Book Reviews

Katrina Porteous. *Edge.* Hexham, United Kingdom: Bloodaxe Books, 2019, pp. 128, PB. Price: £12, ISBN: 978-1-78037-490-1.

Reviewed by
Neal Whitman*

Born in 1960 in Aberdeen, Katrina Porteous grew up in Country Durham and was graduated by Trinity College, Cambridge, and has studied in the United States at the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard University. She has made the landscape people of the Northumberland coast her specialization.

In 1959 a lecture C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, was published in which this British scientist and novelist offered his thesis that the intellectual life of western society was split into two cultures: the sciences and the humanities. In her book, *Edge*, published in 2019, Katrina Porteous reflects that, when she was in school nearly half a century ago, she chose to study Arts rather than Science, and now, with this book of poems is trying to make up for that deficit. To that end this is a book, "not so much about science, as a poet's view of science and the poetry of science …"

In six decades between 1959 and 2019, many residents of Arts and of Science have claimed dual citizenship and with *Edge*, Porteous deserves its passport. Her language is somehow both simple and monumental at the same time. The charm of Katrina Porteous is in her willingness, now more than midway in her own life journey, to explore the *selva obscura* of astronomy, cosmology, and particle physics without a Virgil to guide her. She is a fearless traveler.

Porteous is a poet who becomes a guide as we ponder the mystery of Life and Death in a Universe that began with a Big Bang. For example, one of my favourite poems is "The Sun Makes a Noise!" which opens with these lines:

> The whole Sun – its honeycomb
>
> Its pomegranate, its brilliant, seething layers –
>
> Awash with this choirs
>
> Has no truck with your language. (1-4)

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The poem can be recited in order to hear the celestial music. Though there happens to be no sound in space, a bonus in this book are the links in her Introduction to readings with the electronic music of her collaborator, Peter Zinovieff, set in the Life Science Centre Planetarium in Newcastle. With sound and sight, image after image, their performances burst! Energy emanating and pulsating! The book, on its own, does too.

Edge is divided into three poem sequences: "Field", "Sun", and the title sequence, "Edge". Each sequence is, in a way, a single poem and the whole book one long poem. The poem that opens "Field" and the poem that finishes "Edge" are for me bookends that hold the *corpus* upright. Here are lines from the opening and closing poems of this marvelous book.

From the opening poem, "Field":

> When the little ideas slip into their bodies like clothes
> They step through the mirror, enter
> An irreducible level of noise …. (9-11)
>
> But how compelling to have a body. If fact,
> Irresistible. (15-16)

Lines from the ending poem, "Intertidal"

> I walk out to the end …. (1)
>
> As far as light can penetrate, until
> There is nothing here but process.
> And I have to turn back. (18-20)

Edge might push you not over, but into her two earlier books of poetry: *The Lost Music* (1996) and *Two Countries* (2014) where you will discover her themes of "nature' in its wildest sense and "place" its deepest.

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