

Laurie Smith reviews Genevieve Carver, Toby Buckley and Jess Murrain

Landsick

Genevieve Carver
Broken Sleep Books, £7.50

Milk Snake

Toby Buckley
The Emma Press, £7.00

One Woman-Horse Show

Jess Murrain
Bad Betty Press, £6.00

Despite its morose-sounding title, **Landsick**, Genevieve Carver's second pamphlet, is often very funny. The comedy arises from a surprising perspective: humankind and its artefacts suffer while nature is resilient and consoling. *The Train and the Whale* – a winner in the Poetry Society's members' competition for poems about 'surreal cities' in September 2021 – is a dialogue between the train and a giant plastic sculpture of a whale's tail which saved a metro train from plummeting into the water in Rotterdam in November 2020. The train is traumatised, the whale solicitous:

THE WHALE: Did you notice the black-backed gulls overhead?

THE TRAIN: Splash me in oil and put me on a stretcher of steel.

THE WHALE: The ones now pecking out your eyes.

THE TRAIN: Release me into the diesel sea where I can swim free.

THE WHALE: You should spend a bit of time on *you*... Have a bubble bath. Put a favourite record on.

David and the Whale also recounts an actual event: a commuter phoning the authorities to say he thinks he's hallucinating, seeing a whale in the Thames. The poem is told by the man who eventually accepts what he has seen ("I surrendered myself to the flood"); by the whale which knows it's trapped but is unafraid ("here come the shakes / I can't hear myself think but I know what I've seen"); and, brilliantly, by the train which can't cope with the experience ("It's been three days and I've yet to leave the depot / the doctor signed me off / the nausea / the dizzy spells"). For the train, but not the others, "everything is slipping ... the world beyond Slade Green is trembling".

Even more strikingly, *Nature Documentary* is about the famous David Attenborough clip in which orcas play with a seal pup before killing it. The narrator is transfixed with horror, rage ("*David! Do something, please!*") and helpless laughter until Attenborough intervenes:

*I can't keep up, says David,
wiping the tears from your face
only now he's your ex-boyfriend
twenty years on
leaving you all over again*

The poem captures our mixed feelings about the savagery of the natural world and our complex relationship with presenters like Attenborough who mediate it to us. It presents these as both ridiculous (“The orcas are bigger / than you'd realised / and are responding badly to reason”) and deeply felt, and in this respect Carver is a genuinely surrealist poet. She creates imagery that is highly original, startling with the potential for humour that shock gives, and also emotionally resonant to unexpected depths.

This is memorably achieved in poems ostensibly focused on the natural world such as *Imploring the Hermit Crab to Embrace Her True Self* and in poems that address difficulties in personal relationships such as *Interoception*, *Blue Monday*, *A Week Spent Leaving You* and *The Selkie Searches for Her Skin*. But the strain of sustaining a surrealist perspective sometimes becomes too great. For example, *Dream Thief* sets up a wonderfully miserable description of the poet's dreams (“it's got my signature whiff of reheated leftovers / crab shack melancholia all over it”), but then drifts into finding the other person correcting her poems and ends melodramatically with fossilised trees and sun-bleached bones.

Conch sinks into obviousness not saved by using an increasing font size; *Colour Chart* becomes banal; and the title poem *Landsick*, which has some finely desperate moments (“your birthday is leaning from an upper / storey window, threatening to jump”), sinks into cliché – “the bargains you attempt to make with time” and the sea shushing consolingly.

At her best Carver responds to the reality that nature can never give us respite from the awareness that it may be time-limited with a surreal brilliance that makes one forget the truth's numbing misery. Hopefully she will continue to play to this strength.

Toby Buckley's debut pamphlet, *Milk Snake*, is quietly spoken and cumulatively disconcerting. This might be deduced from the pamphlet's title with its uncomfortable echo of 'milkshake'. The poem in which the title appears, *Shaping Staff*, notes how sausage skins slough off when boiled and look like condoms – “sad and prophylactic” – leading to:

I would like to see
what forces could do the same weird thing to me:
make me guiltless and lean, and let me shed my skin.

If I picked a shape I think I'd like to be
a snake, a milk snake, or really any form
of lovable snake. I'd leave ghosts of myself
everywhere. I'd leave them like you leave footprints.

The imagery builds through sloughed snakeskins and condoms (inevitably with semen as a version of milk which is shaken in a version of loving) to relics of the guiltless self which are now left openly, everywhere. The poem renders coming out as a sexual being with a wry apparent artlessness which is, in fact, carefully designed.

The same artless pose appears in other poems expressing unease with the body: *Pip* which envisions puberty as a tree growing inside the self, ending “I squeak the first / bulge of a chubby pink / apple in my neck”; *Entryway* about bodily invasion including “boy things going inside / like wrong jigsaw pieces / leaving the smaller piece / sad and dogeared”; *Companion* in which the sexual companion is indistinguishable from a caterpillar; and *Pickling* in which the poet's body in the bath is “corpse-ish, bloated and wrong”. Buckley writes with the steady focused aplomb of Edward Thomas describing nettles or a railway station with similar implied depths. One sees why he received the first Ruth West Poetry Award Scholarship at the Seamus Heaney Centre, Belfast.

Some other poems lack emotional pressure, but two are powerful evocations of fishing off Donegal where Buckley grew up: *Inver* where the reality badly fails to match the romantic desire (“the dolphins all had gaps / and chunks missing”) and *Waders*, a gentle sonnet in

which it gradually becomes apparent that the fishermen let a boy drown. Buckley's journey will be interesting in either direction – outwards into Ireland or inwards into the self.

Jess Murrain, her debut pamphlet *One Woman-Horse Show* tells us, is “a queer poet of British-Caribbean heritage” and, while Carver's and Buckley's pamphlets express complex aspects of personality, her poems are more directly political, both as an out queer woman and as a Black writer. In the unpunctuated *Analogues 1980s*, one of several poems about Murrain's earlier years, the poem swiftly cites violence which is racial and as intrinsic as religion and music:

funkateers & boogie boys a communion wave
in its original form picket frequencies fires
through teenage letterboxes
straight from the microphone
of dual heritage laid onto mixed tape...

In *Girl* there is both overt violence and depersonalisation:

with every outing of a hat. sufficiently waterproof
to be used as a bucket. this here nasty island.

the permanent state of childhood
in a game.

It would be easy to miss the bitterness of “this here nasty island” which refers to Britain and its wet weather, but isn't emphasised or expanded. Similarly *Seaside*, a memory of seaside visits with her father, ends:

cameras don't
capture Dad just the whites
of his holiday smile
rinsing down my wrist

are deeply conservative variants
of lemon ice.
sugar
the biggest atrocity
on humankind's
tongue.

The memory is now tainted by an adult understanding that sugar was the basis of Caribbean slavery, but the issue isn't laboured. Murrain makes her points swiftly and moves on.

This political awareness hovers behind many of the poems. In *Half*, for example, the difficulty of coming out as queer to one's parents is greater than admitting to a white boyfriend: “white men /are easier / to introduce / into a life”. But there are others – *Of hidden frames, Women are living in drums, When she was* – that celebrate the experience of being a woman with another in language which is rich, suggestive and often very original: “her pelvis / is committed to her pleasure / as the carpet is to cigarettes”.

The most ambitious poems are *One in Four Cowboys Were Black* and *Out of Shot* where the tropes of gun-toting white men in films are reviewed and renewed through a Black lesbian perspective; and the title sequence *One Woman-Horse Show* which draws on Murrain's experience as a performer. This recounts many of a performer's grouses – unsympathetic directors, difficult co-actors, alienation from the role, the first night crowd (“a line of my partner's friends gawping / as if I'd just left the womb”) – but in fresh vigorous language.

Murrain's voice becomes more measured in pace, with fewer tight elisions of meaning, as the pamphlet progresses, creating a more poised style towards the end. Where Murrain shines is in her original and startling uses of language, which can only serve her well going forward.

Laurie Smith helped start *Magma* in 1994 and has co-edited various issues. He teaches literature at the City Lit, London, and has been a Trustee of the Poetry Society.