

## SOUNDS SIGNIFICANT DILYS WOOD ON ANGELA LEIGHTON



*“This collection offers a study in verbal gymnastics which can teach us something both about honed skill, daring, finesse and also pleasure and humour in putting language through its paces.”*

Angela Leighton’s fifth collection, *One, Two*, reminds us what can be done with the *sound* of words and sound-patterns. She’s ‘up there’ with the exceptionally gifted in the use of alliteration, assonance, euphony, and in the use of esoteric vocabulary. Gerard Manley Hopkins is head boy in the school of word-wizards but Leighton matches her subtle perceptions with rarefied, uncompromisingly ‘poetic’, expression. Today, we’re more used to poems imitating plain speech, so her work is an important locus of the challengingly different.

With apologies for taking lines out of context, examples from across the collection demonstrate Leighton’s exceptional facility: “the vast sea-level’s intemperate upheavals”, *Stormy Petrel*; “feather finials hallucinating hands – / what ghost inhabits this fanning thing?”, *Barn Owl*; “morkin dumped among your nunkey tumps”, *Saving his Gloves*; “empty aspergill trembling for air”, *Praise Song for the Washing Up*. We can make a game by following how the syllable ‘in’ in *Barn Owl*, is made to dance through the sentence.

This collection offers a study in verbal gymnastics which can teach us something both about honed skill, daring, finesse and also pleasure and humour in putting language through its paces. Of course, we want more from poetry – to be engaged emotionally, enlightened, nourished. How does Leighton approach the larger task? Language here is far removed from the street and from the work of those poets who Fiona Sampson called ‘plain dealers’ (‘their straightforward, bread-and-butter diction and emotional intelligence is not so much a conscious strategy but an absence of affectation’, *Beyond the Lyric*, 2012). Does Leighton’s at times dazzling, fine-tuned language divert her energy and lead to sterility in any way?

This question pursued me through many re-readings of *One, Two*. One conclusion was that Leighton’s love of word-sounds ‘comes natural’. An Italian mother and a British father, with her father being the composer Kenneth Leighton, may have first introduced this poet to a fascination with sounds. She both ‘lives in her ears’ more than most poets today and frequently relates matters of relationship and emotion to sound.

There are a lot of references to music and dance here. Several poems include ‘Song’ in their title. Spread through the book (rather than offered as one sequence – a possible option) are four short, rhymed lyrics about early musical instruments. These touch on the initial impulse to make sounds and the use of dead animal material for the purpose. In *Drum for the Feet*, the final question posed about early music-making uses onomatopoeia: “Who paradiddled / to muddle the beat / until some mallemaroking might start, / instead of a kill?” Printed opposite *Drum for the Feet* is the poem *On the Mirliton and the Clappy-Doo*, which offers a whirl of ideas about Scottish dance music, primitive musical instruments, and massed black mussels.

Sound is clearly a preoccupation. Many poems make at least one reference to a distinctive sound effect, from “that motor levity, the fret of a hum” of a moth (*Humming-Bird Hawk-Moth*), to the tick of father’s watch (“my playtime shortened by the whisper of a tick”, *Livelong Day*), to the sounds of a young child, “your nazal gazoo, / your farty whoops” (*Neapolis: Nuptials, V*), to an eerie sound indeed, “tap for the soul long lost, unnamed / riffle a finger / across the anonymous casque of a skull” (*Toccata for the Pezzentelle*).

Recollection of specific sounds are also functionally useful in assisting the re-creation of vanishing past in a vivid, intimate way. Such re-creation is one of Leighton’s main concerns in this collection, which includes sensitive poems about both her parents, recreations of childhood experiences in Naples, reflections on mortality linked with particular places and with friends who have died, reflections on the scars of war in Europe, responses to nature, responses to culture, an overall sense of the shortness of life. When Leighton is writing at the top of her game she conveys a sense of preternaturally attuned senses catching slight changes on the wing. An example is the passage describing a pick-pocket’s raid, which she links with the moment of inspiration when searching for a subject for a poem: “pickings for a light touch, legerdemain, / there’s an angel’s wing flexed at my back – / this artist’s quick impersonal tap, / his opportune grace to feel and lift ... a skimming finger at my zipped backpack, / my almost biblically lightened load”, *Pickpocket, Naples*.

*Pickpocket, Naples* is a sequence of nine sonnets describing childhood’s sensitivities and fears, the folk tales which provoked anxiety, the sense of mortality which the returner feels on her old ground (the ground of an ancient civilisation) and the nuances of Judo-Christian morality that retain a grip on her mind (“church-porch squatters, callers on the Lord. // He’ll hear them one day, the *pezzentella*, / the pleaders, beseechers, too poor for a grave”). The language here is lively and witty, and not short of variety, such as direct speech and quotations from games and songs, but is relatively restrained and uncluttered. Here, language never swamps content. Such restraint perhaps relates to the extent and importance to the poet of the material confronted.

By contrast, I found some poems attractive and enjoyable while also sensing rather too much ‘flummery’. This took the form of sometimes over-developed linguistic playfulness, sometimes over-extended imagery, sometimes a straining after cultural reference.

Whether one delights in semi-technical detail in poetry is a matter of taste. Leighton is well able to supply a treat of this kind, with plenty of wit thrown in, as her two anatomical tour de force poems, *Last Bequest* and *Out of Ward 35*, prove. The former (with wonderful slightly macabre detail) considers leaving one’s body to medical science and the latter puts together thoughts about body as machine (“This weight-lifting arm’s a crane and winch. / Each leg propels on tendon pulleys”) that might occur after a hospital stay. One can’t study Leighton without noting energy and versatility, though some poems are cooler in feeling than others.

Leighton is tempted by the idea of a literary tribute, such as her poem *Magi*, derived from Eliot’s poem, *Journey of the Magi*. This turns out to be comparatively dull and over-extended, echoing Eliot but adding nothing. Similarly, a poem essentially about rain, *The Old Masters, Again*, draws a comparison with W H Auden’s thought-provoking, *Musée des Beaux Arts*, proving more desultory, though strong on rain (“the bleared / mirror-ovule of a falling drop ... the capsuled hollows ... spilling in shaded monochrome”).

Leighton repays careful attention, both for her strengths and the weaknesses that perhaps stem from her facility and willingness to tackle different registers. Where she goes astray, there are compensations even in weak ‘set-pieces’. In other poems, such as *A Counting Song*, intense engagement drives out fancifulness. This 7-page poem will pin down the Covid 19 experience for many readers, opening with the poet’s attempt to capture a sound of origin unknown and probably in her head:

It was dusk, late April, but midsummer warm.  
Through the reeds it sounded: *who? oh*  
Who knows? Translations of a ghost in note-form.  
That day no-one spoke for unspeakable sorrow.

Perhaps all I heard was a wing on a thermal  
or a five-barred gate in the breeze expel  
a conch-shell's harmonic, low glottal.  
A sound-thought carries further than a yell.

This intense, 'listening' beginning (turning into a vigil for a friend with Covid) links with Leighton's deep interest in sounds which stay in her head from key moments in her life. The poem reflects on the absence of friends living voices and of live music ("the musicians are silent / the concerts forbidden"). After searching through memories of sound, the poet wonders if a bittern is calling in this marsh setting. The idea of 'sound' leads on to 'breath', and in the laboured form dictated by Covid, "a slow peristaltic lunge or gulp". The still unidentified bird is unmusical and becomes a symbol of loss, "The bird that has no song to sing". The poet imagines herself in the sick friend's head, "in the locked smiddy of your listening where / that bony blacksmith / hammers the silence to a dream memory". The poem is a fine achievement and brings many of Leighton's strengths together under a tensile control.

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**SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION**  
**DEADLINE 11<sup>th</sup> AUGUST 2021 JUDGE: HANNAH LOWE**

**Hannah Lowe** teaches at Brunel University. Her collections are, *Chick* (Bloodaxe), which won the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize for Poetry, and *Chan* (Bloodaxe). She is one of 20 Next Generation Poets 2014. Her third collection *The Kids* will be published by Bloodaxe in 2021.



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The Competition: £300 first prize in each category; £150 second prize; £75 third prize. Publication of winning/ commended poems (long poems may be in extract) on Second Light website and in ARTEMISpoetry (maximum one full page); invitation to winners to read at a Second Light event (may be online).

Entries: Open to women poets only. One free poem may be entered, Long or Short, by Members of Second Light and if joining Second Light when entering the competition. Long Poems (over 50 lines, no upper limit) £6 per poem. Short Poems (up to 50 lines) £4 per poem or £9 for 3, £14 for 8. The line count is for text lines of the poem only. Titles, epigraphs and blank lines, do not count.

Entry by post (send 2 copies) or online by e-mail. E-mail submissions should be in .doc or pdf (NOT docx) attachments with each poem in a separate file. Contact information to be only in the body of the e-mail (or on a separate contact sheet if entering by post), not on the page with the poem. For entry form and online payment link: [www.secondlightlive.co.uk/news.shtml#comp20](http://www.secondlightlive.co.uk/news.shtml#comp20).

Entries to be sent to Dilys Wood, 3 Springfield Close, East Preston, West Sussex, BN16 2SZ (cheque payable to 'Second Light') or [p.wood159@btinternet.com](mailto:p.wood159@btinternet.com).