

MICHAEL BLACKBURN

Tradition, Traduction, and Truth

Mark Robinson. *How I Learned to Sing*. Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 2013. 202 pp. ISBN 978-09571722-6-5, £8.95 pb.

Fiona Sze-Lorrain. *My Funeral Gondola*. Honolulu, HI: Manoa Books / Berkeley, CA: El León Literary Arts, 2013. 59 pp. ISBN 978-0-98339198-2, US\$18.00 pb.

Helen Ivory. *Waiting for Bluebeard*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2013. 112 pp. ISBN 978-1-85224-975-5, £9.95 pb.

Robert Sheppard. *A Translated Man*. Bristol: Shearsman, 2013. 130 pp. ISBN 978-1-84861-284-6, £9.95 pb.

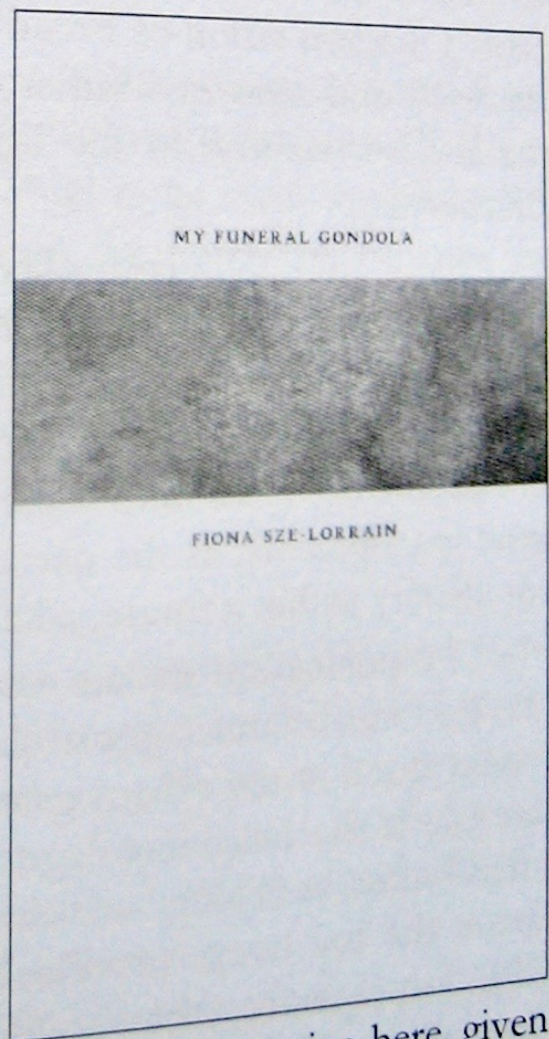
Fiona Sze-Lorrain's *My Funeral Gondola* operates in a different realm altogether, one that is defined by a cultural melding of east and west, and of music and language. Sze-Lorrain is a classically trained professional musician whose main instrument is the *zhen*, a form of Chinese zither, on which she plays both classical and modern music. She has performed in Europe and American and now lives in Paris. This helps

account for the movement between the deployment of certain images, e.g., moon, clouds, flowers, etc., in a way we associate with traditional Chinese and Japanese poets, and the use of more modern and modernist approaches – prose poems, anecdotes and the occasionally Eliotic exercise. Her versatility extends to prose poems, which, for me, vary in success. One of them, “Visitor”, in which the poet thinks about her grandmother, successfully delivers a powerful examination of past and present: “How the past not mine comes back faster than old fears [...] After marrying a Communist she learned to be sparing with passion and images.” (44)

“Diva” exemplifies the Eliotic approach, quietly poking fun at a singer whose talent and self-absorption are in an uneasy relationship with her personal, and it seems solitary, private life: “With an assassin’s smile she waters her plants / while scratching her armpits.” (11) The mole on her face is fake and she is given to drink: “Empty demijohn clasped in her bosom she hiccups / and sleepwalks down the corridor.” (11)

The sharp observation and satirical edge of “Diva” is taken up again in “Digesting an Academic Symposium, Some Months Back” (52), in which the poet is as much a target as the others: “I was grateful / because I was invited” (53).

As the collection’s title suggests, in its rather gothic way, the poems continually float through meditations of mortality, including the poet’s own. The process throws up unexpected images, realisations and secrets. In “Francois Dead”, for instance, the poet appears to be remembering helping Francois (or is it someone else?) tidying up his room, to discover a book of translations: “Francois said he stole it” (23). But how sure can we be what is happening here, given the tricksiness of the poet’s account, when she says “He lights the



lamp, we return to dust" (23), playing on the double meaning of "we turn to dust" to indicate our own inherent mortality?

Many of the pieces possess a surface attractiveness, without necessarily opening up to further understanding, but most of them are redeemed by a clarity of image and diction, especially when working in a contemporary or recent context. This happens in "My 1980", for instance, where the poet enumerates various items from her life: "John Lennon died. / I started to visit museums" (45) she says; but if you thought she was too serious a youngster she brings you up with "An interest in toilet bowls. And who sat on where." (45) Altogether the collection has enough charm and individuality of voice to draw you repeatedly back into it; and it is a beautiful piece of book production as well.

If Sze-Lorrain's poems seem to float just below the surface of consciousness in a somewhat fantastical zone, then Helen Ivory's plunge us into deeper and more disturbing regions. *Waiting for Bluebeard* presents a modern vision of Freud's Family Romance gone wrong, where the weak and repressed father of the narrator's childhood returns as