

MIXING PLAYFULNESS AND SINCERITY REVIEWS BY SARAH WESTCOTT

My Blazing World, **Patricia Brody**, Salmon Poetry, 2023. Euros 12. ISBN 978-1-9150223-8-7
The Coming Thing, **Martina Evans**, Carcanet Press, 2023. £12.99. ISBN 978-1-8001734-5-3
Hollywood or Home, **Kathryn Gray**, Seren, 2023. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-7817271-2-6
God's Little Artist, **Sue Hubbard**, Seren, 2023. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-7817271-6-4
I Think We're Alone Now, **Abigail Parry**, Bloodaxe Books, 2023. £12. ISBN 978-1-7803768-1-3

The poems in **Abigail Parry's** second collection are nimble and tricky, profound and quantum – that is, they exist in multiple states and places of mind: “The trick falls somewhere there between what you see / and what you don't” (*Giallo*). Parry mounts a sustained enquiry into the nature of intimacy with precise, playful imagery that turns on a sixpence. A speculum is an inquisitive “clockwork bird” while the mind is “brute” beneath the “yoke” of tongue. As the book progresses, it explores Cartesian issues of body and soul through what Parry describes as the “intimate space” of the poem itself:

Suppose there's a catch – some sort of pin –
that holds us to these soft bodies.
Testing the weight of the thought of it gone by watching your sleeping body.

Ghost story in the subjunctive

Parry is never pretentious or pompous – these poems are deceptively fleet-footed and sometimes funny forms of serious play. Key too is a knowingly (and winningly) performative register (“a little bit of hush please...”) which means that when sincerity leaks through, or is earned, it is moving. At a funeral, the “overburdened / fact” of the grave “... opens under / every gesture, thought or act” while that ubiquitous British staple, the egg sandwich, is “reliable / as Death itself, and which I am / for no good reason, stuffing in...”

Many poems are formally striking – a beetle in a box (which transforms into a metaphor for pain) becomes a sonnet boxed within a longer poem and Parry has a delicious ear for apposite, sticky rhyme:

like a locket; like a secret;
like a tacky little secret
might be hidden in a locket;

like a sneaky little poet
might say *box* but mean a *sonnet*
and then put a beetle in it.

A beetle in a box

These are witty, spry poems that deepen our place in the world and suggest an original “way to be where you are” (*The Squint*).

A comparable sense of performative bravura pervades **Kathryn Gray's** *Hollywood or Home*, a collection written from the knowing-yet-tender midpoint of life where “no magic bat / outgames the sweet spot of the sheer, bloody *heart*.” *Hollywood or Home* is an iterative read that builds upon itself, as good films might, creating its own self-aware, mirrored world of watching and being watched. In a beguiling mix of playfulness and sincerity, voices are refracted through the ruthless lens of Hollywood movies and La La land where the real is illusory and the illusory becomes real.

Gray reaches behind set dressings to reveal darker and wilder truths, often using dramatic personae to striking effect. Jump-cut humour and surprising line-breaks delight: “There are not enough Key lime pies in this world / for all the people who deserve them. In the face.” (*Meryl Street is my therapist*).

While it is impossible not to smile at some of the poems, (“I cannot cry. / I have need of a handsome weeping boy...” *Hollywood or Home* is a book that draws on existential threats to the self and wider civilisation. *Brundibar*, a powerful poem of just twelve lines, is named after the opera performed by the children of Theresienstadt concentration camp in occupied Czechoslovakia and subtly questions complicity:

You are innocent.
To watch, merely, is not to be complicit –
At least, surely, not from such distance.

Hollywood or Home offers artful, thoughtful (and ultimately, joyful) comment on the cultures we live in and die for where “the stars – / our startlers – the stars impossibly accrue.”

The titular *Coming Thing* of **Martina Evans’** dramatic book-length poem is, ostensibly, the dawn of the digital age in 1980s Cork and, as the narrative builds, an abortion. The collection is voiced by a young college student, Imelda, whose tone is both knowing and authentic in articulating a changing and sometimes duplicitous Ireland, “... the difference between what you feel & what the world / really is.” Imelda is a “top-notch punkette”, able to send herself up, but painfully self-conscious of her body and her musical tastes, “... wondering what anarchy really meant.”

Reproductive autonomy, the “desperate / responsibility to have the power of life & death / over another creature” are a key theme of the book:

Dora said she’d go straight to England if she ever got
in Trouble. She was the youngest of ten & a mistake
& when the priest visited her family, he was bent over,
red with laughing, pointing, *Look at the Mistake!*
Hasn’t she grown into a fine strong girl!

The book is full of droll lines: “... we were thinking we were / extraordinary too. That’s youth for you. It doesn’t last long.”

The Coming Thing is composed of 75 numbered 14-line monologues – a form of anarchic sonnet, perhaps, and as the story unfolds it gathers pace and takes on, as Colm Toibin says, “a strange concentrated power”. We follow Imelda’s relationship with Carl, in his Mod Trousers and Oxblood Doctor Martens: “More than anything / I wanted him to feel Manly. [...] If Carl didn’t feel Manly, he was a wasp.” When Imelda discovers she is pregnant, she visits a clinic in London. *The Coming Thing* offers a clear-eyed look at hypocrisy, acquiescence and feminism through a unique and pacy poetics.

Patricia Brody’s poems are imbued with their own (sometimes irresistible) poesis – each poem complete in the blaze and impetus of its own making. *My Blazing World*, her second collection with Irish publishers Salmon, is ripe with physicality, idiosyncracies of speech and wider concerns including Covid and war. Brody is particularly moving when articulating layers of loss through the prism of human relationships. Several poems draw on the death of her mother, Jeanne who, through Brody’s acute eye and ear, is lifted beyond the temporal realm in a final act of tenderness:

When you are dying, here is what I’ll tell you:
When you wake up, you will be young again.
Red Mustang, top down, pony tail flying *All I Can Leave You*

The collection is populated with archetypal female figures drawing on myth and the contemporary world. Re-imagined scenarios featuring Virgin Mary, Persephone and Plath pose provocative questions: “you don’t think / it would have made all the difference?” (*Sylvia Had No Starbucks*)

But it is when she is writing about beauty and its darker, riper corollary that she shines most brightly. Many of these poems shimmer with a kind of “duende” – described by the Spanish poet Lorca as “that mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher can explain.” Writing ekphrastically through a da Vinci painting, for example, mothers have “honey” in their veins,

Nectar in their skin & hair
their flesh-bright, heavenly necks.
The bared, offered throat of the lamb.

The Virgin, Her Mother, The Child & The Lamb

An address to an infant son, written from later in motherhood, turns into a profound meditation on intimacy and an almost biblical fall from grace:

When you go from me, how will I be?
You'll think it was a dream. All that will remain:
Loss of perfect sleep, loss of warmth.
The way we lay, curved
sated, in our milky bed.

Almost 2: Mother Falling

My Blazing World is a humane and generous act, a book that leaves you charged; alive.

God's Little Artist is an engaging biography-in-verse structured upon the narrative arc of Welsh artist Gwen John's extraordinary life (1876 - 1939). John is known for her paintings of female figures, many exuding a quietly powerful interiority within light-filled Parisian rooms. She was painting at a time when it was almost “impossible” to be an “independent female artist” according to author **Sue Hubbard** in her compelling introduction to the collection. The book traces John's singular creative and personal life through a sequence of delicate, clear-sighted poems that portray the turbulence of love affairs with men and women, art and spiritual retreat.

John, who was born in Tenby and lost her mother when she was eight, was one of the first women to study at the Slade School of Art. She lived for many years in Paris where she met the sculptor Rodin and, through modelling for him, underwent sexual awakening:

With her head coquettishly turned,
she's half-girl, half-beast,

indolently waiting
for those thick fingers...

Drawing the cat

As the affair comes to a painful close, John “replace[s] her obsession for Rodin with one for God,” living alone in the “limpid / pallor of her tiny room” where she creates luminous work – “only paint and prayer / can offer salvation.” Sue Hubbard writes sensitively of John's physical and mental states as her world shrinks and she seeks the clarity of solitude, becoming “almost transparent”. Colour might be read as an easy metaphor for vitality but the collection (and artist) are more subtle and complicated. Shades and tones of light and loss “in pigeon-whites and dove-grey” enact the intensity and beauty of John's paintings. Hubbard writes exquisitely of colour and its connections to spirituality: “she begins to understand / that colour is light” and her skills as a novelist come to the fore as the poems animate John's character and (often dire) circumstances convincingly.

Gwen was known as the sister of celebrated artist Augustus John who himself said: “In fifty years' time, I shall be remembered only as the brother of Gwen.” *God's Little Artist* impelled me to seek out and appreciate John's work and may go some way towards ensuring her life and work receive the attention they deserve.