

“YOU SHOULD NOW SEEK COVER DEAR HEART...” *



Carrie Etter



Selima Hill



Caoilinn Hughes



Sarah Kirsch

Imagined Sons, **Carrie Etter**, Seren, 2014. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-7817215-1-3

The Sparkling Jewel of Naturism, **Selima Hill**, Bloodaxe Books, 2014. £9.95. ISBN 978-1-7803710-3-0

Gathering Evidence, **Caoilinn Hughes**, Carcanet, 2014. £9.95. ISBN 978-1-8477726-2-6

Ice Roses: Selected Poems, **Sarah Kirsch** (trans. Anne Stokes), Bloodaxe Books, 2014. £14.95. ISBN 978-1-8477715-1-3

* “You should now / Seek cover dear / Heart. Otherwise longing will howl / Your lost dream / Of the beauty of the world...” from *Cold*, Sarah Kirsch

How does a mother ever deal with the trauma of a lost child? *Imagined Sons*, the third full length collection from **Carrie Etter**, reflects on the experience of a mother who gives up her baby son at seventeen. The plural in the collection title is no misprint for the poems explore the many possibilities of unknown sons: sons selling the *Big Issue*, sons working in the city, selling cars, or flying planes. The conspiring mind is ever at work growing up these possibilities.

A Birthmother’s Catechism is a refrain-like sequence which runs throughout and borrows the call and response of doctrinal manuals. It invokes the societal pressures through accusatory inquisitions such as “How did you let him go?” and “Why haven’t you looked for him?”. The responses are both unflinchingly honest, a child is let go with “pills for drying up breast milk”, and indirectly striking, because no-one “hangs a birdhouse from a sapling”.

The collection dwells on the son, but it is not static. Time moves forward and back from numerous supermarket trips as an adult to a class reunion at high school where former classmates are joined by her son “grown to the age I was when I gave you up”. Similarly, the dream and dream-like sequences often feature movement towards an ever-distant figure, not just of the mother pursuing her son but the son running towards and away from his birthmother: “he increases his pace and at last breaks into a run, always / gaining on a memory he can’t quite catch”. The final *Catechism* offers some hope of resolution in the closing line which invites “the stone” to “make an effort to flower”. How much resolution this oblique reference to Celan really offers is open to interpretation. Ultimately, these are poems which linger in the mind, haunting with their alternative lives.

Selima Hill’s *The Sparkling Jewel of Naturism* is a triptych of sequences. Each stands alone as an exploration of their respective subjects (jealousy between sisters, young girls, and married women), but in grouping them together as a collection they speak to each other to provide a wider view on the female experience. The truth of female experience, of course, is that when it is non-idealised it is ultimately human, which is, of course, often more than a little grotesque.

Throughout, the poems take up the very short couplet form which Hill favours, and again defy any accusations of mere flippancy with the punch of pithy surrealism. What they appear to lack in length in fact makes space for clarity disguised as word-play or analogy. The first sequence, *Doormat*, for

example, addresses the depth of jealousy which is rarely honestly articulated in life. It is directly treated in lines such as “You stare at him with your staring eyes. / You and he are repellent to me” and “I certainly won’t ask if I can help you / because I can and I don’t want to.” Read as single poems, many of these would be unremarkable, but in their number and abstract insistence they are all uncomfortably real.

The late **Sarah Kirsch** lived through interesting times in Germany’s history, and these translations from Anne Stokes bring together a substantial and wide-ranging selection of her life’s work in both their original German form and in new English translations. The poems in *Ice Roses* can’t help but resound with their context, recalling the division and repression of post-War Germany with lines like “The land in our parts is in a bad way”. Yet the lyrical vision always has promise close by, and the poetic voice itself is always a form of release. As *Freie Verse / Free Verse* suggests, these poems need to be out in the world, and “Who knows what will become of them. / Before they come to rest”.

Gathering Evidence is the debut collection from Irish poet **Caolinn Hughes**. There is great confidence in these poems, given best form in the slow reveal of the long and long-lined poem. So much so, in fact, that Carcanet have used the wider slim volume first used for Sinéad Morrissey’s *The State of the Prisons* in 2005. Like Morrissey too, there is great strength in an even-handed thematic focus. Many of the best poems focus on scientific discoveries and chemical reactions remade again in poetic language, from Marie Curie to atmospheric physics. As *Somatic Cells* has it, these are investigative poems which are “turning the labyrinth of words on their heads / for a better angle on their vowels, on their open / endings”. This exploratory approach shows great promise.

Alex Pryce