

# Shivaneer Ramlochan reviews Niall Campbell, Rebecca Tamás and Helen Nicholson

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## **Noctuary**

Niall Campbell  
Bloodaxe, £9.95

## **WITCH**

Rebecca Tamás  
Penned in the Margins, £9.99

## **Briar Mouth**

Helen Nicholson  
HappenStance, £5

Traditionally, conventions in art (and the lives of artists) hold that stern ambitions of parenthood – that world that so frequently manifests in verse of soiled nappies and spoilt milk – are only achieved by bidding farewell to another, parallel life. In **Noctuary**, Niall Campbell does more than take us to the nursery: he uses reflective, bittersweet poems, bitten things of want and sleep deprivation, to illuminate a night-time where the son eclipses a previous, older understanding of love. *The Night Watch* inducts us, childless or fecund readers, into this unsteady, affectionate terrain of a parent's small hours:

It's 1 am and someone's knocking  
at sleep's old battered door – and who  
could it be but this boy I love,  
calling for me to come out, into  
the buckthorn field of being awake –

Campbell's 'buckthorn field of being awake' complicates the over-ragged binary that new parenthood equals an abnegation of personal freedom. Simple loss is not the construct of these poems: rather a rich, surreal transmogrification is afoot, one wrought in landscapes of those fields, of "a pair of lungs/ trusting they are on fire for the right goal" (*A New Father Thinks About Those Running Home*). The poet's language is hemmed tenderly, clipped with the caution of self-doubt, of a masculine restraint attempting to define itself better – or at the very least, more clearly. **Noctuary** succeeds in this endeavour, presenting us with polished poems for the thinking father, for the faltering pater familias, as indeed the best work in this book rattles the vacant statue of the stern, stoic provider.

See proof of this in one of the collection's most visually immediate offerings, *Cooling a Meal by the Outside Door*, wherein we see the father figure who declares himself unceremoniously the "Devotee of, what, if not small actions". Campbell's speaker straddles emotional ambiguities with utter convincingness here, singing us either a dirge or a paean of "the moon with this tree, the streaming clouds/ with my child's bowl – the small works of love/ and this dim porch". The poem unwinds itself to a deliciously ambiguous purpose – we receive sensory reflections of a meal cooling, of a sky opening, but nothing beyond this – the usefulness of small objects inundates us. This nebulous emotional foothold, gained by Campbell's narrator

through a fidelity to the “smallest” of functions, is its own clear posture.

Scatological, subversive and frankly delicious, Rebecca Tamás’ *WITCH* is the blood offering you’ve been waiting to imbibe. Sinking unapologetic linguistic teeth into the twin fonts of obscenity and perversity, Tamás gives us a witch with penile blood between her lips. If you are affronted, you are at once the ideal and unintended reader of this astonishing debut. Hearken to poems that straddle playful and punitive modes, like */penis hex/*, the galvanic invocatory piece that opens *WITCH*:

hex it through glory  
total and utter glory  
your huge red/black reaching and touching the upper  
echelons  
pagan understanding and all sorts of weird singing

There are obvious allusions to Sexton plaited herein; Tamás makes no stranger of a strange lineage. In this sense, one of *WITCH*’s finest achievements is a reading of the canon as a venerable bed for multiple subversive wooings. It is an animate world stoked with influences that the poet breeds here: shades of Plath frolic, spectres of Glück linger, even the irreverent winkings of Atwood gambol. Yet when Tamás offers her own witch, a composite creation of womyn’s resilience, mischief and unbridled sexuality, we’re blessed with poems like *WITCH VOLCANO*, which ends:

the witch watches the charged belonging air  
rubs her foot in the salt lava  
intimate and hot as god

It’s worth paying attention to this immediacy: so does Tamás’s witch hold us, intimately, hot as God. Never does the closeness of the synaptic link between poet and reader stutter: we are not so much presented with this confrontational work as we are bathed in its primordial juices and asked to declare ourselves duly feral, wild, feckless by association.

Helen Nicholson’s debut pamphlet, *Briar Mouth*, casts open the long, age-patinated doors of memory and allows the specificities of a natal tongue to echo through. Here is a first work deeply concerned with the original significations of a sound, and how best to map that sound on the page: the results are compact, curious worlds that ask an empyrean question: do those vocal patterns we call speech impediments do more than impede?

In staccato and in the scatterings of vowels, consonants and judicious measurements of emphasis and inflection, Nicholson’s poems prove resoundingly that they do. Not merely that, but in the pamphlet’s titular offering:

Thorns n icked but it wasn’t all  
bloody Occasional soft dark fruit  
pushed past the alveolar ridge

The poet orchestrates the patterns of what might conventionally be understood as a loss in proper speech to pierce through to a multiplicity of meanings. It wasn’t all bloody, the poem reminds us, a caution against the performative stigmatization of expressions of otherness, even (or perhaps especially) in contemporary verse. A briar mouth can, and does, occasion delight amidst the bloody brambles. The connotative branch between Nicholson and Tamás seems impossible to overlook here: that the wounded body, already designated as female and therefore historically suspect, can make a deviant performance of its own pain, eliding the traumatic by staring directly into it: this is in the bedrock of both poets’ responses to the rigours of ancestral, inherited hurt.

Campbell’s relationship to this principle seems less direct, but consider the function of the noctuary by dictionary definition: a written understanding of what passes by/through/into the night. The speakers of *Noctuary*’s poems, too, carry their own differences into the darkness, almost conversationally, almost as if making allegiances with the forces of Nature themselves, daring them into a response. See *First Nights*, which presents interlocking asks and answers

of the father facing down the proof of his own difference, his own sense of what he has lost without knowing it:

What do you make, young father, of the lateness,  
are you a little drunken with the dark?  
*Yes, my head swims; I lean this head against  
the solid wall, and hum to these new cares.*

Each collection asks us, too, to take the passions of labour as their own professions. The strivings of Campbell's father-speakers meet the orgasm-claiming, incendiary exhortations of Tamás's Hypatia and Lilith, if not on quite an even plain, but in an arena of enterprise: of the soul stretched to its yearning limits, in the quest for self-definition or self-defining acts of service. We're lucky to witness this principle applied at the height of its powers in several of Nicholson's poems: particularly moving is *Woodcarver*, consecrated to English wood carver without equal, Grinling Gibbons:

I shall learn the scent of limewood, of linden  
and the functions of finger, palm and eye in grip.  
When even my shavings curl smooth, I'll make  
my world an oyster, rosecurl, peapod, feather  
in pliant wood.

The physical functions hewn out of desire are their own curative against loss, Nicholson's *Woodcarver* quietly, firmly exhorts: Gibbons' medium was wood, but these collections convince that a powerful purpose can be committed for others, and for oneself, through solemnly tending a newborn son's night hours against colic, and through – dare it be said? – a woman, sometimes called a witch, ruminating on whether she'd rather fuck the government or the deep, deep woods.

Perhaps, as all three collections strive to showcase through startling, remarkably distinctive ways of seeing – the rudder is instinct. This applies, and is applied poetically across the breadth of these books, whether they are invested in delineating a father's inchoate helplessness and wonder, or mapping the

habitations of the witch, or as Nicholson's *Scarves* exhorts, "I do not need empty eyes/ feeding on me. It is dark. I learn by feel."

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