

Jane Routh reviews Fiona Moore, Jericho Brown and Marianne Burton

The Distal Point

Fiona Moore
Happenstance Press, £10

The New Testament

Jericho Brown
Picador Poetry, £10.99

Kierkegaard's Cupboard

Marianne Burton
Seren, £9.99

Plain grey, ornamented only by a tiny plane leaf under the title, the understated cover of Fiona Moore's **The Distal Point** suits her work. She writes out of quiet restraint about her partner's death, the pivot around which the book is organised.

Incorporating poems from her two previous pamphlets, she opens the first section, *Overwinter*, with *The Shirt*, which looks back to when she finds it, but simultaneously takes you to the earlier trauma which tore it: "They must have had to work so fast to / save you there was no time to unbutton it." She tells the sequence of what happened by staying with the shirt:

I'd washed it afterwards, not knowing what to do
with it, or that in three weeks the same thing
would happen to another shirt, a favourite,

not naming what happened, but concluding "and from

then on / nothing happened that we would forget." This type of restraint (which an American poet-friend of mine calls 'very English') plays two ways with a reader. You're drawn into the writer's experience by having to imagine what happened, yet simultaneously relate the poem to parallels in your own life because they're not overwritten by another's specificity.

She almost writes a guide to grief – how momentary forgetting can happen as "death works in binary mode" in *1010101010...*; how memory will re-write the past to make it seem to prefigure a death in *Tower*; how long grief lasts, though "change may come while nothing seems to change" in the poem *Overwinter*. Only with the title poem does she assert the uniqueness of any one experience of grief, standing on a shingle spit which shifts with the tides: "No one will stand here again".

Exclave, the middle section of the book, moves out into the world, to Poland, to Germany. *The Numbers* uses the same tact and understatement to effect the shock of seeing them on "The lower arm's soft skin". There are powerful poems in this section – as well as delightful irony in *The cows of North Korea and Satellite Shining Star-1* who proclaim they're "in orbit, grazing". Yet the first section of the book remains their context, the poem *Exclave* extending that word's meaning to:

...A memory of someone
still held in the mind, though it feels more like the heart.
My absence, anyone's absence from the crowd.

which ties the "we" who "drove to the frontier" back to

those first poems, as does the traveller in *Timetable* asking “How did you get this far?” (an example of the strong last lines she is able to deliver.)

The final section, *The Rose, The Stars* returns us to a present in which she’s aware, in *Heart*, of her own heartbeat, “how long how long how long”. But it’s also the afterwards of *The Sound Crowds Make*, in which a boy is trapped by tube doors, and of valued memories, where light from stars “must be from that time / when we first met”.

Jericho Brown’s *The New Testament* couldn’t be more different. The cover image (Leon Bonnat’s *The Barber of Suez*) is straight out of nineteenth century homoerotic Orientalism, slightly but tellingly cropped closer to the figures, to appear more contemporary and with a greater undertow of violence. Jericho Brown grew up in a Baptist family in Louisiana; as well as writing from that wider black culture, he writes of love and violence and AIDS and his family’s inability to accept his sexual identity, challenging his reader with the most un-English of addresses in *Heartland*:

This is the book of three
Diseases. Close it, and you’re caught
Running from my life...

Here “my life” isn’t offered on the assumption the reader will find parallels so much as to say here’s a culture you don’t know about, maybe even wilfully so.

Whereas Fiona Moore’s first person is an individual self, Jericho Brown writes from a far more complex position. His long poem, *The Interrogation*, states “I chose my brother over my / desire to be invisible”; Jericho Brown’s first person is partly his own, but also that of his brother – in the collective sense of that word.

“Brother” is, however, a shifting fulcrum at the heart of this book. “[M]y people / Who are several and whole, holy / And acceptable”, he says in *Romans 12.1* “will not call me / Brother” since:

... they hate a woman
They smell in me, every muscle

Of her body clenched
In fits beneath men
Heavy as heaven –

Two poems on, in *Another Elegy*, a phone call says “if you don’t stop / Your brother, she will kill him / This time.” This is the brother who reappears in the six-page ‘Motherland’, “a fool for a tall woman”, who:

... got out of my car laughing, but with his head in the
window like it was his
last chance at giving advice, *It feels good to have a*
woman fine as she is so mad
at you.

The final section of this poem opens with “That wasn’t the day she killed him.” No use thinking this is to unravel a sibling story; towards the end of the book, ‘Make-Believe’ reveals what is at work here:

...The next
Day to my students I’ll say, *No, I don’t have a brother*
In the world. Myth is not make-believe...

and moves on to “This, / My brother, is a metaphor. I am the tenor.” Yet almost as if to destabilise that, the very next poem, *Found: Messiah* addresses the shooting of an actual family member – though, still slippery, it does so quoting a blog entry.

This is simply to examine the thread of brotherhood – which is interwoven with those of love and violence, AIDS and race. Heavy-going? No, the poems are too well-made for that (especially in their attention to lines) and too well fuelled by the language of his childhood’s preaching and Bible-reading and too various (one made from entries on a dating website) and too funny: “My doctor tells me I’ll live // Longer than most since I see him/ More than most.” They also surprise with where they take you, like this long-haul flight in *Homeland*:

... the dark fields below us. Some slept,
But nobody named Security ever believes me.
Confiscated –

My Atripla. My Celexa. My Cortisone. My Klonopin. My Flexeril. My Zyrtec. My Nasarel. My Percocet. My Ambien.

Nobody in this nation feels safe, and I'm still a reason why.
Every day, something gets thrown away on account of
long

History or hair or fingernails or, yes, of course, my fangs.

Kierkegaard's Cupboard has a different 'I' again – not the writer's, but Kierkegaard's. To voice his autobiography Marianne Burton gives him fifty-two 14-liners (a form which she has skilfully shape-changed in earlier work) in six sections, from 'Childhood', to being in love in *Regine*, to *The Writings* and being written about in *After The Corsair*, to his criticism of the Lutheran church in *The Moment*, and *Death*, each of which she prefaces with a factual half page for context, so a reader with no background knowledge of Kierkegaard won't need Google alongside the poems.

The first is a tantaliser: *How To Write A Preface*, a list poem which opens crisply:

A preface is a mood.

It is tuning a guitar,
sharpening a scythe,
bowing invitingly at the start of a dance.

It then shifts with lengthening lines towards the life
being lived:

It is having arrived at the beloved's house, sitting in the
best chair
in the comfortable parlour, and having endless topics to
converse upon.

Does Marianne Burton draw all these metaphors from Kierkegaard's own writing? In her end note to the book she says "Some of these poems are more Kierkegaard's than mine and vice versa. Perhaps the best way to describe this book is that it is a personal interpretation, in the same way that jazz interpretations pay homage to standards." Not so simple, then, this achievement of a single voice speaking to the reader. But Marianne

Burton has read so much by and about Kierkegaard that a nineteenth century voice comes through steadily, often cleverly as in *Either/Or*, echoing the title of one of his better known works:

Listen Soren / I said listen / Soren do as you want
/ marry the girl or don't / it's all the same /
even if she loves you today it won't
last past the first glad year or two / she'll blame
you for neglect whenever you try to read

I'm given the impression of an introspective and 'odd' speaker through striking imagery like "I was turned the wrong way out, like a sock / waiting to be pulled on" ('My Misfortune...'). But maybe we come closest to Kierkegaard's voice in poems built from his letters: *Above All*, *Jette*, *Do Not Forget To Walk*, from a letter to his brother's wife who suffered ill-health:

I have walked myself into all my best thoughts
and I know no thought so burdensome
that I cannot walk away from it.

There are also poems here with contemporary resonance – about "busy business behemoths / who rush about spending other people's lives" (*Remember To Love Yourself*), or *The Better The Book The Fewer The Readers*. Of these poems, Marianne Burton modestly says "I hope readers will go on to read proper books about him. This is a book of poetry and as such is not at all proper." Proper poems, though.

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