Thembe Mvula reviews Arji Manuelpillai, Jay Gao and James Conor Patterson

Improvised Explosive Device
Arji Manuelpillai
Penned in the Margins, £9.99

Imperium
Jay Gao
Carcanet, £10.79

Bandit Country
James Conor Patterson
Picador, £10.99

The presence of what lies beneath the surface is a constant active pulse beating through Arji Manuelpillai's debut collection. ***Improvised Explosive Device*** deep dives into the world of violence and extremism, touching on broader themes of identity, masculinity and media. Based upon first hand interviews with ex-extremist group members, their relatives, and academics, Arji weaves together a piece of work that is a reminder of the power art has in portraying the truths in society in a light that causes you to pay attention and feel. The undercurrent in the poems oscillates between the human need to belong and to be seen. These tensions are portrayed through gripping multiple perspective accounts, many times having benign openings that spiral into something dark and sinister, where violence, or the threat of it, permeates each poem.

In poems such as *I was just LIVE-fed two young men knife fighting in Greenwich* and *Tank*, the psychological impact of witnessing violence is contrasted with the ease at which it can be accessed, and is a normalised source of entertainment. The influx of the media is inescapable, as put: "Everything is happening everywhere in the palm of my hand." Poems fall into couplets or three-line stanzas, conveying the pattern of experiences like PTSD and the recurring triggers faced by its victims, as seen in *After the Prime Minister's Statement*.

Ways of Being Heard powerfully showcases what it takes to face up to being classified as a national threat when parts of your identity are deemed to threaten the status quo. The line "until I realised violence was the language of negotiation" points to moments in history such as documented in *Blacks Britannica*, a previously banned documentary which depicts the experiences of systemic racism

on black communities in Britain, culminating in an uprising of riots. The metaphor found in "I opened my mouth to shout but soil came spilling out" powerfully articulates the maiming impact of one's existence being invalidated and devalued by those in power. *Way Back* unpacks the problematic statement of claiming to not see colour, how what's regarded as freedom of speech works to not only silence other voices, but dissolves the ability to call out discrimination. The poem brings to the surface what dominant narratives in British society have long swept under the carpet. *You Must Have Misheard Him* is a perfect example of this, where a dismissal leads to a resolute statement: "Not everything is about race until something is about race".

The Expendables unfolds with the forming of toxic masculinity through false memory. This poem centres on a conflict between giving in to the human desire to be accepted and the need to survive in a brown body where your skin colour renders one a target. What the speaker must internalise in order to survive can be likened to the impact of substance misuse; in this poem self-harm and self-preservation intersect.

Poems such as *188 to Greenwich* and *PREVENT* employ surrealism, whilst the closing poem, *Objects Increase Their Distance at Ever-increasing Speeds*, turns to nature, the galaxy. Perhaps this is for comfort or to grasp at as the closest means of escape. However there seems to be no means of escape from the PSTD. The collection is punctuated by poems titled with the motif of Melville's image of the giant sperm whale that seem to provide moments of reflection, a brief shift in address from other poems which allows the reader to observe from outside the world of the poems.

Jay Gao's debut poetry collection, ***Imperium*** offers a contemporary reimagining of Homer's classic epic poem ***The Odyssey*** through the eyes of a tourist who astutely notes and recounts the implications of imperialism, exploitation, and power in the places he visits. Earlier in the year, Gao released his second poetry pamphlet which set out the poet's narrowing focus on the experimental. It is unsurprising that some of Gao's influences include Alice Oswald, Fiona Benson, and Derek Walcott as poets whose works explore and play with concepts of history and myth. In this reimagining of ***The Odyssey***, Gao features recognised characters from the epic as hosts with a growing intolerance towards visitors, with queer voices and a scepticism towards heroism. The contemporary take on the classic collection doesn't just lie in its thematic concerns, but also clearly evidences itself in the remarkable ways that Gao employs language, imagery and form. The results of this linger in the mind after reading the poems, for example "a gang of golden daffodils" and "an asylum of fake palm trees" in *Seeing Man*.

The poems in ***Imperium*** invite the reader to travel through them in various ways. The option of choosing your own adventure in *Seeing Man and Seeing Man II* creates a possibility of a looping between the two poems, challenging the reader to find connections within the narratives in each poem. The latter ends with a question: "do you really think we can live on like this?" As the reader seeks answers from the former, reading the poems becomes an investigative task. Do the first-person voices in these two poems mirror each other, speaking from different perspectives in time or are they separate and corresponding to one another? Alternative possibilities in reading the poems also present themselves through form. Gao's deep understanding of and curiosity towards language translates into experimental forms that are fresh, fascinating, and a profoundly intentional, balancing of sentient and mechanical. As well as the two mentioned poems, *Nostalgia* showcases a form originated by Gao, called stacks. These stacks materialise as words that are slightly distanced from their line before the line breaks, and they run along the right side of the page.

The poet refers to the creation of these distances as 'poetic spaces' inspired by the geological formation of rock columns created by sea wave erosion. The reader can follow Gao's lead in reading these stacks in vertical order before reading each line of the poem vertically. When one does this, the effect is that of catching the essence of each line, and the

poem itself, the context of which expands when the poem is read in its entirety. As the line ushers towards the point of breaking at its highest point of tension, the stacks create a pause between the end of that tension and add a meditative quality. In other instances, dense prose poems contrast with the likes of the *Body Sonnet* where the reader can find poems contained within a single line, or in *Storm Spell* where each line and word holds its own voice and moment in time.

Bandit Country is James Conor Patterson's debut collection. Centred on a young man's experiences of living in the borderlands between north of Ireland, the Republic and England during the Troubles, the poems are written in Scots- and Irish-inflected dialect. These factors don't alienate the reader; instead a sense of familiarity is established by the writer's skilful ability to evoke a strong sense of character. It balances the gritty world with a bittersweet nostalgic tone which doesn't sugar coat but holds tragedy alongside tenderness.

Encompassing black and white photography depicting the landscape, objects and nature related to the region in which the poems take place, the collection at first glance presents as bleak. However, the poems explore mortality, not as the end of life but a gateway into the unknown, and therein lies seeds of hope. In *maturity date*, life in relative poverty culminates in death as the only freedom one can obtain, for financial freedom can't be afforded and debt constrains one. A line emerges from the poem *ghost estates*: "time which is speculative, / limited, an niver guaranteed." By portraying these accounts, the poet immortalises the voices represented in them in a way that is almost redemptive in that it regards their lives as worthy of record. As such, the poems serve the same purpose as photography, as expressed in *from clouds on a screen at a drive-in, n.j., 1960* : "Photographs, too, fulfilled this need / to anthologize and make tangible the fleeting."

One of the things that stands out in ***Bandit Country*** is how the poems are mostly contained in neat, box-like shapes and stanzas, almost as if they are relics on display in a gallery or museum. Much like the photographs alongside of them, the poems ask to be observed for their patterns and symmetry, which reflect the perspectives they are written in. The poems tend to look back, and even if they are looking forward it is from a retrospective point as within *the disappeared*, which speaks to the legacy of Irish emigrants in Argentina in the nineteenth century through the voice of a revolutionary fighter.

on meeting an influence at a book signing works similarly as a poem of redress, where the poem's speaker wises up to a figure they once looked up to after being made to feel small.

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