

Leo Boix reviews Lucy Mercer, Amali Gunasekera and Gayl Jones

Emblem

Lucy Mercer
Prototype, £12

The Golden Thread

Amali Gunasekera
Bloodaxe, £10.99

Song for Almeyda & Song for Anninho

Gayl Jones
Virago, £12.99

The Italian jurist, philologist and writer Andrea Alciato (1492–1550), commonly known as Alciati, has left us many works that still resonate with us today. Among them is his *Emblemata*, published in countless editions since 1531.

This collection of short Latin verse texts and accompanying woodcuts created an entire European genre, the emblem book, which attained enormous popularity in continental Europe and Great Britain, and has served as inspiration for many generations of poets, artists and printers.

Lucy Mercer's inventive debut collection *Emblem* is an attempt at exploring Alciati's seminal book and the many ways in which text and image can converge to give us a multilayered experience of the world.

Mercer reinterprets that hybrid form, in some cases by reusing Alciati's original pictures and woodcuts, or by simply making poems emblematic, which according to the poet in her preface allow the poems to speak to the image "from inside the visual language of the interior."

The collection is divided into six main sections, some with straightforward titles such as Emblem, Text & Image, Notation and Emblemata, and some that are more intriguing, like This Thing Is The Cloud, or Never Stops Busily Planting Ropes From Boom.

One of the main themes in this book is the relationship between mother and son, between becoming a mother and reaching adulthood, as well as the endless possibilities between body, image and text. In her poem *Rossalia*, Mercer explores the anxieties of a newborn child, by

merging history with the contemporary in a way that feels playful and luminous at the same time:

my son, we have given you our two
priscae gentilitatis obsolete errorem-
two old and outmoded pagan
understandings.

And now you are asleep, I am fearfully
examining them with this little battery light-

Mercer's use of alliteration, repetition, word plays and neologisms is brilliantly illustrated in her poem *Single Mother*, where irony and an overwhelming sense of the surreal often prevails:

Fell into the matrices *hour* problematic
ten thousand years of thorny overwhelmed
mothers flighted spinning in such spheres of fright,
mothers repeating *Polly-Polly-Polly-glot*,
mothers sealing ears with moly the plant,
mothers levering scabs on legs earliest of the sofa,
mothers plucking hairs like shot birds
preparing themselves no eschatologies Ω

Emblem is a rare book, full of strange, otherworldly poems that are imbued with wit and inventiveness.

Although the book has many literary and historic references that the reader might find puzzling and even inaccessible, it successfully manages to combine visual art and philosophy with the everyday life of a young mother, in a way that feels exciting and new, often challenging the reader to search for hidden meanings.

This is a brilliant debut collection by one of the most exciting and innovative poets writing today in the UK.

Amali Gunasekera's **The Golden Thread** was written in two places, Scotland and the north of England, during a period in which silence and a deep contemplation of the natural world played a big part. The collection opens with a concrete/visual poem that functions as a portal into a world of environmental, metaphysical and spiritual concerns:

May I not be the wilding deer in the woods longing for the heady musk hounding it everywhere oblivious of the flood at its own navel

We enter Gunasekera's world of quiet woods, wilding deer, mythical tales, dying turtles and ever-changing seasons where different temporalities often converge.

"Countless people have walked past the hourglass without ever noticing it", writes the poet in one of her prose poems, often merging daily observations, like a robin flitting in and out of a twiggy cherry tree or a brisk walk in the woods, with experiences of divergent spaces and times. "I was rehearsing travelling light", she adds.

Quiet contemplation in these poems often leads to a sense of discovery: that the world we live in is more wondrous than we can imagine. Between what is possible and the *why* of the yearned for, there is a long road.

Among my favourite sequences in this fascinating collection is 'Variation on the Fact of Spring: One for

Sorrow Two for Joy', where Gunasekera explores the minutiae of time passing while observing each season with a generosity of spirit and a sharp eye.

The poet moves from *Winter*, where 'the world happens, skeletal against a bleaker sky, grows uncharitable encountered by the lone self', and *Spring's* 'dancing illusions', to *Summer's* 'unbearable space between / of a year ago and unnumbered versions from all the intervening days.'

I particularly liked the way the poet describes the ever-changing nature of the cosmic world around her, interspersing stories of Hindu deities, Ancient Greece and Classical myths, adding a cultural and spiritual dimension to her poetry. 'I'm gladdened by the lone arrival of the bird – like the annunciation of Ardhanarishvara – emerging from the flock of wrecked things at the feet of Shiva and Shakti in their furious dance – as the world grows dark.'

The changing seasons also become for Gunasekera an existential question about renewal, rupture and transformation, not only of the natural world, but of the poet herself: 'the world is moulting [...] they come and go where time is not sequences but spirals of leaf-fall, never in the same place twice, though I may look upon the same scene, I live things over and over only in their difference.' (*Autumn*).

This is a quiet and unassuming collection that at times can seem obscure and cryptic, but, to use words that Gunasekera might find familiar, end up glowing in the darkest of woods.

Gayl Jones's two-part poem, ***Song for Almeyda and Song for Anninho***, is an epic exploration of memory, race and history where the main characters move beyond the individual experience to represent the communal destiny of the African descendants who were brought to Brazil in the seventeenth century.

The book begins with the shorter ***Song for Almeyda***, where the protagonist Anninho tells of the Palmares settlement of Africans. He recounts how they've

escaped from slavery in Brazil in the 1690's and how, through non-violent raids upon slaveholders, they end up rescuing others who were either too timid or were otherwise prevented from escaping. The South American place where they now live appears as a land of hope, but also of yearning:

You are rubbing me with
Healing oils,
Almeyda,
And I am planting
Agapanthus.
And we are in that New
Brazil
Building our own city, our
own free city.

(*Song of Almeyda*)

Through dialogues, songs, repetitions and folk tales we quickly are immersed in a story that lays bare the violence of the slave trade in South America, and the many generations of people who suffered from it. It is a story built upon a series of oppositions, such as man/woman, love/hate, war/peace, and slavery/freedom, where there is much suffering, but also redemption and hope:

Almeyda, the war has not
Ended. But
here in these caverns are the
African waters that
heal.

(*Song of Almeyda*)

In the longer ***Song for Anninho***, originally published in 1982, we learn how Almeyda had been brought to Palmares through a raid. Jorge Velho, a Portuguese field-master, eventually leads a successful attack against Palmares, re-enslaving most of the inhabitants and scattering the others through the hilly forests of Brazil.

Among those who managed to escape are Almeyda and her lover Anninho, who voluntarily came to Palmares because he could be useful to the settlement as a trader and a spy.

Song for Anninho combines personal and communal history in recounting the love of Almeyda and Anninho and their separation through the war with Velho's regiments.

The poem is formed of three sections. The first and longest recounts what has happened in the battle, the history of the settlement's fight for freedom, the role of women in the society, and the escape of Almeyda's and Anninho from the military fight. Jones' use of short, simple lines, and also of repetition and alliteration, emphasises the urgency of the story, and its political force:

The trees are tall here.
The men are tall.
The men are the color
of the black bark.
But men are not trees.
Sap is not blood

(Song for Anninho)

The second section concentrates more on the inner lives and tribulations of both characters. Here, the poet's clever use of descriptive language and the senses (especially sight and touch) helps to add a sense of physicality and turns the body of the narrator into a space of suffering, pain, but also desire: 'My breasts are heavy, Anninho, and she is curing me./I am bread soaking in milk.

She says my breasts were globes floating/in the river,
and that it is only/memory and desire that replace
them.'

The last section, only six pages long, deals with Anninho and Almeyda's past, present and future, and includes a dream she has, which emphasises the transcendence of mortality, and also the importance of human hope:

'Now I make roads for you, Anninho. I make roads'
(Song for Anninho)

This epic and courageous book reveals the strength of Almeyda's people through their struggles and

suffering, and gives hope that they might one day establish a spiritual and physical unity which will withstand all oppressors.

Leo Boix is a British Latinx poet born in Argentina, who lives and works in the UK. He is the author of *Ballad of a Happy Immigrant* (Chatto & Windus, 2021). Boix is the recipient of the Bart Wolffe Poetry Prize Award, the Keats-Shelley Prize, the PEN Award, and The Society of Authors' Foundation and K. Blundell Trust.