

# Rishi Dastidar reviews Iain Morrison, Kate Potts and Michael Hofmann

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I'm a Pretty Circler  
Iain Morrison  
Vagabond Voices, £9.95

Feral  
Kate Potts  
Bloodaxe, £9.95

OneLark, OneHorse  
Michael Hofmann  
Faber & Faber, £14.99

Right from the off Iain Morrison's is a voice that you want to spend some time with. How can you not be charmed by a book that begins, in 'in relation to': "Your sofa is flammable, sorry, I mean inflammable, / my tone is pertinent, or it's rather impertinent."

Morrison's debut collection, *I'm a Pretty Circler*, is full of these word and sound games, alive to the potential for joy and illumination in onomatopoeic collisions and cuddles, revelation lurking where you might not expect it. Take *Flags*:

Flags kill like cloth moths  
Flying over us, flooring us.

Flags curl from tough clicking wires.

Flapped, flags slough blusters off,  
Loathe, billow, following, ferrous,

I love how this simultaneously manages to make us think of flags as pesky insects that leave holes where we least want them, and at the same time forces sense into a comparison, that we should be suspicious of flags, and what they stand for, a too-easily reached-for bellicosity. That's very, very smart in just seven lines.

Not that *I'm a Pretty Circler* is all cerebral loops. Across its long complex pieces, some of which originated in art performances, there is plenty of body, sweat and sex too, and an unapologetic – and maybe even unexpected – frankness. Of course, you might not be the type of reader who appreciates someone making a rude poem using just phrases found in Emily Dickinson's work (*Rude Emily Dickinson*) but even if you don't like such high-jinks, there is plenty of other love on display, like in *Lover each*: "where the lamp sat on the floor, I approached, / naked. Hankering after the feel of naked / on you, you on the bed, gazing off somewhere."

The book is billed as 'experimental', and while it's not especially fond of a traditionally left-aligned lyric on the page, don't think that that designation should be read as 'unapproachable'. Morrison's inherent musicality (he is also a musician) and playfulness mean that many of his dispatches from gallery world and elsewhere raise a smile, even when you might not fully grasp what's going on.

Perhaps where he is at his strongest is when he is direct, such as in the performance piece *Red Road* that came from (as he puts it in his notes) "a day

waiting for, and missing, the demolition of Glasgow's Red Road flats." The clipped, complete sentences have the taste and tang of being real, overheard conversation and, layered together, tell a story of hope, change, complacency and expectation.

Overall, *I'm a Pretty Circler* is bold, bright and a lot of fun. Speaking as a show-off, it's refreshing to discover a kindred spirit. You can't help but applaud the daring of it.

Daring in a different way is *Feral* by Kate Potts. Her second collection, how often do you see one that squarely puts a verse drama at its heart? For this alone, the book would be worth investigating, but *The Blown Definitions* is a piece that provides a new way in to thinking about what happens as we make more and more land uninhabitable, for ourselves and others.

Set on Ilha de Piñeiros in 2068, the play traces what might happen when words, weather and myth collide, and how taking refuge in what we feel – literally and metaphorically – might be the best, and only, rebellion we have. There are moments in the piece where the language is startling, evocative and almost tangible – "Winds leans the building so its girders sing... Winds etch new, wraith-harmonics into her sleep." – and there is a sequence where a character, Lucia, walks into a rock-strewn, myth-hewn pool which I found thrilling.

Either side of *The Blown Definitions* are poems which show Potts to have an appetite for formal risk-taking and a lovely way of conjuring sounds. There are the phrases of *Footnotes to a Long-Distance Telephone Call*, which smuggle image and memory a-plenty into a gathering rush, the delicate differentiation of what the ear is picking up in *Prelude* – "My footsteps' shuffle / hi-hats on the frosted kerb." – and most notably various entries from a broken sequence, *A General Dictionary of Magic*, where suckling pigs, scanderons, grizzly bears and iron horses take on surprising and enchanting shapes.

These have the feel of being written by a 21st century Borges and, for someone as utterly uninterested in nature poetry as me, I found myself gripped by many

of these poems. Of course, Potts does human drama very well too; the waxy memories of the descent into degenerative ageing illness in *Pistons and Bones*, the almost *Coronation Street*-like account of escaping domestic violence in *Home Economics*; and all the time hinting that the difference between humans and animals is only one of degree.

And here's a lovely paradox to ponder: for a book that is called *Feral*, the wildness inherent within it is tremendously well channelled and controlled.

For those of us who started writing poetry in part because of his work, the return of Michael Hofmann has been one of the happier pieces of news of 2018. A critic and translator of some note (his version of Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March* is one of the finest things you will read), his gifts as a poet were perhaps in danger of being, if not forgotten, overlooked in the context of his other achievements – and dare one say it, the fact that we might have, as a poetic culture, over-indexed on clever literary men like him.

At his best he has always delivered a certain kind of hard won and yet easily worn emotional sublimity, with an ability to transmute pain into an incisive phrase. And while *One Lark, One Horse*, Hofmann's fifth collection and his first since 1999's *Approximately Nowhere*, continues to do this, and the 'friction' he has said he likes and uses to power his work is in evidence, there is also a suggestion that a mellowing is going on, perhaps caused by ageing. "I'm an inefficient volcano." he writes in *Lindsay Garbutt*, "Half-remembered scraps of things come out of my head."

Getting older is a central concern of the book, what with *LV* and *On Forgetting* both being litanies of the words and ideas that are starting to slip away, potential death for a man like him: "My spelling isn't what it was. I talk when I have the words. / They are not always there when I talk" (*On Forgetting*). And of course it wouldn't be a Michael Hofmann book without some reference or call back to his strangulated relationship with his family: *Ebenböckstrasse*'s evocation of the embarrassment

felt at making do and mending, or the precise spatial remembrances of *Smethwick* and *Lisburn Road*.

But as he gets older, it's clear there is an opening-out happening, a number of poems suggesting that he is engaging more with a world outside his self, with dispatches from Australia, the USA and Germany being all the more welcome for allowing his eye to pinpoint what changes, what stays the same and what that might mean, as in *Sankt Georg*: "and the immediate, somehow always slightly grubby or / compromised view // of three theatres, two museums and le Carré's bunker hotel, / but, hey, it was classy while it lasted".

And this engagement is stretching into politics too, with poems touching on the marketisation of universities, US elections and, inevitably, Brexit. I don't think it's unfair to suggest his touch is a little less sure here, as the danger with his aesthetic – or maybe it's a persona – of a rueful appreciation of nostalgia is that it doesn't necessarily give him the purchase he wants or needs to go beyond a superficial reading of events, or an easily-reached anger. *Silly Season, 2015* for example doesn't provide much by way of insight, recreating as it does a barrage of headlines with asides, sometimes cutting and sometimes clichéd. He is on stronger ground when he can show how a degradation in language has perhaps led us to where we are now, such as in *see something say something* or *Less Truth*: "Lusher menus. Bigger bonuses. Less contrition. More shamelessness."

Of course, if you know where to look, he is funny too; his keen eye for pathos and absurdity means that a joke is always waiting to happen to someone, somewhere. I guffawed at the Hessian gag in *Judith Wright Arts Centre* and *Cricket* too delivers a well-turned knowing smile.

Forgive me for going on, but I'm delighted this book, with all its subtle musicality, and the sense of a mind working things out as it goes, is in the world. I can't help but give Hofmann the final word, for he pretty much sums up *One Lark, One Horse* – and dare one

say it, his poetics? – somewhere in *End of the Pier Show*.

A pessimistic sublime.  
They had made  
their bed and they  
were jolly well  
going to lie in it.

The *pessimistic sublime*. It's good to have it – him – back.

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