

Jennifer Wong reviews Gale Burns, Fiona Benson and Joolz Sparkes & Hilaire

Mute House

Gale Burns
Eyewear, £10.99

Vertigo & Ghost

Fiona Benson
Cape Poetry, £10

London Undercurrents

ed. Joolz Sparkes and Hilaire
Holland Park Press, £10

Gale Burns's first full collection, ***Mute House***, is a house richly resonant with echoes, voices and silences. From *Crystal Palace Parade* to Massachusetts, from the good old Wimpy to a siesta in Europe or a migrant builder, his poetry transports us to unfamiliar territories and elsewhere, probing the secrets and tender wounds in people's lives.

In many of his poems, Burns captures brilliantly the osmosis between the environment and the self. In *Crystal Palace Parade*, the motif of "one week" commencing each couplet articulates the subtle changes of a place when tenderly observed:

One week, no dawn,
just traffic lights pulsing.

One week, Matthew Caley, taking his child to school,
a poem like leaves in his Broca brain.

Through such pared down language, we access the speaker's fleeting glimpse of "a woman crossing, my mother,/ many years gone" and himself, "the avenue, the past", tapping into the seemingly ordinary, where the complexities of one's interiority and place-making begin.

What makes Burns's poetry memorable is how everything is at once personal and yet interdependent, constant but mutating. In *Builder*, he sketches the portrait of a foreigner builder with "small, ageing, gimlet eyes, no English" but, as the poem progresses, he deconstructs the relationship, where he - the house owner - starts to "eat wood filler and grout" and feels less and less the owner of the house ("the phone rings less; it's always for him"), culminating with the strange hypothesis that the speaker is turning into the builder.

The poet is also adept in using prose poems to build mood-based narratives. In *On My Teenage Visit to NY*, Burns portrays a teenager's unconventional experience of New York, how he "didn't leave the flat for days, spying on garbage trucks" and, in the supermarket, was "queuing behind Britney, who smiled":

[...] We
 Could have been friends had she been there
Wednesday.
 That was when I saw my first naked man,
clutching
 his beer, dancing between cars, his thing
flapping.

Instead of looking for the landmarks in New York like any other tourist, here is a young individual excited about his secret discoveries about New Yorkers. From side streets that sell “split rainbow underwear” to the vast range of yoghurt flavours, here is the freedom the city represents, as he locates himself “in the middle of History”.

While **Mute House** negotiates the gaps within the self and between cultures, Fiona Benson’s second collection, **Vertigo & Ghost**, brings us into the difficult terrains of the sexual exploitation of women, the redemption of the body and its procreative power. The first part of the book is an imaginative retelling of Zeus, the Greek god and serial rapist, and his lust for women. In remaking the myths of Zeus, Benson engages the reader with startling economy and precision of language. The opening poem in the sequence, *[Zeus]*, creates a narrative from fragmented memories: an innocent meeting with Zeus (“days I talked with Zeus/ I ate only ice”) is followed by shocking images of “blisters/ on the soft parts/ of my body”, a visit to Zeus in prison, and a sense of how she is still gripped with fear:

bullet-proof glass
 and a speaker-phone between us
 still I wasn’t safe

From this setting the speaker shifts to a telepathic memory of irreparable bodily and psychological damage: “thunder moved in my brain/ tissue-crease/ haemorrhage”. With these images still trawling through one’s mind, the speaker relives the moment of trauma, fear and hatred:

I kept the dictaphone running
 it recorded nothing
 but my own voice
 vulcanised and screaming
you don’t get away with this

One cannot help but admire Benson’s ingenious storytelling, the blending of the dramatic, the old and the new. In *[Zeus: anatomical dolls]*, we are forced to join in with a tormenting gaze at the private parts of the girl, where there is the surreal “tucked-in silk-and-string umbilical/ of a pull down, poppet foetus”. Then, we are offered the shocking flashback of the repressed *Act One* with “the male doll/ playing Punch, Judy trembling and bruised”. At the end of the poem, the speaker summons the courage to call Zeus by what he deserves: “you filthy pimp, you animal, you rapist.”

In the second half of the collection, Benson articulates both the insanity and courage involved in giving birth, and the trauma of motherhood. In *Wildebeest*, the poet conveys the sheer impetus of love and the inconceivable physical demand on the mother’s body: “I became beast/ I submitted to my body’s/ wild stampede.” In *Afterbirth*, the reader is presented with the unsightly aftermath of birth: “sweet stink/ of torn labia/ under warm water”. Packed in taut, brisk-paced tercets, the poet compels the reader to witness the mother’s damaged body, and how such trauma makes it difficult to accept this “stranger/ sleeping/ in the crib”: details often deliberately forgotten or glossed over later.

Benson’s irony cuts deep. In *CELLS*, feelings of disorientation and shame in mother-and-child relationship are told with urgency and forceful metaphors: the madness of a rat-brain, and the sense that part of her daughters are still residues in her: “my daughters’ cells/ left stashed in my body/ like stowaways or spies”. Feeling the disconnectedness from her past self, the speaker is disappointed with “how obsolete I am in person;/ I am wheeled and governed,” as if she is the body that no longer matters.

Vertigo & Ghost takes us across a spectrum of emotion and knowledge unique to womanhood and motherhood, as it finds a language to navigate these difficult terrains.

Meanwhile, **London Undercurrents**, edited by Joolz Sparkes and Hilaire, offers the diverse, unsung stories of working-class heroines in London from the 16th century to the modern day, tracing their struggles and their triumphs.

Instead of relying on a chronological or geographical order, the anthology offers short sections of poems based on social themes. Playing on the idea of mapping, each poem is situated north or south of the river, while the subtitle indicates the year it refers to. Contextualising these poems lets the narratives interact with each other, although the time shift from one poem to another can now and again be confusing.

Neighbours, for example, sheds light on the conversation between two married women back in the 1930s, the affinity they share as one confides in the other anxieties about their own health and financial worries:

They're behind on their rent
like most of our street
her third nipper not long weaned
and herself peaky as a skinned rabbit.

Many of these poems are exuberant in their experimentations with dialects and linguistic play. In *An Easy Evening's Work*, the gypsy's wife gives her account of being abandoned so that "Mr Borrow, overcome by pity, pours/ silver into my thirsty palm". In *Oh I Say, I'm Striking for Fair Pay!*, blending lyrics with her pleas, the lady performer beckons the audience to be more generous in giving: "my pay went that a-way,/ won't even cover/ my do, ray, me, fa, sol, la ti ray".

In *Clippie, Top Deck*, a woman with a strong mind, having experienced and endured hardships in life, remains fiery-spirited and uncompromising. She

leaves behind her former identity as a domestic helper, becoming an independent person working as a bus conductor: "I'm polishing nothing but my own boots."

In *Knitting for Spain in the People's Bookshop*, political wit and the personal are combined to represent women's efforts in offering support during the Spanish Civil War:

We are knitting a convoy of garments. Balaclavas
and cardigans fall from our needles
burdened with history.

The word "we" brings to mind Battersea's motto back then, 'not for me, not for you, but for us.' The poet points out the hidden power in such a harmless thing – knitting – and its ability to counter violence – "*Click-clack of needles muffles/ the rat-tat fascist guns.*"

In this anthology, there is no shortage of poems that deal with serious subjects in witty, light-hearted, accessible language. Told in first-person, *On the way to see the Sex Pistols play in the Hope and Anchor* uses protest language to challenge the assumptions about women's appearances, claiming: "You can't fight. /Hundreds of me /pogo in basement gigs [...]". This volume of poems kindles curiosity, as it sheds light on the underground lives of women, their determination and humble struggles, across different periods and places in London.

Jennifer Wong is the author of **Goldfish** (Chameleon Press). Her works have appeared in *Magma*, *Oxford Poetry*, *The North*, *The Rialto*, *World Literature Today* and *Prairie Schooner*. She has a PhD in creative writing from Oxford Brookes.