*Nine*, David Harsent (Guillemot Press)

There is a long history of incomplete texts in poetry. From the fragments of Sappho to Ken Smith's *Burned Books*, via Tom Phillip's *A Humument* and Antonin Artaud's demented scribbles and spells, authors have created works with missing, deleted, amended or changed parts. *Nine* claims to be 'a reconstruction of certain passages from a notebook found among the writer's effects', although we are never told who that writer is, only that '[s]ome pages had been damaged, removed, or scored out.' It also notes that the gaps in the text are as per the original.

I mostly know David Harsent's work through a couple of his early books of poems, his sequence about Mr. Punch (which seems to be out of print) and his recent versions of Yannis Ritsos poems. This book feels very different: stream(s) of consciousness, sexual and religious undertones and witchery, along with several mentions of specific, named works of art. It is incantatory, dense but lyrical, allusionistic and at times obscure and full of signs, symbols and digressions.

The poem starts with the notebook's narrator remembering 'the riddle of how she came to me at the tideline', her 'sudden arrival', but quickly moves to one of many sections about and mentions of 'The Fool', here a 'riddler jester' cackling at 'nine white gulls on a flawless sky'. Then there is a passage about a witch's stone, worn smooth, followed by the first of many notes regarding damaged and missing pages, then a brief consideration – reported as spoken by the unnamed 'her' – regarding the 'women at the foot of the cross'.

The obsession with representations of women continues throughout this long work. The abstract consideration of

 – the female form (a charcoal sketch) is a pattern of
 flow is rhythmic (first from life later from memory)
 the way self shadows self the way line develops
 harmonies the way light returns shape to shape (up

changes into specific memories and misrememberings before becoming an image 'set behind glass', which links to mentions of paintings by Klimt, Sickert featuring women, but also to visual memories of landscapes and the sea, Dürer's *Melancholia* and Holbein's *Dead Christ* (both titles' lack of italicisation appears to have escaped the proofreader's notice) and possibly Malevich's minimalist black square painting. Literature is in the mix too: Kristeva and Dostoevsky are mentioned in one section.

Death is a character, The Fool is a constant, as is the questioning of the representation of women: sex object, fetishised other, witch, object of devotion and desire and the dangerously clichéd whore/goddess duality. Fragments of narrative appear and fade away, moments of anger, silence, dreams and love; expressions of loss and mourning; children's voices and the sounds of nature. Although we are told 'the story of herself is simply told' it is not, not here anyway; it resists the suggestion that it 'goes into hiding in plain view'. This is a story of fogs and mists, misunderstandings and slippages between worlds. Of inclinations, assumptions and suggestions; rituals and self-sacrifice, emotional unrest and 'passion's overload'; questions and few answers. It all, suggests the text, leads to 'fire-in-flood and carnage cities falling', a world where 'every doorway gives onto a boneyard'. And the final line is even darker, shockingly so, but I will let you read that for yourself.

I did wonder if the whole book is inspired by art, but I don't think so. Nine is a 'magical' number in mathematics, there were nine muses, cats have nine lives, and in Norse mythology the tree of Yggdrasil not only supported nine worlds, but Odin was also hung on it for nine days. There are nine hares – often associated with witches – drawn on the cover of this book and in one of the illustrations; and I'm sure there are more connections and suggestions. But poems don't need decoding in this way, it is enough to be challenged and entertained, seduced by the language and made to think.

*Nine* is another beautifully designed hardback book from Guillemot, although it's a shame that the 8 pages of illustrations (visual suggestions of the found notebook) are clustered together and printed on different paper rather than spread out throughout the text. I also found the text's justification strange, as a handwritten notebook would not work in this way; I'd rather have had a ragged right-hand edge of text. But these are minor quibbles, Harsent has produced a distinctive and otherworldly long poem that reads as not only out-of-time but also contemporary, rooted in a mythical pagan past.

Rupert Loydell