

# Chloe Elliott reviews Helen Quah, Michaela Coplen and Nóra Blascsó

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## **Dog Woman**

Helen Quah  
Outspoken, £7.00

## **Finishing School**

Michaela Coplen  
ignitionpress, £6.00

## **<body> of work </body>**

Nóra Blascsó  
Broken Sleep Books, £4.00

Helen Quah's debut pamphlet, ***Dog Woman***, is named after Paula Rego's Dog Women series, a brackish pastel-exclusive sequence. Rego's artworks are the magical realist transformations of folk-tale; her women sit, squat, or splay in bodies rendered to partial submission. Quah opens her collection with a quote from Li-Young Lee spangled across the first white page, "My body is estrangement". What follows is a series of bodies in meditation where estrangement is inescapable. In ***Minor Feelings***, Cathy Park Hong writes, "Is there even a concept as an Asian American consciousness? Is it anything like the

consciousness DuBois established over a century ago?" At the end of *Self* Quah asks a question we both grew up asking: "I sometimes want to know what it feels like to be white / I sometimes have a pretty good idea". It's no wonder we both get the same response: "then a van turns the corner all over my dress / my head dilating / in the rear-view mirror".

The language is carnal and grotesque; in fact all of Ada Limon's horses have come to lie down on the "burnt carpet" (*[When I Marry a White Man] II*) to suffer an episode of "arthritic pain" (*Suburbia*). The universe is a mono-material culture, retaining a cold European brutality that probably belongs in an East German broadcasting campaign: "Women in the discotheque / Women on the autobahn. / It's believed the inside of a woman's thigh / is longer than a piece of Sellotape". But Quah is assembling something. The sense of learned, copied behaviours is terminable. The abject is being assembled – sparsity and expressionism are combined in *[When I marry a White Man] II*, where women are composites of "hydrogen bonds" and "birthday cake". The thought in *We Don't Look For Comfort* sounds like a mix of a poorly rolled spliff and acid, a

comedown best comparable to eating rot: “we are polite young women / swallowing the yellow earth / fungus in the shower curtain”. And truthfully, when I read the first line of [*When I Marry a White Man*] II, I had to spit out my toothpaste in equal parts of dismay and satisfaction as I watched my boyfriend brush his teeth in his Nike Daybreaks. Read further onto version II, however, and the subject-object gaze swivels, repositioned to a white husband “threatened by the dirt of the place / and the sweat and sun cream / [that] poured into his eyes like traffic. / I’m left with the image of a dog in pain”. Quah’s surmount of the abject is a writing against order, as it is a writing against the racialised body. But, if in the final poem, *Luxury Rabbits*, which inhabits videogame consciousness as it rides out on a “pink wave”, we feel that the whole of ***Dog Woman*** is a trap, that’s because it probably is, where the urgency to actualise the self depends on the next level cleared like the rabbits that jump “past / the gate”. The game reloops, the narrator will kill them before “closure”, and we are jostled into Fanon’s “infernal circle” and Rego’s portrait couch as the auditioning room is readied again.

Michaela Coplen’s first poem, *Apple*, starts with obedience and ends with the machinations of a body that is learning to unsettle itself. Think of the song of Stephen Dedalus from Joyce’s ***Portrait***. Replace the moo cow, pair of plucked out eyes and bottom of an Irish dinner table with Coplen’s own dresses, slip knots and encasings of eggs and you’ll reach the kind of poetry that knows how to capture a tracking shot, knows how to be careful of itself. Stephen isn’t here, although the myth of the arrogant Young Artist who can only understand women as birds can still be felt. Sometimes I want the women in ***Finishing School*** to feel less tinny, less like polished napkin rings or “A vine that supplicates / by opening a fist. My father / gave me everything / he could. / I need so little” (p. 19). But Coplen’s pamphlet understands how excruciating it is to be alive as a woman, capturing violence in the lightest of touches. This is the case in *Grasp* like “The man who follows

after / [who] moves his hand along the railing” as “his movement churns the air” or in *Knot* as a narrator, whilst fooling about with their lover in a car, is led into stasis: “I just watched him / from inside me; I tightened / in the grip: that slip knot / I could never slip”.

***Finishing School*** is so careful that its own poems must doubletake at the house logic. Coplen excels at setting up a work that will deny itself, whether it be in *Grasp* – “You can’t be alive and untouchable” – or in *Letter*: “You can’t climb a ladder while looking back”. The abecedarian format of the pamphlet permits this, where each poem is attributed to a single-word object or concept.<sup>80</sup> The collection can be read like an advent calendar, doors opening and closing, as a narrator declares “Like an archive, I’ll take anything” (*Organ*). Okay. So then put me in an archive, and don’t you dare touch me. Okay, I’m going to climb this ladder whilst waving to Eurydice.

The contested logic accrues in *Middle*, the spleen of ***Finishing School***. The narrator and their mother “are both eighteen” at the same time, sitting in the car “both leaving home for college”. The poem is aware it exists as a lucid dream: “There’s really / no good time to tell her” and yet the imagined journey resists any Stephen-Hero-focalisation. Instead, we are offered the operatic, handed two women who know their stuff, who although the introductions might be a little messy, are going to the same frat party. Form is only as enduring as its ability to be undone or peeled away, where the central question of ***Finishing School*** is what lies beneath the membrane. The answer is not in the itemised titles – the poems are not resolved Anglo-Saxon riddles – but at the end of *Figure*, where “tenderly the edges of the flesh [are] becoming flesh”. Okay, keep driving; Coplen tells us: “Reversed, we start in check”, and rather than questioning the route, we’re probably better off facing ahead.

When I first saw **<body> of work </body>** I immediately thought of Shelley Jackson's 1995 work of electronic literature, *Patchwork Girl*. Nóra Blascsó's pamphlet is tight, linear, and imperative, where bodies will "gear up / curl back / into shapes not meant". But assemblage is on a "flatpack" basis, where once a "walnut / falls to ground", it "stays there" (*Rolling out of bed*). Stephen Sexton's "pixels and bits pixels and bits and their perpendicularity" spring to mind where in Blascsó's *Fizz and excitement*, tangible joy is ossified into "a packet / of cheese & dread". The whole thing makes me unbearably sad, most likely because I am responding to the poetry sat in my office at work, the duty phone in my right hand and the shrill gargle of our network generator acting as a "language / parasite' in my left ear" (*Wallowing is a sign of well-being in swine*). Here, as in *Finishing School*, it is excruciating to be alive. But the conditions of restraint are felt more acutely, where in *Four walls*, language must run up against caesuras, "to find something missing / reach for glass / on beside table / mug not / where it used to be". The '/' in bold are as appear in the text, rather than the unbolded slash to indicate a line break. Language must heave itself over the weight of a pause like a slowly moving car trying to push itself over a speedbump.

I can stomach the stasis in Blascsó's pamphlet, but it does make me feel like I've swallowed an entire IKEA KALKNÄS cabinet made out of starch, that is gradually expanding and assembling itself in my gut, about to make itself known to a well-behaved Anglo-Swedish family who have an exquisitely kept collection of monstera plants. In *Plants*, the narrator confesses "I / surround myself with testimonies of life ... I feel for them / trapped with me." There is little to no reprise or breathing air in **<body> of work </body>**. It leaves me wanting a few more glitches, like the "deer [that] flinches / mid-drink & disappears" in the middle of *AFK* or the gesture toward the "bellyrub" for the Corsodyl-coloured swine in *Wallowing*. I think maybe the best thing to do is take this collection into the middle of the New Forest, press yourself up against an excellent loving tree and very softly whisper into the lenticels of a birch the final lines of *Plants*: "I feel for them / trapped with me. I lean close and whisper: we're going / to be fine." It won't be anything like a bellyrub but it might be a start.

**Chloe Elliott** is a winner of the 2022 New Poets Prize as well as the 2020 Creative Future Writers' Award. Her debut pamphlet *Encyclopaedia* is forthcoming with Smith/Doorstop in Summer 2023.