

Rug of a Thousand Colours and don't mention this to anyone

by Tessa Ransford

Tessa Ransford is deservedly famous, having created the Scottish Poetry Library and set up the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award for pamphlet poetry, but these two new books mark her out once again as a fine poet in her own right. Beautifully produced by Luath Press, both volumes have text in two languages. Her nostalgic recall of a Kashmir childhood, *don't mention this to anyone* (the modest absence of capitals is deliberate), features passages of Urdu, gloriously hand-scripted by Jila Peacock.

Rug of a Thousand Colours is even more radically cross-national, being a co-production between Tessa and the Scottish-based Arab poet, Iyad Hayatleh. This, too, is a visual delight, with the contrasting visual weight of written English on the verso page of every opening, faced by the lighter, infinitely graceful Arabic on the right. This book was co-translated by its two authors into their respective native tongues, and one can only guess how intense the work involved must have been, to convey the subtle precision of the respective texts. The result is a dual study of themes that might at first seem impossible to share. Through a miracle of inspired effort, the passionate faith of a committed Muslim and the careful spirituality of a non-church near-Christian combine with mutual respect, and the result is a dignified, deeply thoughtful collection.

For Iyad Hayatleh, prayer is the foundation of life. 'I circumambulate the Ka'ba / and, Lord of the Worlds, my very being reverberates to your name ...' In her balancing *Prayer-sequence*, Tessa Ransford takes an equally devout approach, though a more ecumenical, or perhaps ecological one. 'To pray is to offer ourselves / to accept, be open, listen, / or to be the one who must lose or fail / or wait.'

Tessa Ransford's own book, *don't mention this to anyone*, is an evocation of her childhood in India, and it is filled with the sense of love and loss that still assails her as she thinks back. Like so many who were caught up, however peripherally, in the Raj, India cast a spell that

remains eternally powerful. The surge of passion that comes from these poems is rooted in the place itself and on a physical sense of recall so immediate that it seems total and indiscriminating – though, of course the skill lies in the careful creation of this very feeling.

To hear psalms sung in Urdu to Punjabi tunes and the beat of the *tabla*

the honk honk of the machine which grinds the wheat

To watch sugar cane pulped and boiled in a huge iron cauldron on a kiln built out in the field

camels feeding under the trees near the village

buffaloes washed in the yard ...

It's an outpouring that is close to unshed tears, and lays bare the deep connection that bound the children of India to the place they would always think of as their home. Tessa became fluent in Urdu, and that language appears occasionally in the book to translate a title or an explanation,

don't mention this to anyone will touch countless people born into the Scottish-Indian heritage. It is a testimony, an acute recall, and a beautiful thing in its own right. A book to keep and to treasure.

Alison Prince

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Rug of a Thousand Colours by Tessa Ransford and Iyad Hayatleh, Luath Press £8.99

ISBN 1-908373-24-5

don't mention this to anyone by Tessa Ransford, Luath Press £8.99 ISBN 1-908373-18-0