

Patrick McGuinness

Jilted City

Carcanet

74pp

£9.95

By Paul Batchelor

First published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 1.10.10

The in-between place is overcrowded poetic territory, but Patrick McGuinness has a sound claim to it: he was born in Tunisia of Belgian and Newcastle-Irish family, and now lives in Caernarfon, North Wales. In “Article 0.5: The Right to Be In-Between” he even proposes a clause for the European Constitution which “enshrines inalienably the right to alienation / for those who want it...”. The constitution of *Jilted City* is nothing if not European: the title comes from Jennie Feldman’s translation of a Henri Thomas poem, and McGuinness goes on to name-check Mallarmé, Rilke, Baudelaire, Cervantes, Rimbaud, Proust, Jacques Brel and Christian Dotremont.

McGuinness’s wry take on identity politics means that Belgium is very much the dead centre of this Europe: “our annual summers in Bouillon, / where our Belgitude rose up in us like the damp / behind the wallpaper.” The longest poem here, “Blue Guide” is a series of vignettes based on the stations of the Brussels–Luxembourg rail line. As a child, McGuinness used the line for a twenty-minute commute; but later realised that the line connected him to all of Europe: “All I had to do was stay on the train a little longer”. The sequence explores the tension between the evocative childhood memories and McGuinness’s watchful refusal to be seduced. Of Bruxelles-Luxembourg he recalls

the funereal blush of marzipan fruit in the *chocolatier*’s window,
laid out in their crinkled doilies like Lenin in his mausoleum,
and the ghost of their taste in my mouth: sugar dipped in formaldehyde.

McGuinness’s chief virtue is the subtlety of his observing eye, which he keeps trained on “the border between the over- / and the unexamined life”. He can slip seamlessly from description to abstraction with no loss of precision, as when a disquisition on dust begins predictably enough in the everyday (“It fills the gulf behind the sofa, / that small domestic void”) before concluding:

It is the shape of nothing, the shape of nothing happening,

and of nothing’s impossibility; matter worrying away
at trying not to be, and being all the while; reminding us
there are no absolutes, that all is graded on the scale,
that all is incremental, deciduous, and undecided.

The unforeseeable, perfect adjective “deciduous” indicates the scrupulous intelligence of this writing. McGuinness examines, through a clear lens, subjects that poetry often sees in soft

focus: nostalgia, loss, nationhood, identity. Even literary staples, such as his elegies for his parents, are never merely set-pieces:

Unlovable as ever, yet he was brave,
with that aura of unshared suffering
that spared us everything but grief
at knowing what we felt was not exactly grief.

The collection concludes with a short selection of translations of Liviu Campanu, an imaginary Romanian poet. Campanu, we are told, was exiled to Constanța during Ceausescu's regime, allowing McGuinness to explore his themes of displacement and internalised political deadlock with a darker, sourer wit. The title of "The Ovid Complex" is the first of many self-referential puns: "I'm not adapting. But what's worse / is that I'm getting used to it..." Campanu's presence means that *Jilted City* trails an unexpectedly dark shadow: "what survives of us / is what was least intended to go on after".

Apart from the inevitable blank-page poem (boys: stop it!), McGuinness's poems never waste your time and never overstay their welcome; consequently, you find yourself returning to them and spending longer than you'd intended. *Jilted City* has the wit and lightness of touch that made McGuinness's first collection, *The Canals of Mars*, so welcome; what it adds is a new depth of feeling and maturity of vision.