

E. J. Scovell – tribute from Professor Michael Schmidt, poet, author, critic, founder and editor of Carcanet Press

I attended Joy Scovell's funeral at Oxford Crematorium in the company of Anne Ridler, who had introduced me to her over a decade before. In the front row I remember three of her sisters, some older (she was well into her 90s). What a stalwart family it seemed, and how together! At the end we sang 'The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended', and parts of Psalm 103. Robert Elton offered a family tribute. Theresa Frayn spoke of the poet, Katie Buffonge read a poem of Joy's, and Wilma Elton read Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar'. Literary tributes came from the novelist Maggie Gee and me, her publisher.

That event on 30 December 1999 was a celebration. This event, twenty-five years later, is even more of a celebration as we recall the poet and her husband, and mark their home for posterity. I know that her poems have a posterity. It is not a popular posterity, she won't become a set text. It is a presence that single readers will happen upon in anthologies and follow up: her singular poems let us in to a unique and unexpected imagination, timeless in its concerns, deft in its forms, an imagination rooted in a tradition which survives despite changes in fashion. We know her as a translator but especially, to use the words of that severest twentieth-century critic and anthologist Geoffrey Grigson, 'a poet less concerned with celebrity and self-importance than with being alive and in love'. She is, he added, 'the purest woman poet of our time.' I think we can drop the word 'woman': Grigson's statement retains its force without a hint of condescension.

I fell in love with Joy's poems when I read a pamphlet published by Peter Scupham and John Mole of the Mandeville Press, *Listening to Collared Doves*. The title poem begins 'I am homesick now for middle age, as then/ For youth', and accepts that 'our natural span may be enough'. She is a poet of and for maturity, for adult readers. Her poems keep open ways back to childhood, youth, middle age and accept what Philip Larkin coldly calls 'age, and then the only end of age'. I appreciate her more each year.

One poem seems especially apposite for today. It is called 'The Ghosts' and it conjures both the poet and her family and by extension our own ghosts, comfortable and uncomfortable, present, past and to come.

The days of our ghosthood were these;
When we were children, when we had no keys
We entered through closed doors, unseen went out again.
Our souls were the dissolved, ungathered, filtering rain.
Our bodies sat upon our parents' knees.

In the second days of our ghosthood
We went on foot among a multitude,
In time of drought. In our hard youth, we winter-born.
And those were visible to men as flowers in corn
Whose souls were eyes unseen that gaze from dark.

We entered flesh and took our veil, our state.
The third days of our ghosthood wait.
When we are stripped by pain, by coming death far-seen,
Of earthly loves, earth's fruit, that came so late to hand,
With that waking or falling into dream
We shall not cross into an unfamiliar land.