

Star Reverse
Linda Ann Strang
(The Dryad Press, 2022)

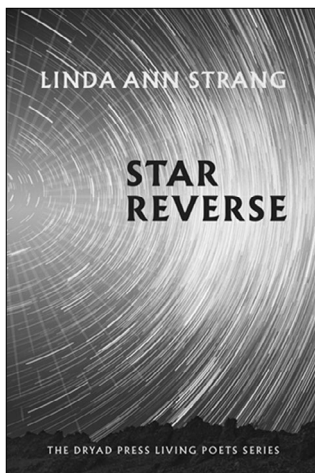
This book conveys, as it were, an astronomical aura. Each of its forty-seven poems has a designated home in one of six sections: I Zubenelhakrabi, II Vega, III Tislit, IV Capella, V Betelgeuse and VI Antares. My two favourites come from Vega and Antares. But that does not mean that there are no ‘claws of the scorpion’ in Zubenelhakrabi, or that there is nothing to be squeezed out of the Betelgeuse section.

Strang’s work is mind-stretching. Unexpected images are constantly popping up. Language bends back upon itself, reworking tropes within the space of a few lines. Subject matter surges with the poet offering individualistic takes on topics as diverse as cancer therapy, traditional carpenters’ shops, and Brent Crude (from the well visited by the woman who spoke with Jesus). It’s all a matter of wordplay, teasing inversions and apparent inscrutability. Feminism is enfolded to speak from unexpected angles. A great deal of heart is deployed among lovers, mothers and the disadvantaged.

Here are my chosen titles viewed through the bevel of one particular lens.

‘Héloïse in Hell’ – The beloved, now an abbess devoted to worship, passes her days in a 12th-century convent. Abelard, her lover, has been made a castrato for the affair. But there is a love child, Astrolabe. For Héloïse, the lifestyle is now officially celibacy, but sexuality is yet installed in fantasy and in her seething pulse. Her once-used womb speaks of “...the incubus hidden within” that became her little son, while her highly amusing / unsettling response to sighting

A purple frog hopping upon the garth
[that] pulses like Abelard’s member –
severed



suggests that, though unmanning may have led to Abelard's repudiation of his passion, clearly Héloïse has not yet recovered. Her mind goes back to their great escape into sensuality, both riding the same horse on "a wynd that led to the sea." In contrast, the control of a convent may be "...Thorns / for the lost and sad. Rats in the straw." Héloïse—with Sister Ebba, whom she spies illicitly feeding "the finches or elves"—has her own way of experiencing life in hell.

The nineteen lines of 'Syrian Villanelle' (dedicated to "Sea Watch and the Polish Border refugees") inscribe the fates of fleeing women and children. At first, they venture out in unseaworthy boats, only to come hard against the barbed wire of a non-reception, death by drowning or disappointment. A sad narrative is encapsulated in startling images, such as: "Waves foam flippant with prayers on their crests." The poem's structure allows four iterations of two lines—initially sounded singly but joining together in the final stanza. The first deals with what Othello might have called "the pity of it": "My wishbone breaks within my wounded breast." The second is almost relentless, like Boyles's law: "for hope is a vacuum that nature detests."

Not least among this collection's strengths are the inspired titles, such as 'Mr and Mrs Noah Nova' (who provide a Chagallian supernova), 'The Angel Gabriel Advises the Rebel Leader' (after having no doubt levelled with virgin Mary and prophet Mohamed) and 'The Sky of Women: China,' a terse piece concerning Qui Jin, a poet and revolutionary beheaded in 1907. In the final line Qui, speaks for all courageous women: "I am the thought of iron."

Strang has published widely in over fifty journals and anthologies. This is her second collection, following on *Wedding Underwear for Mermaids* (2011), published in the UK. In *Star Reverse*, skill has come up from the deep to shine in the night sky of her unusual and challenging imagination.

GEOFF HARENAPE