*Of Certain Angels*, David Harsent (Dare-Gale Press)

*Annunciation Sonnets*, Linda Kemp (Broken Sleep Books)

*The Book of Yona,* Sarah Cave (Shearsman Books)

*Apostasy,* John Burnside (Dare-Gale Press)

There is magic all around us. I do not mean the stuff of fairy stories and fantasy novels, nor do I mean the occult activities of lodges, covens, ritual groups or obsessive individuals. I mean the magic of language and its ability to create ideas, images and new worlds when arranged upon the page.

David Harsent writes about 'certain angels', beings who are not spiritual or religious at all, rather sensual, seductive, passionate creatures engaging with humankind through music, sex, memory and invention. These angels write 'delinquent' poetry that is 'ruinous', guides the dark dreams of the sleeping, seduce with traces of their absence: 'dark angles and deep scents', 'illusions of aphrodisia', 'patterns of light refracting to a hall of mirrors'. We are, it seems, mirages 'in the corner of her eye', beings who can never know 'what prayers and hallelujahs light the commonplace'.

Linda Kemp's *Annunciation Sonnets* also discusses 'the insistence of extraordinary' but there are only implied angels here in these deconstructive poems which take apart the very concept of the annunciation story, sometimes referring to specific images and artists, sometimes not, all 'transmitting the moment' and questioning the 'influential metaphors' of the Bible story where an angel tells a mother she is pregnant and prophesies what the future holds for her son. Kemp has little truck with the spiritual however: 'the gesture of a martyr is no place marker', she states in the book's opening poem. Her texts consider the 'documentation of salutation' which continues to this day, how light and colour and shape convey the moment, the 'bewildering piety' of Mary, 'the beginning of intimate / knowing'. There are no question marks in these poems, but there *are* implied questions and commentary in these playful, splintered poems riffing on the 'various discrepancies' of iconography and belief.

A quick online search shows much bickering between religious commentators, sects and denominations about whether Jesus had any siblings, Mary stayed a virgin, or the earth is flat (I made that last one up). It's strange because there are clear Biblical references to four named brothers and to two unnamed sisters. Sarah Cave doesn't care however, in *The Book of Yona* she names one sister Yona and has her cursed by the Apostles to live forever, or at least until her brother returns to Earth. So, she endures the centuries, on the way becoming a 'cunning woman', falling in love with 'the beguine mystic Hadewijch of Brabant' who lived in the 13th Century, and seemingly becoming a saint, remembered for a while through her relics, which by now are only folklore.

The book starts with a queer rewriting of *The Song of Songs* (or *Song of Solomon* as it is called here), a celebration of celibate longing and love, written – and still apparently being rewritten – for Hadewijch. It is desirous, lustful even, romantic and sensual, speaking of a 'Love no flood can / quench' as it hymns the author's Beloved. Further sections of the book are more playful, as Yona becomes a bird, a cat, her own familiar, and her brother Jesus becomes yesyou. She is a shapeshifter, a timeless presence, a nature- and animal-lover like St Francis, a necromancer and is then forgotten. Even as St Yon.

All that is left are lost and missing relics, some of which have been recreated in wool by the St Didymus's Mother's Union and photographed here. Others only exist as 'anecdotal information' or are reputedly 'held in another collection', whilst 'the existence of Yon's Jewish heritage has been redacted'. After this, the collection draws to a close. There is a brief psalter, where Yona has become an anchoress whose relationship with the world is reduced to

 gaps of beauty, nothing

 ...

 gaps of beauty, sound between trees, nothing

and visions of the Crucifixion. A final section offers us a 'Triptych' of 'sky, stardust, nebulae', 'gathered nightfall', 'occult blossoms', a baby singing and breath turning Yona's breastbone into 'a fragile harp', and then Yona is gone, as transient as 'ants flying flying ants flying', 'like the mayfly, like the seed, / like the baby's breath'. Cave's new volume is a subtle, elusive text that only reveals its intricacies and playful subtext slowly, with rereading and attention, but it is also a book to enjoy as a reader.

John Burnside is having no truck with established religion, even fictional or poetic ones. Instead, in this fourteen poem sequence he prefers 'Blossom in the ruins' of belief, preferring 'The Gospel of Narcissus' where 'every man [is] alone beneath the stars'. In 'XII Litha' he reflects that

 In summer, it was harder to be churched;

 the pagan gods were out, their sentries

 drifting through the sunlit

 chapel, pollen

 scattered on the flagstones like some timeless

 scripture from a world before the Word.

Although he says 'At one time, / [...] there might have been a God', it is to nature he returns, as 'a pilgrim again, beyond all destination', with 'nothing to repent, / and nothing to forgive'. Embracing 'The Heresy of the Free Spirit' he ends – perhaps somewhat over-defiantly, considering the previous thirteen poems – 'haunted by nothing at all.'

Rupert Loydell

(884 words)