

# *Travelling Towards Utopia*

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**Patricia Nolan. *Travelling*. (France: Le Castor Astral in Paris, France, 2001).**

If poetry is life, it is because there is movement in it. The opposite – lack of action, inertia – is a form of unworthy resignation to death. As a reaction against this latter possibility, Patricia Nolan faces the challenges of her own existence by combating this inertia through her most intimate experiences - the various memories, sensations, dreams and aspirations. This is the luggage, on her voyage of self-discovery. A journey undertaken in the full hope of retrieving vanished moments and if death is not the final destination then at least she finds peace and salvation (cf. last poem of book: “Redemption”)

And so the poet begins her most important voyage: not an impossible journey which would take her back to places in her life but a voyage that is made through time and poetry. Once inside this Time Machine, Nolan repeatedly travels backwards and forwards like a camera capturing life scenes. Travelling is then not only the action of travelling itself but a vision of movement through space and time that may finish at any possible moment in death. In this way, the poet is witness to humanity’s absurd journey on earth where one encounters famine, violence and gratuitous death as demonstrated in the poem “The Hare”. Almost in shock, she writes “we stride the coast road, dismayed / how history leaves pock marks on the landscape’s face”. Later on in the poem her fears are confirmed when she meets death “so perfect” in the body of a hare before continuing her journey through an avenue of trees planted by men dying from hunger in the great Irish famine in 1845 -1848.

Nolan’s poems are disconcerting. This is conveyed via a form of a subtle witnessing as expressed through some of the characters found in her book. A case in point is the pathetic white South African woman who while redecorating her bunker style house into a pink coloured paradise is surrounded by blacks who steal and rape. She is incapable of understanding their hate. It is as if apartheid were as fictitious as the pink paradise into which she is trying to transform her home. (“Paradise”)

Nolan’s sense of fine irony paints pictures which are all the more effective due to her inspired ferocity ever present in all of those poems where conventionality, prejudices (social, sexual, religious) and the establishment are portrayed. In the poem

“Desert Rose” where two unmarried women “on the edge of time” are travelling alone through Namibia. One of them at least has tried unsuccessfully that improbable state called marriage. While the other one reveals herself to the world as a lesbian with all the dignity possible when faced with a supposedly city bred and cultivated man who in response to her declaration asks them about God’s plan. “Which one did you have in mind?” one of women responds. They are still laughing at their joke when “the Southern Cross lights up the night sky / the palms bow their heads”.

Another example, the poem “Rural Foreplay” is in some ways similar to “Desert Rose” where macho men are likened to the mythical minotaure. In the former poem, Nolan to a certain extent reduces the men (farmers) to a simple animal level when she describes them as thirsty calves sucking on untipped cigarettes. These men need alcohol to give them courage to invite women to dance. They, the women anticipate the start of the dance and the time when the men will invite them outside the dance hall into the night for some intimacy. The description of the couples exiting like eels, “embracing the dark till the moon coughs / to warn the priest is trawling the night.” is beautifully illustrated.

Although Nolan demonstrates an angry elegance against a strange world that responds to her stupidly and incomprehensibly, she also shows great sensitivity and tenderness when she evokes loves ones. This is evident in such poems as the sleeping mother in “An Artist’s Hand”, the dead father in “Dermot’s Coat” the fragile grandmother in “Jewish Princess” and even the old and rescued teddy bear of her childhood in “Hibernation”. She talks about all of them not only with respect and tenderness but also with melancholy due to the sadness she feels when faced with the unavoidable passage of time and the decadence endured before death. Some images remain in the reader’s mind, the image of canes and tripods “stick out at angles from chairs / like abandoned armour on a battlefield.” which evokes the idea of old age ill health and anxiety in “Jewish Princess”. Or the tender moment in “Dermot’s Coat” where the daughter tries on the dead father’s coat and feels its weight overwhelming her, while at the same time, she submits to it.

In relation to this idealised love (of Electra) for the father figure, Nolan reminds us of Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, with their terrifying visions of fathers which leave us breathless but which are also capable of producing surprises. In other moments Nolan approaches hope as in the poem about the woman in “The Couch” where she writes about separation and divorce. The woman, after lying “like a grub without a thought / while life screamed for a second chance / from the bottom of a glass... eventually decides to finish with her pain and mourning by having apathy jump out of the window. And so she begins the next part of her life with subdued optimism. All this is expressed with the unforgettable sense of humour and the sharp ambiguity that characterises all of Nolan’s poetry.

On the other hand, even if it is true that most of the poems have a narrative character, others are based on fleeting images, brevity and their proven capacity for

implication. Examples are “Crossing deserts”, “Sub Rosa” and “Bushman’ Creek” where their length is compressed and repressed to communicate love, urgency, sensuality, mystery, and silence. Let us read the first of these three poems without saying one more word: “If I could capture/ your essence in a word/ I would never speak again / but keep you on the tip of my tongue / to savour like the nomad of the desert / sips water from the last oasis before dawn.”

Patricia Nolan travels on and on unrepentant through the world, always with her poetry on her back like a camera which she uses to transmit her own distinct and particular vision of existence. One could speculate ad infinitum on possible meanings only to arrive at no definite conclusion in the end. But what cannot be denied is that through this nomadic travelling, she has learnt to identify with and demonstrate her love for humanity as well as of nature with which she is in symbiosis in the best pantheist style of the Swedish-Finnish poet Edith Södergran or Emily Dickinson. This fusion is evident in the poem “Cycad” where in an intimate dialogue with a primitive fern. The poet pricks herself on its leaves and so unites her own blood with the fern. They set out together in search of Terra Nova wandering through the universe while “plotting to pollinate the moon”.

*Travelling* is a traveller’s book. Through the art of its words, it brings us to other spaces and times in the hope of taking that great and almost impossible qualitative leap - the escape from the tyranny of time through memory, imagination and desire. In this way, we could settle in the Utopia called poetry with Patricia Nolan leading us there by the hand.