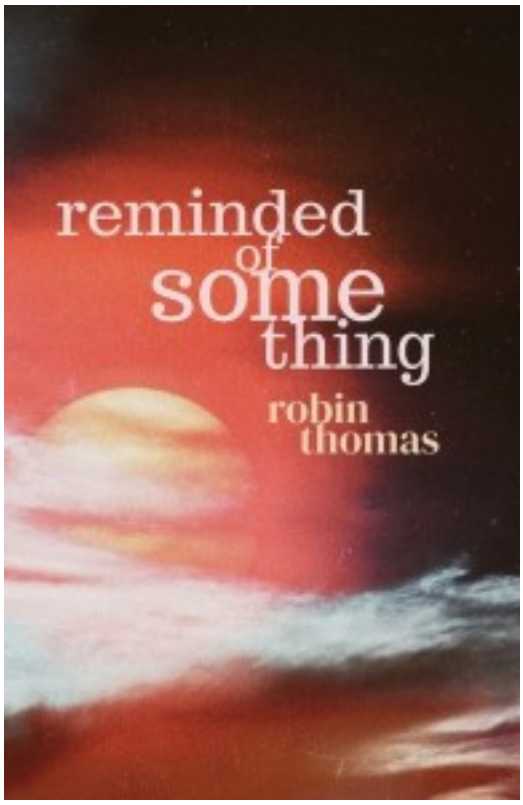
***Reminded of Something* by Robin Thomas. £9.99 Cinnamon Press. ISBN: 978-1-78864-144-9. Reviewed by Neil Fulwood**



My review of Robin Thomas's previous collection, A Distant Hum, for The High Window's Spring 2022 issue began with the observation that the poet makes a virtue of concision – a statement that ought to be thunderingly obvious given that one of the chief pleasures and distinctions of poetry is its capacity for distillation, but isn't always the case (increasingly, multi-page expressions of verbosity are becoming the norm). I concluded that Thomas had a particular talent for understatement – again, not something that is always the case, particularly amongst adherents to the confessional or life-writing style.

Reminded of Something displays the same commitment to concision – only one poem pushes beyond a single page – and understatement, and it would have been quite easy to rehash the superlatives from my previous review (only with different quotes dropped in) and declare it a fitting and eminently enjoyable follow-up to its predecessor. Except that Reminded of Something unfolds with a heavier heart.

The dedication – to the poet's late wife – readies you for the collection's defining theme. Its four sections are prefaced by a twelve-line poem, 'The Engine', which I shall quote in full.

Who remembers the birches
which swayed in the soft winds

of yesterday? And who recalls
the fires of their heart

when the sky was blue and the sun
a hot engine, driving through winter
to spring, through spring towards
joy; or the child which played

at the foot of the birch trees
which swayed in the bickering wind
drifting tomorrow
into its innocent head?

The first section, comprising a dozen poems on loss and remembrance, opens with ‘After many a season’, which again benefits from quoting in full:

all the things she was

compressed
expanded
to become
an event
and curtains closing

I
was just getting to know her

I’m generally suspicious of poems which use single word lines, the uncertainty always nagging away at the back of my mind as to whether that single word is enough to do the heavy lifting. Thomas proves that it can be done, and done elegantly. The wistful last two lines suggest a middle ground between mourning and the poet beginning to make his peace with a vastly changed world. Subsequent pieces achieve a similar effect:

How you would have loved it:
the power, the expression,
the tenderness … h’mm, let’s try again:
the thunder, the sweetness of rain,
mild, fresh mornings …

[‘On listening to a Brahms piano concerto’]

…

welcome home
when I come through the door.
As I lock it behind me I don't
keep you safe.

['Where won't you next be']

I tease them from the sleeves they
don't want to leave; I save some
for her to never see …

['The photos']

The second section continues the theme of recollection and reflection: poems of people and places. 'Their own lives' invokes Larkin, but Thomas keeps the detail personal to his own experience. Then, with the prose-poem 'The science of poetry', the focus expands: Yeats' 'Song of the Wandering Aengus' is sensitively reimagined through the lens of childhood innocence in 'Angie's Song'; 'Life and work' dismisses some lazy thinking about Beethoven while preserving the towering intensity of his compositions; canvases by Guercino and Vanessa Bell are brought to life (Thomas's engagement with the visual arts was one of the great joys of A Distant Hum); and there's even an affectionate little skit on Brief Encounter in 'Mrs Jesson's brush with life'. Nods to other poets abound: Eliot, Wordsworth, Brooke, Larkin again.

Section three comprises the sequence 'Dark-eyed night' which is too long to quote in full and does not lend itself to being abstracted. It pulls together much of what has gone before and hums quietly with its own power. Thomas's unassuming humanitarianism and his unforced craftsmanship achieve a poignant symbiosis here.

The fourth and last section gifts us just one poem, as perfectly distilled as anything Thomas has written. It's called 'The news' and it's tempting to quote it verbatim. But I'll resist doing so. It needs to be experienced by the reader in the context of the collection as a whole. Reminded of Something is not a book to be dipped into, flipped through or accessed casually. It should be read as a whole, in sequence, ideally in a single sitting, and when the ten lines of 'The news' break upon the reader, the effect is all the more powerful for their stillness.

Neil Fulwood was born in Nottingham, England, where he still lives and works. He has three collections out with Shoestring Press: *No Avoiding It*, *Can't Take Me Anywhere* and *Service Cancelled*. He co-edited the Alan Sillitoe tribute anthology *More Raw Material* (Lucifer Press, 2015), and has published three volumes of film criticism with Chrysalis.