

Rob A. Mackenzie reviews Richard Gwyn, Jane Yeh and Steafán Hanvey

Stowaway

Richard Gwyn
Seren, £9.99

Discipline

Jane Yeh
Carcenet, £9.99

Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photographs and Words

Steafán Hanvey & Bobbie Hanvey
Merrion Press, £17.99 (Hardback)

Richard Gwyn's fourth collection, **Stowaway**, follows its anti-hero of the title as he roams around the Levantine region, but this is no straightforward travelogue. The voyages take place over many centuries – from the fall of Byzantium to present day refugee camps in Syria – and mix reality with myth and magic, enabling Gwyn to reflect on history, memory, conquest, loss, settlement and exile, where mazy journeys can become, as in *Map of Venice*, “simply a map of yourself, or of anyone you care to name”. Indeed, in that prose poem, the juxtaposition of long and short sentences – the long, deliberately convoluted ones split by comma after comma – becomes a formal mirror of the city itself in which an alley's name-plate will bear “no relation to the name on your map”. Anyone who has been in Venice will know what he means, as will anyone

who has ever begun a serious journey of self-exploration. There is “No respite from the labyrinth;/ it pursues you/ even when you think/ you have evaded it” (*Facing Rabbit Island*).

Gwyn writes complexity into a plain style. In the title sequence, spread through the book in six parts, the stowaway is discovered and set to work on the ship. He sprouts (and hides) wings and horns. He understands dolphin language but isn't above being “fellated by a myopic poet”. He metamorphoses into porpoise, gull and rat. He's tied up, beaten, and urinated on, which gives him a curious satisfaction. He sheds his soul. No wonder the ship's crew “treated him with caution/ and rumours began to circulate”. Gwyn fuses the real and surreal with great skill. Just as “every city collapses into Byzantium” (*Memo to Enrico Dandolo, Doge of Venice, First Venture Capitalist*), so time zones also collapse. A vagrant, the goddess Antigone and a white dog crop up in poems separated by what could be years or many generations, and yet a residual memory somehow remains. In the final poem, *On Lesbos (November 2017)*, set in a refugee camp, he recognises “a Syrian woman he knew/ centuries before, in Aleppo. She has barely changed, despite/ the pall of fatigue around her eyes.” Gwyn's narrator notes how history repeats. He is no angel, ruthlessly exploiting others and taking part in violence and killing. Even he begins to sense the futility of it all – the rise and fall of Empires and the short-lived cycles of gain and

loss – and vows, in *Shabra and Shatila* (September 1982), never to go to war again but, in the very next poem, he kills an old foe. In *After Smyrna*, a prose poem set following the Greco-Turkish War of the early 20th century, “the more Greek he is made to feel, the more he fights back, to become his other: Turk, Jew, Arab, Kurd... and begins to understand that every narrative contains its opposite.” He is a shapeshifter, without allegiance, nationality or origin.

Stowaway implicitly interrogates nationalism, mercenary individualism and historical precedent and still manages to be relentlessly entertaining.

Where Gwyn fuses reality and myth, Jane Yeh focuses on the surreal and absurd but her wild connections are never as far from reality as they might seem initially. Using an oddly-angled lens, her third collection, **Discipline**, eschews conventional routes in favour of slant ways of interpreting the world.

Thematic and stylistic variety, but also cohesion, emerge from an unusual sensibility and by the use of repetition. Words, images, subjects and forms migrate between poems. One mode is the short-lined, heavily enjambed poem in couplets. The frequent line and stanza breaks slow the reader down. These poems often depict artistic struggle: individual authenticity and frailty in a world that commercialises stolid conformity. *A Short History of Style* channels Joey Arias, a drag artist known for performing the songs of Billie Holiday, “The catch// In her voice like a rusty key/ Turned.”. That final single-word syllable, given emphasis by the line-break, is gut-wrenching. The poem continues, and ends, with a description so vivid that the song and its struggle become virtually audible:

...A hundred
 Nights blurred together
 Like an ink blot
 Smear'd – her long fall
 Of hair saying *No no no*.

A similar form is used in *Turn It On* (a performance by Sleater Kinney), *Discipline* (a Kirsten Glass painting), and *Installation*, prompted by artworks by David Escalona investigating the fragility of the human body. In the latter, the short enjambed lines mirror the fragmentation and difficulty of living in a world designed for the neurotypical and able-bodied: “...His hand// Is a book with the pages glued/ Together; the sea// Is a circle that spits/ Him out.”

Some poems have no, or very little, enjambment. Stanzas consist of lines in complete sentences, juxtaposing images that don't seem immediately related but resonate disconcertingly. *A Short History of Migration* gives a whimsical first impression with its strange, comedic impressions:

We attended bake sales with a suspicious degree
 of fervor.
 We hindered our children with violins, bad haircuts,
 and diplomas.

But the idea, I think, is to question the term ‘migrant’ as depicted in mainstream rags, a reminder that migration is a condition without which none of us would be where we are, and to which the rules of structural injustice and fitting uneasily in have always applied:

We kept our money close and our feelings closer.
 In the event of an emergency, we kept a baseball
 bat prepared.

The poems are often funny. Yeh has a sharp line in imagery and offhand asides. *Happy Hour, New York City* involves a “duel with tiny umbrellas” and “the answers to all life's questions: what are/ We here for? (Cheap drinks.)”, but in the background “The heat/ Is a blanket smothering all thought”, the cocktails “Melt like pink slush”, and the traffic is “a mechanical river”. Humour and linguistic dynamism, mainstream and counterculture, brush up against each other in Yeh's poetry. Outsider art, unheralded animals, alternative histories: all find themselves centre stage in **Discipline**, which challenges narrowness of outlook, as in *Self-Portrait as Joey*

Arias, Klaus Nomi, and Others: “Beneath the city is another city, where everything matches us”.

Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photographs and Words recounts the troubles in Northern Ireland through the poems of Steafán Hanvey and the monochrome photographs of his father Bobbie Hanvey. The photographs are excellent, iconic images of power, conflict and violence, and capture the appalling cost of occupation and terror, as well as the weariness and resolution of those having to live through it: smiling RUC officers posing with guns, warehouses aflame, funeral processions, burnt-out vehicles, politicians and poets, paramilitary women in sunglasses. The poems find inspiration in the photographs to tell stories that blur the boundary between personal and political.

The poems are long, most of them covering several pages. They are prosy to the extent that I questioned the point of having line-breaks at all. Occasional clunky rhymes made me wince. In *Though I Walk in the Valley...*, Hanvey describes driving a journalist:

...I hung a swift right into the dead-end night
in an effort to quench his appetite
for that elusive sound-bite.

If you're going to rhyme, make sure the words are worth the resulting emphatic clang! However, ignoring the fortunately infrequent barrage of haplessly executed rhyme and alliteration, the poems present a sobering account of life in Northern Ireland from the 1970s through the 1990s and the pressures bearing on anyone reluctant to identify with the violence of either side. In *Easter 1974*, the photograph of paramilitary women in sunglasses:

Defiant to a fault, one thing is certain:
they don't defy description - *they demand it*,
barking orders through sealed lips and time
as they lay claim to space itself.
Ours is attention not requested,
but sequestered.

The Hanvey family several times found themselves close to explosions that destroyed neighbouring buildings. An INLA bomb aimed at a bar popular with the British army, indifferent to its location in a 'mixed' residential area, blew in their windows. The child Steafán Hanvey was almost shot by an off-duty RUC officer after igniting a party popper outside his door at Halloween. The stories bear witness to the paranoia of conflict and to the humanity of those caught up in it. *The Way of Them* recalls Protestant neighbours repairing bikes and giving lifts to Mass - except in marching season when they'd stonily ignore Catholic friends until it was over and life returned to "normal" again. Hanvey finds humour in the absurdity:

if this is what they were like having won the fight
what would they be like if they'd lost?
Shouldn't we be the ones with Lurgan spades
for faces?

The Ninth Hole concerns a car bomb, a crash, and a great deal of shooting. An 11-year-old Steafán Hanvey misses the chaos by minutes. In the accompanying photograph, a fireman practises his putting action, a metaphor for how ordinary life co-exists with mayhem. Two RUC men are dead, many civilians are taken to hospital:

by the time I'd shared the news,
it already was the news.
Nobody would benefit from this night.

These poems and photographs are an angry cry into the dark, a moving monument to the dead and to the pointlessness of sectarian conflict.

Rob A. Mackenzie is *Magma's* Reviews Editor. His reviews and articles have appeared in *The Dark Horse*, *New Welsh Review* and other magazines. He is author of two pamphlets and two full collections. A third poetry collection, ***The Book of Revelation***, will be published in 2020.