# THROUGH BUSHES AND THROUGH BRIARS: REVIEW BY THERESA SOWERBY

**The Hawthorn Bride** by **Victoria Gatehouse**

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The title poem depicts hawthorn in May, ‘Beltane wild’, its full blossom trailing ‘all this slithering light’. The reader (male / husband?) is challenged to ‘savour her scent of musk and decay’, the hint of her winter crone state. In fourteen lines, a cyclical motion through fertility and death, with the promise of renewal:

‘rioting petals, this cluster of stars

offered up beneath a waxing moon’,

Gatehouse sets a template for what is to come – a celebration of pagan, often female energy rooted in the trees of the Celtic Ogham..

The penultimate and final poems, close the circle. The ‘Elder Mother’ demands an offering, nail clippings or a ‘strand of hair’ in return for a ‘sliver of her bark’, sealing a ‘pact’ to give back ‘your own wood when you become tree’; in ‘Yew Needle’ the focus is on renewal:

‘There are days you could lay

new rings around an outgrown heart’

and ‘stitch yourself a new skin’.

‘I Always Knew I Was a Blackthorn’ presents a spiky, sensitive adolescent. Overshadowed by the ‘other girls, / those Golden Beeches’, the protagonist has knives in ‘the secret thicket of (her) ribs’ and blossoms into the ‘silver-blue / bloom of fruit, so close to the thorns’ before the surprise climax of her awakening, not by the conventional prince, but a ‘Beech Girl’, her ‘finger on the spindle of my heart’.

The spirit of Angela Carter hovers over ‘Little Red’ who longs to inhabit the wolf’s body, ‘his pelt a hand-me-down coat’. Similarly, Carter’s Erlking lurks within Dionysus in ‘The Ivy Crown’, a powerful depiction of sexual obsession and manipulation from which the woman must cut herself free ‘to live’. As in many poems here, use of the second person pronoun brings immediacy, suggesting within the specific situation, a universal significance.

There is a strand of meta-poetry, best when rooted in a situation. ‘my life in the verges’, all lower case, has the poet among long grasses ‘a little out of control…rearranging words – in the small-boned light’. ‘Owl Light’ explores a similar excitement in being drawn to the peripheral, grasses ‘murmuring / their untidy truths’. Owl pellets, gathered by the speaker when younger, suggest a darkness held within surface beauty, both disturbing and necessary:

‘and still this bleeding, unseen beneath gold,

the skeletons in her pocket, carried home’.

Two elegies for a friend are particular poignant. In ‘Gorse Light’ memories of walking together resolve into the meditation that ‘You’ll ‘walk it alone, the final mile’ and unlatch the gate with hands which have become ‘the curved / arms of a harbour’. The easing of pain is treated more idiosyncratically in ‘Learning to Walk in your Boots’. Inheriting her friend’s boots half a size too small, the speaker persists in wearing them until they ‘take on the contours of my feet’, a witty metaphor for exploring the gradual loosening of grief.

This impressive first collection, full of startling images rooted in Gatehouse’s precise scientific knowledge, is a delight to read.