The Paths of Survival
by Josephine Balmer
Shearsman Books 2017, paperback 92 pp., £9.95

Josephine Balmer is a research scholar, literary critic and translator of classical Greek and Latin poetry as well as a poet in her own right. I first encountered Balmer's work in the form of her Sappho translations, published by Brilliance Books in 1984 and comprising versions of all the then extant poems and fragments – two more poems that can be safely attributed to Sappho have been discovered since. That edition (the book was re-issued by Bloodaxe in 1986 and 1992) was illustrated with black and white drawings often uncomfortably reminiscent of Aubrey Beardsley's aesthetic; and the back cover claimed Sappho as 'the first and arguably the finest lesbian poet', an anachronistic and misleading claim, which is undermined by Balmer's thoughtful introduction. These translations, undertaken when she was in her early twenties, remain the ones I turn to, even though many others have appeared in the meantime, including Anne Carson's dramatically dismembered *If Not, Winter* (Virago 2003).

Balmer's own poetry draws deeply on her knowledge and love of classical languages; her volume *The Word for Sorrow* (Salt 2013) combines versions of poems written by the Roman poet Ovid during his exile on the shores of the Black Sea with poems exploring the story of a second-hand Latin dictionary once owned by a schoolboy who later fought at Gallipoli – on the shores of the Black Sea – in WWI. It was highly praised by David Constantine and George Szirtes.

I mention these two previous publications (out of a great many) to make clear that we can have faith in Balmer's poetry as much as in her scholarship, and indeed to illustrate what a *Poetry London* reviewer, Kate Bingham, meant by saying that 'Balmer has created a genre of her own: a kind of docupoem, a collage of voices in which authenticity is as important as art'.

The jacket description of *The Word for Sorrow* as 'an interplay between translation and original, text and translator, past and present' applies equally well to the present collection: *The Paths of Survival* confirms Balmer as a creator-curator of immense vision and gifts. The book is described by Shearsman as exploring 'the fragility of the written word; the ways in which its is destroyed and the ways in which, by each fresh miracle, it endures against all the odds.' The written words in question are those of the dramatist Aeschylus, and their 'fragility' refers to the fact that out of an estimated *oeuvre* of at least seventy plays only seven have survived.

The Myrmidons is generally agreed to be the first play in the lost *Achilleis* trilogy and it is the few fragments of this drama that Balmer exhumes, in order to celebrate their survival as well as, by implication, to commemorate the original tragedy's destruction. The loss of the play mirrors the loss in the play – Achilles' refusal to take part in the battle against the Trojans causes the killing of his beloved Patroclus. Achilles is broken by his lover's death, and his despairing rage becomes his motive to return to battle.

Reflecting on the scholarly and emotional achievement of this book, I was reminded of something said by Dr. Edmund Richardson (lecturer in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Durham University) speaking on BBC Radio 3's 'Free Thinking' in the summer of 2016. He suggested that all classical scholarship: '*is driven by this desire that can never be fulfilled. Ninety-seven per cent of ancient literature is lost; we work with fragments, we work with dreams, we work with the longing for lost texts to be discovered, for every broken thing to be repaired…*' And of course we cannot but relate the book's theme to the losses that are being inflicted – by time, neglect and outright destructive intent – on the cultures of the Arabic world, which was instrumental in preserving so much of the classical corpus when the western world was in chaos.

Love and rage – those engines of human action, those drivers of tragedy ancient and modern – figure in Balmer's poems in subtle and multifarious ways; for example, the expression of love as longing in the opening poem 'Proem: Final Sentence' which goes like this: 'Still I am drawn to it like breath to glass. / That ache of absence, wrench of nothingness…'. Then rage, encountered in the form of Orthodox disgust for homophilia in 'Trespass': 'Anathema. The taint of unconstrained sin – / a snatch of Aeschylus' foul Myrmidons', and then, implicitly and in passing, at the shocking start of 'The Professor's Prize': 'That day I'd seen a student hung / from a lamp post by a baying mob / for "associating" with men.'

Above all, however, Balmer's work is a labour of love, not rage. Her engagement with what we still call the classics both enables and impels her to range widely over the extraordinary history of how and why the fragments of *The Myrmidons* managed to negotiate their way through all kinds of material and ideological vicissitudes, so as to be read, interpreted and appreciated in the 21st century. According to the contributor of the Wikipedia entry on tragedy, 'tragedy has remained an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle and change' and Balmer's book weaves together the precise textures of all these processes and undertakings, revealing what joins them together in common pursuit as

well as what distinguishes them from each other in time, place, ethic and motive.

Just to give a sense of the book's terrain and trajectory, here are the characters who make an appearance as listed in the Contents: Custodians, Excavators, Editors, Scavengers, Translators, Victors, Believers, Emperor, Anthologists, Scribe, Annotators, Bureaucrats, Copyists, Comedian, Tragedian. A further refinement is that we travel back in time in the company of these people, real and imagined, over two and half millennia. I honestly think I've learnt more from this single book of poetry than I have from a great many academic articles.

The effect of allowing oneself to become immersed in the book is gradual and cumulative; as one might expect, there are several individual stand-out poems (and doubtless each reader will have her/his favourites), but really the significance is in the whole, the rounded-out view of time and change from a host of human perspectives.

The book's cover prepares us beautifully for what we will read and try to comprehend within – it's a photograph, taken from the left side, of the helmet of Miltiades the Younger that shows both the spare elegance of the head-armour and also its alarming frailty, the skull protection completely missing and the metal oxidised and dented.

Lesley Saunders
1100 words approx.