

Zakia Carpenter-Hall reviews Togara Muzanenhamo, Louisa Adjoa Parker and M.R. Peacocke

Virga

Togara Muzanenhamo
Carcenet Poetry, £10.99

She Can Still Sing

Louisa Adjoa Parker
Flipped Eye Publishing, £4.00

The Long Habit of Living

M.R. Peacocke
HappenStance Press, £10.00

Each of these three collections has a different and intentional quality of being 'up in the air'. Rather than diving deeply into their subject matter, they often hover above or circle around it.

Virga, by Togara Muzanenhamo, takes its name from a meteorological phenomenon that describes a band of rain or snow that falls and then evaporates - never touching Earth. This premise made me wonder, what does language have to do so as to not touch the ground? Muzanenhamo plays with this concept of precipitation and evaporation in several ways. First, the language is lush. For example, from *Swakopmund*:

And as he walks - cold moisture
collects at his lips. The sea's

and sky's condensation salted
with a terrible promise he can not
pronounce. The agony of unsaid

prayers rushing up and crashing
against rock - taking to the sky
and falling back. Becoming mist.

The diction in this excerpt and throughout the collection has the tenor of literary fiction - rich and lingering. There's a keen focus on precipitation: "moisture", "condensation", "mist". For me, it brings to mind thematic soundscapes that people use as ambient sound. In **Virga**, weather phenomena become an orchestral performance - the main event - and any reference to people is shrouded in fog. Second, there's both an erosion and decentring of human presence:

Each silhouette becoming flesh. Each figure gaunt
and naked
as the hour itself.

(*Swakopmund*)

Both figures as casual as the pale smoke rising
from vicarage chimney –
The grey air gaining height
and thinning out like prayer

(*Öxará*)

I like to think of these shadowy depictions as a charcoal sketch of human figures translated into lyric. These excerpts and others like them are depersonalised outlines, interesting because they force the reader to see through the lens of various elements; this allows for a kind of “windscape” or “weatherscape”. Similarly to the way pastoral poets use lyric to depict the land, Muzanenhamo uses lyric to depict weather.

Third, form also offers a narrative arc, tells a story of flux, movement and stillness through an array of poem shapes. Examples include *Bharathanatyam* and the middle sequence of *Openings* where poetic lines undulate like waves.

Fourth, scent, abetted by wind, transports elements from one place to another. Smell carries the characteristics of impermanence and evaporation, which feature throughout this collection:

[...] this dark incense filtering
out to him – the smells of forest and river
becoming one scent after the mist has gone.

(*Lens*)

Even memory and identity are subjected to similar forces, i.e. can evaporate or be erased in an instant: “There were never reasons to make this memory” (*In the Distance*). The question then becomes, how does the author ensure these poems have enough weight and impact, so that they have an effect on the reader but maintain an ephemeral quality? Alizé gets the balance between weight and weightlessness just right, detailing a free diving accident that goes terribly wrong:

pressure
condenses air

he snatches his wife
from another man’s arms.
And cradling her body.
Kicks and kicks.

And races for the sky.

The poem has emotional weight, something at stake and relevant to the human experience plus a tension and drive forward. Tragically, its main subject never surfaces, or put another way – she never materialises.

Louisa Adjoa Parker’s pamphlet ***She Can Still Sing*** eulogises a childhood friend. The title recalls Dr. Maya Angelou’s autobiography ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*** and Parker’s central theme is an allusion to Langston Hughes’ poem *Dreams*:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
that cannot fly.

Parker appears to be influenced by Hughes in her poem bird:

A bird
with broken wings
still has a voice
she can still sing

Though the context of Parker’s collection is the death of a friend, she aims to share reasons for this “broken-winged bird” to continue singing, which adds to the pamphlet’s light and airy feel.

Some poems dip into cliché, don’t quite land, or take the reader on an incomplete emotional arc. The latter is shown in the ending of *You loved that boy*:

[...]You even
looked alike – tall, long-limbed,
dark-haired. Once you bought –
and somehow rocked
– matching, rainbow jumpers.

It seems like there's some further significance, weight or importance of the friend's love of the boy that isn't disclosed to the reader. Is this boy a first love, a lifelong friend, the father of the friend's future child? To an outsider, this poem's greater significance and relevance remains largely unknown. This is when an 'up in the air' quality can hinder. Nevertheless, there are some gems and beautiful moments in this collection, such as in *The way that you said your name*:

As though it was soft rain
or sea spray on your tongue
As though it was music, rising and falling.
As though it was birdsong.
As though you'd mixed accents
like a cocktail, sweet and sharp

This list poem reveals a delicate longing, an affection towards girlhood and small everyday moments of friendship. There are quite a few endearing moments in this pamphlet, such as in *roots* when she describes their relationship as "trees entwined" or in *Laugh*:

The day we realised you
had given your laugh to your daughter

we sat down on the brown, zebra print sofa,
and laughed. The sound of you

two laughing the same laugh
was the funniest thing we'd ever heard.
And we laughed, you, me and our girls,
till our cheeks ached; it was an orchestra,

a sound bath of joy, notes of our ringing
laughter suspended from the beam like music

The simple joy expressed in *Laugh* is delightful, and one could read into this poem that joy is something not only shareable but heritable in the way the daughter has inherited her mother's laugh. It's such a sweet and unexpected occurrence.

An unfortunate pitfall is that the overarching theme of linking birds with grief, the afterlife and resilience

has been done before ad infinitum. However when experiencing grief, some readers may want familiarity, a gentle singing hope.

M.R. Peacocke, author of *The Long Habit of Living*, is a nonagenarian and if anyone can say that living is a long habit – she can! The collection begins with a kind of prologue poem that introduces the reader to the rest of the collection:

The Book of rambling worms and moths,
half a page, half a page onward, coding
and ciphering in plainsong,
perishing under the rose.
A Book of random inclinations,
(Book)

To paraphrase an African attributed proverb, "each elder contains a library within them". Peacocke implies that this is true of her also. She's not only a library, but something like an artifact of lived experiences:

I'm old like Roman glass,
no more use, carefully kept, fragile and cloudy.
Everything about me is a long time ago.
(Flies)

Peacocke has an interest in history, retelling mythic stories, drawing from everyday experiences and language. After a literacy lesson with her father, the poet's childhood surroundings take on a new quality:

Away in the garden, the wall
never bothered with warnings (tall, fall),
nor the trees with regular form. The wind
sang and shouted for its own delight,
the whole green world its playground.
Clouds scribbled and smudged out.

Later, a phone rhymed and rhymed.
There lay somebody dying, defying
inarticulacy.

(Syllabary)

This poem and others such as *Rockabye* and *Beetle* have a satisfying emotional arc to them and leave the reader with a sense of something having changed or transpired, a small awakening. In contrast, *The Clever Girls* presents a grammar lesson and then these arresting lines:

Only one thing can trump ought

and that is must. Hilary
must be dead.

It's as if Peacocke touches on something fraught and then quickly moves away from it. Immediately following the previous quote, the speaker mentions:

I believe
she would have died not of ought
but of must. Her father
used to sing Oh for a rope

to hang the pope. His daughter
grew Roman Catholic.
I believe it's possible
to descend into hell
and leave the death till afterwards

I get the impression that the speaker considers Hilary's life to have been tragic, a "descent into hell" without dying, but this isn't further elucidated. The image that comes to mind is of rain rushing up a windscreen – an instance in which the precipitation never hits the ground. Any potentially suggestive details about the author and others mentioned within her poems are glaringly absent and even burned:

Well at least I've done it – posted that thin freight
of news
into a little bonfire, anecdote, lies and love,
my fingers grey with it. A cremation. So, home
now,
scraps of your secret life caught in my hair.

(*Air Letters*)

For Peacocke the secrets are ash, dust, elements that for now land in her hair. We don't always get the pulp of the poem but something freshly squeezed and filtered. Although "it is written and can't be amended, this book" (*Book*), Peacocke also reminds us that any ending she could offer is "still speculative./ A swirl of dust in the air" (*Dust*).

Zakia Carpenter-Hall writes to spark deeper and more nuanced conversations. Both her poetry and reviews have been published in *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Review*, *Wild Court* and *Magma*.