

Alison Hackett. *Crabbing: A Collection of Poems*. Dublin: 21st Century Renaissance, 2017. PB, pp. 57. Price: €18. ISBN: 978-0-9927368-2-8.

Reviewed by
James Lawless*

Alison Hackett was born in Currabinny in Cork, Ireland. A graduate of maths and economics from Trinity College, she lives in Dún Laoghaire. She worked in the Institute of Physics from 2000 until 2012 promoting that subject across the country and, like some poets before her such as Iggy McGovern and Noel Duffy, the scientific background becomes evident in some of her poems such as *Hot Day* where, feeling perhaps awkward in her prepuberty ‘boyish frame’, she declares: ‘I’m profiled in the elbowed angles of my arms’. Hackett founded her own press 21st Century Renaissance, a movement which she claims is dedicated to using original design combined with writing to influence change and raise debate across a wide section of society.

Her first book under that imprint, *The Visual Time Traveller: 500 Years of History, Art and Science in 100 Unique Designs* was published in 2014. It was different to many previous history books in that she commissioned contemporary artists to paint interpretations of historical moments to incorporate into the book. Her second book under the same imprint, a collection of poetry called *Crabbing*, which she describes as ‘a memoir of love and loss’ was published in 2017. In a radio interview she points out that the prompt for the book was her mother’s sudden death when Alison was twelve years old and attending boarding school at the now-closed Glengara Park. According to Hackett, the grief suffered at her mother’s passing was ‘clamped down’ by her and only managed to surface post-traumatically in words forty years later.

The poems in *Crabbing* are an attempt to come to terms now in middle age with that tragic event. They are mainly written through the eyes of a twelve year old and some of them such as *Shorn* are, despite the passing of time, still emotionally raw and could perhaps have taken heed of Wordsworth’s counsel of ‘recollecting in tranquility. ‘Your mother is gone/your mother is dead/the principal says... Oh no./No.no.no.. Not her. Not me.’ This emotion admittedly is more contained in the poem *Where you lie* as, with a hand-drawn map, she tries to discover the location of the grave where ‘the curlew’s cry can still be heard’ and where ‘we leave some shells/beneath the tree/ small tokens of our knotted loss.’ Such pathos and loss are perhaps most successfully rendered in the succinct and distilled *Awake at 5 am*:

...come back to me
so I can breathe
one final touch
and whisper
of hello.

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I open out
 to embrace you
 but arms collapse
 around myself
 an aching absent space
 I want to lie
 beside your bones
 as near to you as me.

For the most part, the poems are full of youthful wonder—was it Graham Greene who said nothing much happens after the age of twelve? However, as if by way of light relief, the p.s. added final poem in the collection, *Poets and their editors down in the school yard*, is a hilarious sendup of prissy workshop poetry editors:

Miss! Miss! Jack just puked
 up his last three stanzas,
 Simon's after standing in it.
 For God's sake
 I'm a professional
 do I have to deal with this?
 Word vomiting stinks like hell.
 Get Beckett from
 the janitor's room.
 He can clean it up.

The book is handsomely produced, but pleasing images and presentation can sometimes blur the line between art and design, and seismic emotional events can cajole the reader into an expectation that does not always deliver. It is a very slim volume of fifty odd pages with generous paper spacing, and a few of the poems which purportedly 'guillotine' the past are slight and, strangely, for this reader, lacking in resonance.

Occasionally one feels that her quest for the *mot juste* missed the mark: Do whistles 'shriek' among the hockey players in *Shorn*, or does grass 'flicker' in *Hot Day*, or what is 'a soft sight' in *Crabbing*, the title poem, which not with standing, shows authentic detail in 'dirt and streaks of rotten wood/trapped in its layers of varnish' as 'a swell surges us onto a sea/of thick rubbery weed.' And in *37 South Mall* the words are just right as 'rain plinks into metal cans'.

There is some clichéd writing as in *Salty Tears* which 'cascade down', the stating of the obvious in the five-lined *Gone*, or in the rather pompously titled *I am Éire is* 'a place you can call home/no matter where you are'. However such writing is offset by poems like *Homeward Bound* which beautifully describes a juvenile crush in the erotic evocation of the soft leather gloves of her father's friend: 'so exotic, I'm fixated/They seem to be seducing me.' And in *Coomakista* she encapsulates wonderfully in the rings of a tree the love for her mother, and finally in *Cold Day* one can really sense the closeness between them:

I know it
must be hurting you
to feel my frosty hands
but I also know
that mother love
will always let
her child hurt back
in slightly
stinging ways.

