

Alice Hiller reviews Rachael Allen, Mona Arshi and Gerry Loose

Kingdomland

Rachael Allen
Faber £10.99

Dear Big Gods

Mona Arshi
Liverpool University Press £9.99

night exposures

Gerry Loose
Vagabond Voices £9.95

Poets responding to extreme experiences often work through transposition and concealment, to help create more agency and safety – among them Rachael Allen. Introducing her powerful, and moving, first collection in London this spring, Allen explained that **Kingdomland** was partially shaped by the earlier murder of a female family member, and its enduring aftermath – alongside larger questions of violence towards women.

Having always resisted divulging this context directly, Allen said she had decided to speak out, because the murder was core to how her work came into being, and its act of witness. Her understandable reticence is echoed by the voice within the final lyric sequence, *Landscape for a Dead Woman*. Identifying the surviving family as ‘reluctant tenants’ of what happened, its disclosure is described as being “pushed back into the dark// my mouth a spell of light”. The duality is

characteristic of **Kingdomland**, whose title poem must travel along ‘impassable paths overcome with bees’.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the long ‘a’ sounds of the ‘impassable paths’ glide the reader forwards towards **Kingdomland’s** ‘dark village’ – with the propulsive, creatively generous, energy driving so many of Allen’s deeply original poems. The speaker of *Prawns of Joe* records how ‘a husband’ made it ‘hard to breathe’, but also sees that the “summer streams through the trees like a long blond hair’ and wants to ‘grab all the things that make me ashamed/ and throw them from the bridge”.

Siting itself beyond the identifiably personal, here and elsewhere, enables **Kingdomland** to become home to a community of women, whose difficulties negotiating their lives and bodies are recreated with discomfiting vividness. Having entered a cafe with “a pair of pants hanging around my arm”, the ‘I’ of *You look unwell, my dear* experiences herself as a “little smacked-on stain”. In *Beef Cubes*, after the anorexic “hot tight Penny” is felt by Terry “through her jean shorts”, her self-hating body is transmuted into a blubber-leaking, beached whale “stroked and swollen// on its back”.

Whales return in *Landscape for a Dead Woman*. Directly addressing a murder, the twenty page sequence makes us all part of what has happened through its use of collective pronouns. We are told that “our memories need flushing/ like a cistern blocked with blood”, and introduced to the ‘colossal guilt’ which is “the size of

blue whales spilling from wounds". Finally, in the penultimate poem, *Banshee*, we enter the kitchen:

where she was delivered
into a weapon with force
like a small model forester
axing up plastic logs
in a red wooden clock

Domestic, horrific, and eternally recurring, the image nonetheless holds its violence within the steady 'spell of light' cast by Allen's language, connecting us to this 'dead woman' – and all the "the murdered girls before her/ gathered up in plain cotton". Allen records how "her hair was a clotted/ pattern of wallpaper" – but then allows the woman to re-assemble herself symbolically, and don "a grey sheet/ the dusk colour of bonbons" which provides our devastating, final image of her as "the red door approaches".

A death also lies within Mona Arshi's precisely realised, haunting second collection *Dear Big Gods* – with many poems responding to the loss of her brother, and its repercussions within the family. Frequently set within domestic gardens, and other miniaturised settings, Arshi's poems also address the persistence of deep grief, and how it bears down upon those who remain. *Little Prayer*, the opening poem, reaches its "pockets of blue-black/ pain" through 'a wren', 'white sap', and 'the fruit flies' and characterises its creative impulse as a:

blind song

shrinking in
 my scratchy
after-feathers

Developing the images of obstruction and reduction, Arshi's *Narcissi* are 'more baffled by light than darkness'. *The Lilies* have their beauty maimed by "a kind of injury, perforations/ on the petals". Impossible to dismiss, they seem to figure the surviving, traumatised self, keeping "their occultish hurting faces/ pressed against the glass", but proving "hard to love back". *Five Year Update* also stays small – showing the living "diligently// pursing our jumpy little grieflings" while 'my bony-breath'd brother' and 'supersonic boy'

has had his trainers turned "south facing into/ the indigo night". Like Allen's lost relative, however, he also returns, glimpsed 'everywhere', whether waking, or sleeping, as in the *Tanka: I Loved You Best in Spring* where "somehow you pinch me awake", still "my accomplice/ from a half-recovered dream".

The turn comes within the fourteen poem sequence *Mirrors*, responding to Federico Garcia Lorca's *Mirror Suite*. 'Air' embodies the silencing annihilation of grief through a mirror who refuses to talk – "its small eyes looked up at the Sultan defiantly". The Sultan instructs that the mirror is thrown into the 'RIVER OF ANGUISH' running through the devastated landscape – "bird song ached through the forests where/ gallons of blood had been spilt". Here, the mirror 'finally' asks "to be put out of its misery".

The Hindu goddess Draupadi faces comparable despair in *Draupadi's Hair* – Arshi's recreation of the passage in the *The Mahabharata* immediately after she has been captured, and narrowly avoided rape, having become separated from her male relatives. Draupadi describes herself as 'sorrow heavy', but is rescued and nurtured back to life by the women of the 'Old City', whom she then tells to "Pinch out my tears" because:

my anger is a yellow lake, the starved city
can't contain it, when shall I begin again?
Five suns, five brothers, never reach my hair.
The tips of the mountains blind the eyes
of the sky and I need to rehearse and walk.

Operatic in its scope, this accessing of rage is shown as what enables Draupadi to break back into life – and find a form of language commensurate with her loss, in the image of the "tips of the mountain" blinding "the eyes of the sky". From here the collection is able to reach its closing poem. Without politeness or self-constraint, *Dear Big Gods* speaks through the abandoned "scribbled/ child in the inferno" to tell them "all you have to do/ is show yourself a little".

Whereas Allen and Arshi work from the human, Gerry Loose more often dissolves the narrative voice into an observing, open Buddhist awareness in *night exposures*. Like *Kingdomland*, it comprises a series of

sequences of linked poems. A long-distance walker, and garden-maker, Loose encourages us to see the world from multiplied perspectives, existing at the interface of time and place. Beginning small, Loose opens with “five cantations for endangered species”. Titled *bardos* – the liminal space between death and rebirth – they address successively the orders of ‘vascular plants’, mosses, beetles, butterflies and moths, and wasps and ants, to wish each well:

instar for the
bardo of coleoptera

dive rove crawl hop chafe
quicksilver copper bronze
bereft transition

an offering

An instar is a developmental stage, whereby the beetle sheds its exoskeleton. Here it is also an act of language-making, calling to mind multitudes of insect lives threatened with a ‘bereft transition’ into extinction, whom the readers are encouraged to see, and connect with, for our mutual well-being.

night exposures, which follows, is thirty-four pages of fragmented, unfolding, images and moments. Moving round the world, the actions shifts and floats from “men in shades/ among crowd giving/ random beatings”, to “little low hills/ given over to wheat”, but also includes more intimate couplets, full of sound and play, as with “she becomes aroused/ the house is full”. The mood is predominantly troubled and menacing, however. The brief, rushing stanzas have the quality of ‘swarming’, recollected dreams, carrying a sense of fear for the most vulnerable – “can’t find the/ two smallest children”.

It comes as a relief to move into the witty, intermittently surreal sketches of the ‘Island Stories’ which follow. The tone is somewhere between Tove Jansson and *Under Milk Wood*, and characters within this offshore community include a ‘vodka drinker’ whose mind “is like a series of drawers containing spices, string, a/ pistol, but that one is swollen shut”.

A Brief Incomplete History of Nuremberg coalesces Loose’s sensitivities to place, person and history, by setting observations garnered during a residency in the town within the joint frameworks of its history during and after the Third Reich, and the renaissance art of Dürer. Amongst bars, and newspaper offices, and butcher shops, Loose finds “those old dreams below the surface fractured,/ broken, compressed”. He visits “the unfinished Nazi Congress Hall, intended/ to hold fifty thousand folk,” and discovers it is “slowly being reclaimed by/ trees” and women who ‘swing their legs like young girls’.

Loose’s final poem sequence “on being in a place /on being in place” develops this potential for reconciliation between the natural world and its human inhabitants through minute observations made during a nine day walk across Scotland. At *Finglen Burn* a spider “fishes/ in pelagic air/ for small fleeting lives”. At *Dumgoyach* “nothing is broken/ a buzzard mewls”. Finally, at *Blackhill Plantation*, “walls of black-/bird calls” rise from the page, framed by a double rhyme which encourages us to open ourselves to:

thickened light
leaf light leaf
filtered
dwell a
while

Poet and curator **Alice Hiller** was a Jerwood Arvon Poetry Mentee for 2017–18. She has reviewed for the *FT*, *TLS* and *Poetry Review*, was short listed for the 2017 Bridport Prize, and Commended in the 2018 Hippocrates Prize. She has poems out or forthcoming in *Magma*, *Perverse* and *Poetry London*.