Impact: The Titanic Poems
by Billeh Nickerson

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Released in time for the one-hundredth anniversary of the disaster that inspired it, this compact little collection, Impact: The Titanic Poems, is enough to restore one’s faith in poetry. Poetry as a voice for temps perdu, for forgotten humanity. With the logic of chronology, Billeh Nickerson honours the story, the history, and the victims; those who were lost and those who survived.

Impact is inclusive. Like the Titanic itself, first, second, and steerage classes are represented, from twenty-eight countries, their children and dogs, along with crew members, Captain Smith, the barber, the workers who built the Titanic, and the White Star Line chairman and managing director, J. Bruce Ismay. Labourers wearing duncher caps, foremen in bowlers, and The Hats in the main office at Harland and Wolff stream, like the passengers, each to their own level (15).

After opening with the rumour of a lost worker, “their rivets sealed more than just the hull” (“The Lost Worker,” 13), the story begins with the ship’s construction. We meet the workers of the riveting squad – heater boys, catch boys, holder-ons, riveters wearing scarves against the “rivet ember.” But the ill omens and foreshadowing persist, in how a child sees the bumps on the riveted hull as “goose bumps” from “a surprise chill” (“Goose Bumps,” 20). How the ship seems to disappear, how the neighbours miss her, after the launch (“The Clothesline,” 23). How Jenny the Cat evacuates her kittens in Southampton (“Jenny the Cat,” 27). Later, passengers recall earlier personal experiences that seemed to presage the disaster. Being lowered into a well, clinging to a rope (“The Wishing Well,” 46). A fortuneteller’s warning to “beware of the water” (“Edith Evans,” 48).

The Titanic poems are organized in a straightforward manner that parallels the life of the ship, the six sections corresponding to places, a sort of industrial stations of the cross. “I. Construction” in Belfast. “II. Maiden Voyage” from Southampton. “III. Impact” on the water off the Grand Banks. The surprise, disbelief, denial. The “negative prognosis” (“The Prognosis,” 42). “IV. Voices” from the survivors. “V. Impact” on survivors, on the rescuers, on those who tended the dead, on the mobs awaiting news, eager to vilify and blame. “VI. Discovery” of the wreckage four miles down, of the unclaimed bodies in Halifax, of the fate of survivors, of the mythologizing, “the crewman with a name similar / to the character played by DiCaprio” (“Fairview Cemetery, Halifax, Nova Scotia,” 91).

Nickerson researches the Titanic story, visits the Belfast berth yard, the Halifax graveyard, absorbs the atmosphere, the ambiance, and then transforms the details into imagined memories or poems found in documents and letters. The simplicity of the approach disappears the poet’s magic tools, the recurring motifs of fire/smoke/water/ice, recurring images of shaving and beards, of lifebuoy, lifeboat, lifejacket, an obsessive madness of recurring movements – rowing rescuers, an air-piano player, a grieving carver. “Selected Provisions” (30), listing thousands of pieces of produce, pounds and tons of food, 8,000 cigars, suggests without naming the excess, the hubris. The first film of a wedding keeps the lost groom forever young while the poet resists the urge to comment, to mention the pivotal role of art in memory (“The Young Widow”, 68). The photograph of orphaned children of crewmen, like thousands of other documents, places the Titanic disaster as only one tragedy among many in human history. “In every photograph there’s always . . .” (“Group Photograph, Southampton,” 72). Nickerson’s restraint, his precision, permit the real emotion to be transmitted in straightforward statements of fact, in stoic recall, in telling detail.
“Watching her from behind,” a woman working a rolling pin crafted from wreckage, appears to row (“The Rolling Pin,” 83). The boy removed from a lifeboat sits “heavy with the feeling/ he’d become a man” (“The Boy in Lifeboat No. 14,” 45). Oranges tossed into lifeboats are eaten by survivors with lips coated with seasalt (“Steward Johnston,” 51). The noise when the ship goes “head down” haunts survivors (“Stewardess Violet Jessop,” 56; “Lawrence Beesley” 57; “Colonel Archibald Gracie IV, 59).

I remember saying to my mother once
how dreadful that noise was
and I always remember her reply, she said
yes, but think back about the silence that followed, [“Eva Hart”, p. 58]

but each time the home team cracked one out of the park
he’d think of the lifeboats, the iceberg,

the screams (“The Sound of the Drowning,” 84)

These *Titanic* poems are not about linguistic gymnastics, about artfulness, about showing off. They are about the emotional impact of tragedy, and about the ability of language, of narrative, of art to convey it. Emotion. Impact.

Wonderful. ♦

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