

Alison J Barton reviews
Eurydice Speaks

[Claire Gaskin](#), [Eurydice Speaks](#)

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Claire Gaskin once described poetry as radial, as a non-linear version of reality. In her description she encompasses the idea of the traumatic memory as fragmented, inaccessible and without language, believing the writing and reading of poetry can be therapeutic and healing. In her fourth collection, *Eurydice Speaks*, Gaskin privileges the realities of the traumatised, the contorted worlds of the ravaged. She re-writes Eurydice's story in fifty-seven linked sonnets, restraining the pieces with a loose OULIPO technique (N+7) and offering a circular space for the traumatic memory. Branching off from previous iterations (namely H.D.'s 'Eurydice') Gaskin offers us a renewed ingenue who self-narrates a contemporary experience of rising from the underworld.

In *Eurydice Speaks* the Greek myth is revitalised, politically repositioning our protagonist as the agent in her own story. Eurydice is re-cast as quietly knowing, robust and steadfast. Where Orpheus struck her down, casting her back to her exile, Eurydice's own words propel her to the surface. Gaskin's adaptation of the OULIPO method ridicules Orpheus as an absent lover and gives a hallucinogenic quality to his interactions. Imagined words from Orpheus are transformed by Eurydice's ponderances: 'nothing' becomes 'nuance', 'novelty' and later 'notion'. She distorts his words, creating new meaning in his utterances. Orpheus is rendered powerless as an awakened Eurydice reconciles the new world with her former hideaway.

From the first page we softly fall on watery steps with Gaskin, floating the psyche of a renewed Eurydice, as she is prayed, lugged and lullabied from land to sea. Eurydice has awoken and is instantly alert and stable. She contemplates her relegation to the underworld, is buoyant in her satori, drifting between stories looping from one to the other. In H.D.'s well-known 'Eurydice' the protagonist lamentingly questions Orpheus why he cast her back to a black, deathly hell, fearing his look. Gaskin, however, has Eurydice in control, willing Orpheus to turn and gaze again. Where H.D.'s Eurydice is pleading and sinking, Gaskin's is afloat, meditative, swimming through liquid imagery, submerged in the fragments of her trauma as she emerges to a 'water-hugged earth'.

A series of self-examining anecdotes are rewritten many times within and between the sonnets. Noun substitution and alliteration continue across sonnets but Gaskin switches concepts sharply, two ideas often juxtaposed in one short line ('to watch the light fade is enough I have the ground' and 'his picture fell he wandered'). Tautograms cement Gaskin's imagery ('the inner worship as boneless as the outer worry' and 'the inner worm as boneless as the outer world'). Eurydice's past is told in metaphor:

words like dust motes in the light of empty rotation
if he didn't want to restrain me he wouldn't
over the page the flashback
sorry is a sword in his side

and her present through surrealist imagery:

the horizon yellows with agency
we both look out our eyefuls of shadow
we are one third
we stand to the right of the framework.

There is a sense that Eurydice's is not the only story to tell here. Gaskin has a parallel narrative. The political is subtly poised in punctuation-less sonnets that are rarely literal. A fine feminist line is threaded through the book ('there's a language barrier between the binaries' and 'don't fight back you might get hurt // said the police commissioner'). In the tradition of Sylvia Plath and her resistance to a woman's 'single pure life' (*The Bell Jar*), Gaskin writes Eurydice with thick layers, set with juxtaposed and complex dimensions of meaning. But where Plath writes of a world closing in on a woman, Gaskin writes one opening up. She gives Eurydice a full life and holistic perspective. She cannot be reduced—she is interrogative of her many selves and many lives.

Gaskin's body of work to date has been pared and light on the page. In *Eurydice Speaks*, each poem presents with a shadow-like 'x-ray' quality; the poems are for our examination. Gaskin seems to be discovering as she writes, as Eurydice's observations spill to the page:

we stand on hindsight look ahead of ourselves
we set off with prohibitions a plan and a theme
chained to a rocking horse every day
we are too orchestrated by what will happen next
to see the turnaround of where we are now here and nowhere.

Her stringing together of many methods gives Eurydice a depth and density that parallels the appearance of the sonnets on the page.

Gaskin's Eurydice is a thinker, an enquiring explorer. She is expressive, astute, almost objective. She seeks answers where problems lie ('in your reappearance is your disappearance') and hides from herself ('a cloth over the mirrors [...] a cloth over the misconceptions'). The sonnets take dark turns ('lots of people now dead have raked leaves // my body was broken where the two rivers met') and offer deep analysis ('those who don't attach do desire', 'is there progress in this alienation // is there no life with no chance to reflect'). The tempo increases, becoming rapid, flitting in imagery to an urgent conclusion, a meeting of worlds demonstrating that trauma without voice is repeated. A muted Eurydice falls to the underworld once more, 'stumbling on steps flowing with water'.

Eurydice Speaks galvanises the notion that poetry is not didactic. Gaskin's sonnets plunge into the uncertain, immersed in the feminine subjective. In her surreal work we find linearity in the grey areas and the abstract puzzles of the world Eurydice briefly looks out towards. We, as her audience, are instrumental in her meaning-making, in her reach for understanding and healing. Eurydice is not yet liberated; she is suspended in reflective animation, simultaneously in motion and ponderous static, her recollections floatingly heuristic.

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