

Dfiza Benson reviews Bei Dao and Kathleen Jamie

Sidetracks

Bei Dao
Carcanet, £14.99

The Keelie Hawk

Kathleen Jamie
Pan Macmillan, £12.99

Superficially, these two books – Bei Dao’s ***Sidetracks*** and Kathleen Jamie’s ***The Keelie Hawk*** – couldn’t be more different. The former is written by an acclaimed Chinese poet who has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature and lived in exile for most of his career: the latter comes from a recent Makar of Scotland whose work is rooted in a profound engagement with nature.

However, there are more than a few commonalities. Their poetry may employ different modes of diction, but both poets are preoccupied with personal histories that are often expressed in dream-like imagery. Time is the overarching concern for both poets: both in its past, future and cyclical states, and as it pertains to memory. Also, that relatively rare beast, an afterword, is present in both these books, contextualising their respective premises.

Both poets also contend with a separation from their native languages – Dao through exile and Jamie because Scots (“first cousin to a globalised English”

as she puts it) was untaught and derided during her formative years. Dao strategises resistance against this erasure with translations of the cantos into Mandarin on the verso side of his book, while Jamie’s poems are written in Scots on the prominent, recto side: unlineated English translations are rendered less significant through paragraphs on the facing page. This focus on language also concentrates the reader’s mind on social and cultural differences that might be lost in translation.

Translated by Jeffrey Yang, ***Sidetracks*** is the magnum opus of Bei Dao (the nom-de-plume of Zhao Zhenkai), the first long poem and first poetry collection in 15 years. In the afterword, Dao reveals that he was inspired to write the book when a friend said “You should write a long poem, something with a sense of history.” Taking up the challenge in *Canto XII*, Dao proceeds to “let the mountains of lost memories move”.

The striking, cinematic result is an autobiographical odyssey, comprising a prologue and 34 cantos that become increasingly dense as they spurn linear chronology and, instead, zigzag across the itinerant poet’s political and cultural past in Beijing and – following student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 during which protesters cited his writing as inspiration – his years living in exile in England, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, France and the United States.

very present anxiety about climate catastrophe in the “made world” (Jamie’s term for the built environment). In fact, it can be said that the poet is nature itself. In *Maspie Den* she writes:

Ah’m here tae tell ye Ah nivver lie
at peace Ah um aye
caller watter jynin watter
pirl and ongang

(English: “I’m here to tell you I never lie at peace I am always fresh water joining water, coil and motion along my bed of clay”).

And because the poet is nature, the speaker can address all living things directly (as she does several times with a rose bush) until she and everyone else becomes

“pairt o the laun’s lang dwam o mindin and forgettin.” (*Killileepie*)

(English: “part of the land’s long dream of remembering and forgetting.”)

Dzifa Benson was born in London to Ghanaian parents, grew up in Ghana, Nigeria and Togo and is now based in London. Her debut poetry collection, ***Monster***, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 2024.