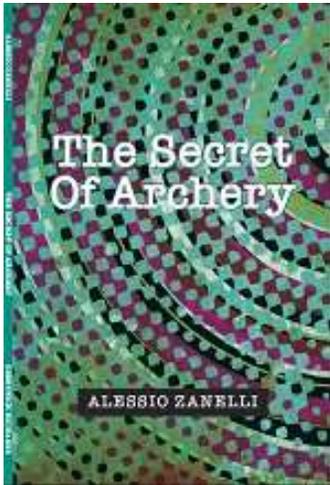


Neil Leadbeater Reviews Alessio Zanelli's *The Secret of Archery*

This latest collection by Italian poet Alessio Zanelli begins with a leave-taking to the old year which sets the scene for what is to come. Time is v ery much in evidence here. In *The Hourglass*, a visual poem written in the shape of an hourglass, Zanelli reminds us of the sand that is passing through it. The upper half of the triangle is full of the



activity of childhood while the lower half is full of the passivity of looking back. It is steeped in memories and speaks to us of postcards and keepsakes stored in the mind and the attic. It is interesting that the word 'sleep' is the standalone word positioned at the waist. The middle of the poem is the gateway between time present and time past, as one day moves into another.

The theme of time continues in *Twone* – a neat contraction of two into one where Zanelli writes about his relationship with his father. It is a poem that draws affectionately and

knowingly on the likeness that exists between a father and a son, something we only come to recognise as we age and see before us our father's features mirrored in our own: that time when we eventually discover that 'I am him and he is me'.

Time also runs through *The Insomniacs* where 'the night has already gathered momentum...the journey is shortening' and 'the horizon is drawing near'. It marches relentlessly in *Down the Homestretch*, it comes full circle in the cycle of nature in *The Albatross* and also in *The Weather Tender* where 'the summer of life' can crease a face with 'more storms than sunshine'.

Time is not the only theme that runs through these poems though. A glance at the contents page reveals an interest in sport, especially running, nature, history and topology. Sometimes the titles are so catchy (*Iceblink*, *How To Make A Pebble Matter*, *The Book About To Burn*) the reader will want to turn to the poems without delay.

Poems such as *Call*, *A Runner's Observations* and *Solo Run* arise directly out of Zanelli's passion for long-distance running. It is no surprise that many of the other poems contain passages about the weather, nature, scenery and time of day for these are some of the things that a runner would be acutely aware of in remote outdoor territory.

In this collection, Zanelli's favourite season seems to be winter. He writes convincingly about fog, ice and snow. In *Iceblink*

...The air sizzles noiselessly, pervades

*the outerwear, invades into the mouth, slips liquid
down*

*the windpipe. And in front of the breadth, of the
overflowing energy*

*of the glittering sweep, one would want to be the
river –streaming*

careless through it, not bothered at all, about still...

Some poems, such as *Mare Nostrum*, *Dark Ages*, *Pasubio 1915-1918*, cover a whole spectrum of history in one fell swoop while others, such as *Culloden Moor* focus on a single historical event: the final confrontation of the [Jacobite rising of 1745](#) at the Battle of Culloden on 16 April 1746 when the [Jacobite](#) forces of [Charles Edward Stuart](#) were decisively defeated by Hanoverian forces commanded by [William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland](#), near [Inverness](#) in the [Scottish Highlands](#). Zanelli's poem of two stanzas is tantalisingly ambiguous about time. Are we reading about the battle as it is taking place or are we revisiting the scene some years after the event in an act of remembrance? On the one hand there is no portrayal of armed combat in the poem and on the other, long minutes lapse before bagpipes are trilled. History tells us that the battle lasted only an hour, with the Jacobites suffering a bloody defeat.

In *How To Make A Pebble Matter* Zanelli shows us how to make anything matter, even something that seems on the surface to be insignificant. By choosing one of trillions of pebbles lying in the water, the chosen one becomes in itself significant. Despite references to water, wave motion, weather and sand, Zanelli reminds us that 'the pebble's shape, size and weight do matter'. Its characteristics matter. A game is then enacted between the player and the pebble of which there are several outcomes, one of them being that the pebble itself could possibly be one of the winners.

Returning to the title of this collection, it is interesting to see how Zanelli sometimes aims his arrows deliberately off-centre, delivering up poems that are intriguing and elusive while at other times he hits the target, the bull's eye, making a poem speak to us very directly indeed.

For me, *The Book About To Burn* is an example of the former:

*On top of the campfire stack stands
a book, aged and worn, crumpled
pages flutter in the wind, which
some absent-minded one forgot
right there or some reprobate
rejected.*

From these opening lines we do not know whether the book has been placed there by accident or by design. The latter reminds us of those times in history when individual

books and whole libraries of books have been burned for one reason or another but in this case the book in question survives:

*...All
that is written on it is not
ready to blaze*

but a note of ambiguity arises later on in the poem when it is suggested that the book's future is not necessarily secured:

*...There's still plenty of
time to turn each word to ash, a
precise time, utterly apt.
On another level, the poem may be interpreted as
an elegy for the demise of books in their written
form altogether.*

The Thorn is another example of elusiveness. For me it is a poem about sin, redemption, healing and freedom expressed through the story of a woman pruning roses when 'the season is well on,' and 'summer draws near / with its swelter, its scalding breath, its unremitting glare'. There is a sense of urgency in the poem, even though we are told that the work was 'soon done to perfection' because even though it is 'still daytime' there are some 'long shadows that precede the hug of twilight, / unnoticed' so that, by the end of the poem, 'evening has slopped all over the orchard'. 'Slopped' is such an intriguing word to use in this context. The sudden

announcement of an orchard, when we have assumed that we are in a rose garden, is a reminder of the Fall. The mystery that Zanelli conjures up for us in this poem is tantalising.

As well as dealing with a variety of subjects, the poems in this collection range across many different locations: Wales and Italy, Scotland, the Mediterranean and England. In addition to poems addressed to his own immediate family, he writes with compassion about the homeless and the plight of migrants risking their lives for the chance of a new beginning and a better life. In many of the poems the tone is elegiac rather than nostalgic. They express an unflinching understanding and acceptance of the vicissitudes of life. As Zanelli says in his poem *Climbers*, mountains are 'monoliths' and 'there is no escape. We have to tackle them.'

Zanelli pays particular attention to how his poems sit on the page. The shape of the three visual poems is in keeping with their message. A few poems are set out in couplets, one or two are in rhyme and most are in free verse with short line lengths. With few exceptions, the majority of them are only the length of a single page.

The collection ends with the title poem which, in turn, links to the quotation at the beginning of the book: Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki's saying 'Fundamentally the marksman aims at himself.' In his book, 'Zen And The Art Of Archery', Eugen Herrigel reminds us that 'archery is still a matter of life and death to the extent that it is a contest of the

archer with himself.' He is the one who aims and the one who is hit. For this 'it is necessary for the archer to become an unmoved centre.' In Suzuki's hands, the art of archery 'is like a preparatory school for Zen,' for it lets the beginner gain insight, through the works of his own hands, into otherwise unintelligible events. In short, it is a spiritual exercise, a kind of introspective mysticism. Zanelli's poem acknowledges that it is often outside events that shape our futures and that we ourselves have little control over the way in which we want our lives to progress. Those who think that they are the masters of their own destinies live in a fantasy world and end up in a prison of their own making. A serious, philosophical piece on which to end.

This is a fine collection from an Italian poet who is clearly at ease writing in English. His poems speak of 'the urge of present days / out of the echo of distant times' for these are poems that are grounded in history and they are also poems that speak to us with the wisdom of experience.

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About the Author

Poet and editor, **Alessio Zanelli**, born in 1963 in Cremona, Italy, has long adopted English as his creative language. His work has been published widely in journals both at home and abroad. His previous collections include *Loose Sheets* (Upfront Publishing, 2002); *Small Press Verse and Poeticonjectures* (Xlibris Corporation, 2003); *Straight Astray* (Troubadour Publishing, 2005); *33 Poesie / 33 Poems* (Montedit, 2011) and *Over Misty Plains* (Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2012). He is the former poetry editor of *Private Photo Review*, an international magazine of b/w photography and short writings, and the Italian Stanza Representative for The Poetry Society of London. In addition to poetry, his interests include painting, scenic photography and long-distance running.

About the Reviewer

Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, Scotland, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus Press, England, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, England, 2014), *Sleeve Notes* (Editura Pim, Iași, Romania, 2016) *Finding the River Horse* (Littoral Press, 2017) and *Penn Fields* (Littoral Press, 2019). His work has been translated into several languages including Dutch, French, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish.

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