit in a moth-eaten velvet armchair wondering what a book about a fox's wedding could possibly contain.

This pamphlet opens the door to a world and then asks you to get lost in it. It deeply understands the language of fairy tales, their repetitions, their swords and spindles, and pins them down into the slightness of poetry. There are odd poems that might appeal to children, but this is by no means a children's book. Certainly, with poems like *Familiar* – my favourite – an Isobel Gowdie-esque story of a woman turning into a hare to escape an unwanted advance, the book drifts into the darker side of fairy tales. It is not afraid to show its fangs. People bleed in fairy tales, or lose things important to them; they return from them entirely changed. This is the world ***The Fox's Wedding*** presents to us. Hurst is aware of the dangers of telling stories about stories, opening the pamphlet with the poem *Unreliable Narrator*, writing "If there is truth / in her / she has yet to find / its edge". For most of this pamphlet, I am wholly convinced by Hurst's voice, by turns practised in its simplicity, at other

times filled with a Gothic richness: “the Bride in her green dress / the chill of dread so manifest her footsteps frosted the new grass”.

There are moments where I, in my nightgown at my maiden aunt’s grand but faded library, lose the thread. There are poems where I find myself wanting a narrative that isn’t there, some instruction for what I should be taking away from them, particularly in poems like *Brothers* and the *Memetics of Fairy Tales*. This pamphlet doesn’t have a narrative, so much as various narratives, utilising a series of paths and recurring images, like catching sight of a deer through the trees. If I am disappointed that we never quite return to threads left in poems like *Rosamund*, perhaps I’m not paying enough attention. I was warned the narrator was unreliable and that in a fairy tale one never quite comes back the same.

Do I want to stare into Time’s Great Abyss, filled with the weight of ancestral history, the vanishings of dozens of species, the swelling of the oceans, the fingerprints left by the last Neanderthal, at 10AM on a rainy Newcastle morning? Well, I’m reading Richard Skelton again, so I’m left with very little choice in the matter.

The Giving Way can feel a little superfluous after ***Stranger in the Mask of a Deer*** which had more questions and more scope to explore them. But comparing a collection to a pamphlet is rather unfair. This is a beautifully designed pamphlet with a stunning cover embossed with red foil, and illustrations/collages of stone tools that interact directly with the text. The need to flip the book round to read these obscured pieces of found(?) text means that we are forced to spend more time with the illustrations of these objects and consider them not just as historic artefacts, but as important tools that impacted the lives of those that made and used them. For every object we must consider the hand that made it.

The pamphlet is not split into separate poems, but one sustained interrogation, opening up a hundred different considerations. Skelton begins by asking “and what is this / what is it / is it / is". Skelton is at his best here, considering the ancient human and the non-human inseparably together. He asks “Is it the porosity of worlds / of fleshworld and spiritworld / is it the porosity of stone / the great sinuses of the earth / and air moving through / and water moving through / always moving / through”. The poem gives most at these thresholds, briefly opening up the otherworld as a place of movement and being.

The work’s focus on archaeological detail holds up the more mythic sections at the cost of confusing those less up on our palaeoanthropology, for instance, the line “is it the interstitial life of Trois-Freres / of Gabillou of Geißenklösterle”. Skelton’s speed in moving between subjects from radiocarbon dating to braided rivers mean that we’re not lost for long. Skelton’s work has the power of enchantment, the ability to show us things trapped in the thick molasses of time, to reach for an echo and pin it in place.

Skelton’s pamphlet captures a sense of deep time. It reminds me particularly of holding real stone tools. There is this sense in holding something so old – hundreds of thousands of years old – and noticing how it fits perfectly to your hand. How it must have fitted perfectly in all the hands that came before. The strange vertigo-feeling of understanding I had then is the same I had reading ***The Giving Way***.

I had not imagined that I could time travel. That I could step back into the noisy streets of Londinium, filled with drunk legionaries staggering past the Thames, the taverns, the mosaiced courtyards. On a street corner two women speaking Greek gush over a new bracelet, walking arm-in-arm. I briefly find myself wondering how “kalos” – beautiful – declines and whether bracelet in Greek is feminine and suddenly I’m back in my room, gazing at my Liddell and Scott Ancient Greek dictionary and wishing I’d paid a little more attention in class. Josephine Balmer’s ***Ghost***

Passages is filled with the richness of time – her polyphonic voice takes the forms of soldiers, mothers, slaves and poets as they go about their lives from 55BCE to 500CE.

What I find most astonishing about this collection is its imagination. Balmer has a wonderful ability to take an inscription from thousands of years ago and imagine its subject back into the room. There's an intimacy with each subject, as if this séance is easy magic for Balmer. To take a stylus with a simple inscription and turn it into a poem about lost loves, to convincingly take the voice of a young woman speaking about the father of her child, a child he will never know – "Ten days old. Her father in replica. As sharp." – is no easy feat.

She summons up a trans or nonbinary inhabitant of Londinium with as much aplomb: "Then late one night at a flickering taper / I was transformed by the lines of a poet: */ no longer man nor woman but both, neither…*" Balmer's characters, because that's what I feel they are, are high-wire acts of empathy, pathos and fearless imagination. They work precisely because they are stabs in the dark, leaps of faith. Because they are written into the unknown. We can never know who owned these objects or wrote these letters, so trying for truth or playing detective is a pointless task. It is a job for the imagination of the poet.

What holds these poems together is the shifting landscape of London: "Now time was a breath suspended / between the dawn cries of forum traders and rhythmic chants of recalled soldiers / falling away as the dawn scuttled to its end". This is a cold, loud Roman London, filled with butchers and blacksmiths, debtors, sailors. It is a stage for the best and worst of people's lives to play out: "This brutal, brimful, unpredictable / city. The air we built it from. The will." The only place I find this book less convincing is in its final moments, where we move away from London to a sequence set in Stone-in-Oxney, Kent. A couple of the poems in this sequence were glorious, but mostly I found myself missing Balmer's London, her effortless command of it, her miraculous talent for worldbuilding in just a few short lines. When a book creates a landscape as wholly believable and complex as Balmer's London it seems a shame to put it away. I wasn't ready to let it go.

Kym Deyn is a poet, writer and fortune teller. Their work has been published in ***Primers Vol. 6*** and they have 'a legitimate snack' forthcoming from Broken Sleep Books.