

Ian McEwen reviews Charlotte Eichler, David Tait and Kristín Ómarsdóttir

Their Lunar Language

Charlotte Eichler
Valley Press, £5.99

The AQI

David Tait
Smith|Doorstop, £9.95

Waitress in Fall

Kristín Ómarsdóttir, trans Vala Thorodds
Carcenet & Partus, £12.99

Their Lunar Language is Charlotte Eichler's debut pamphlet from Valley Press. Twenty-one well-constructed poems over twenty-one pages. Their surface subject matter ranges widely across territory which has long been claimed by the modern lyric; family, places, new-ish relationships and what Jen Campbell calls 'female narrative' in her endorsement on the back cover. (Thanks for that, because I obviously couldn't have said it.) Each poem has an effective tone and pace and usually delivers a little cool 'zing' at the end: for example the title is taken from the penultimate line of *Trapping moths with my father*, "They speak a lunar language/and are trying to get back". There is attention to and joy in sound as well as arresting image:

A green itch:
She pinches little wings
Then plucks a leg.

That's the opening of *What are little girls made of*, and we have space for the whole of *A pheasant*:

Beside us, copper tail cocked -
Aladdin's lamp.

Eichler's writing is largely impeccable, with a definite sense of form, although line breaks tend to be unimaginatively aligned with grammar. A few endings fall into cliché (who doesn't?): "like open graves" (*Last egg collection*), "everything made of unreachable light" (*Fata morgana*), while many poems are a little too clear about their direction of travel to be truly thrilling (the opening poem *Divination* feels like the exception). Don't get me wrong, there are whole books of poems less interesting than these proposed for major prizes: I hope to encounter this writer again, richer and stranger, in future publications.

David Tait's second collection, **The AQI** from Smith|Doorstop, has clear loci and foci, partly China, where he teaches, and partly politically and personally as a gay man.

AQI stands for 'Air Quality Index' and the smog in Beijing is the dominant figure in the first section of the book. Smog appears as a daily oppressor and the facemask as a necessary item of dress. One poem imagines it becoming natural to keep the mask on during sex. In another a poet performs through the mask, and when quizzed replies "'no

one listens anyhow”’. (We all have that T-shirt.) The second section leads out overtly onto political ground – the arrest of a migrant worker for trying to present a grievance in public; a car drive through Shenzhen where the sights are pointed out, skyscrapers, “the building where people go when they need to get killed”’; and the new Starbucks. Smog is both personal and political. This from *Red Alert*:

After a week at Very Unhealthy
We get word that a smog cloud from Inner Mongolia

Is making its way South-West. The size of Denmark,
It drifts towards us like a jellyfish

...

Schools will call smog playtime,
Kids watching Tom and Jerry in face-masked rows,

In the third section of the book, threat becomes global – *Beijing after Tianjin* presents the texture of daily news censorship after the Tianjin disaster, others reverberate with the menace of the Trump era. The centrepiece, the long poem *After Orlando*, is focused on LGBT rights. It is a litany of mourning for those killed in the Orlando massacre, intercut with experiences of discrimination and violence, tweets from Donald Trump, *The Merchant of Venice*, the activities of the Westboro Baptist Church and more extensive evidence of the institutional and personal threat which the LGBT community continues to experience. (In China there is no recognition of LGBT rights, but as *After Orlando* makes clear, having legal rights does not equal being safe.) *After Orlando* is an ambitious poem which uses powerful materials skilfully to achieve its mark.

It would place an excessive burden on the final section of the book to expect either resolution or synthesis – on the whole it seems to be a place for a few insightful but resigned poems (*Happiness* and *The Water Calligraphers*) and the psychogeography of ‘home’ in the UK.

The focus on weighty public issues in *The AQI* is a great strength set against the solipsism of many collections. However, too many of the poems feel too plain, anecdotal or obvious in intent. *Red Alert* or *Beijing after Tianjin* would be unexceptional prose ‘from our own correspondent’ on Radio 4: interesting, poignant, important, but not transforming their material. There are some lapses into lecture – *Sheepdogs in Shanghai*, “Over time we lose track of who we are.....There’s a deep need in us that we have left behind”. A few dream-like poems are the most interesting (*String* or *If you lived here you’d be home by now*) where pressures resurface transformed into surreal private acts and the poet is conflicted.

There are disadvantages to be faced in reaching a balanced view of Kristin Ómarsdóttir’s *Waitress in Fall*. It is a compilation from books published between 1987 and 2017, which are bound to show poetic development. It is translated from a language I do not know and no simultaneous text is given or readily available. (The translator, Vala Thorodds, consulted originals in the Reykjavik Public Library, at the cost of £36 of late fees, she informs us, although this must also be translation, since presumably the fines were levied in Icelandic Krona.) If the result is that I fail to appreciate aspects of the work I can only apologise – but please, publishers, when presenting translations give us the originals on facing pages.

The first book sampled, *Our House is Full of Fog* (1987) contains poems where an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ appear defined in the context of an apparent relationship. “My heart beats/in your palm/and only there” (*Garden in a Metropolis*). Such short, breathless lines feel youthful, although there are some striking moments. However, by the 1993 collection *Waitress at an Old Restaurant* a cooler style is emerging in what we might call ‘the domestic surreal’: “the fish in my sink/loves coffee/I send it down/with loving regards” is the opening of *Regards*. In the following volume *Close your eyes and think of me* (1998) the line length too has relaxed and the poems move towards

what seems a prose line, with a distanced, fairytale, relationship to the world.

Technique is hard to translate but it seems as though Ómarsdóttir isn't much concerned with metrical regularity or rhyme. There is a fondness for coinage and unfinished grammar (missing full stops which I think are not proofreading errors) but she is principally a poet of the unexpected juxtaposition. She also has a refreshing sense of humour. There is quite a lot of cooking and sex. As Vala Thorodds suggests in her afterword, a reclamation of the significance of the domestic is involved, and the domestic role of women seems to be simultaneously a cause for celebration and rebellion. A comic/parodic tour de force of this kind is *Protein*:

I see to it that my man has the guts and the vigour
to love me.

Rice, potatoes, and eggs never fail me.

....

From morning till night I look forward to the
moment when he squirts into me the fluid that I
do all I can to co-produce.

While something more playfully sexy is going on in other poems, like the faux-recipe *Lemon breast* or this, which is the whole of *Mood*:

The nipples of the batteries soften my eyes tonight.
Tonight I will love.
You.

The final two collections sampled in this book build on these strengths. The last, *Spiders in Shop Windows* (2017) is a sequence of short lyric pieces with Ómarsdóttir's characteristic cool strangeness. The whole of *Verse* runs as follows (entirely unpunctuated) "street/lanterns/hang/their/heads/electricity/drips/down/the/corners/of/their/mouths". The previous collection *See Your Beauty* (2008) contains longer poems, often structured as prose paragraphs, which place figures from a mythic family in surreal arrangements. Here is a sample from *Mountain Hike on a Summer's Day*:

Female relatives who share a fiancé sit down on a
mountain crest, find dice in their backpacks
and throw:
'He is mine, he is mine. He is yours, he is yours....'
But they don't care who gets him. Chance rules the
throw.

And on top of the mountain Vikings search for
runaway slaves to wash their swords in. For slave
girls to wash their spears in. But don't see a girl
who is missing her national-costume doll, pencil
case, her swimming stuff, and the pink comb.

And these paragraphs end the poem:

Your sweetheart lies in the back seat of the car and
sleeps while you stand by the bonnet and talk on
the phone.....over the sea that has spread out the
freshly ironed tablecloth....

If you smooth out a tablecloth you imitate God.
If you set the table for one you imitate God.

I found these poems consistently surprising, interesting, offbeat, worth re-reading – and enjoyable to read even when their subjects or objects were dark.

Ian McEwen's first collection was *Intermittent Beings* (Cinnamon, 2013). He has also published three pamphlets, the latest is *White Goods* (Flarestack, 2018).