

# Alice Tarbuck reviews Dawn Watson, Linda France and Laboni Islam

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## **We Play Here**

Dawn Watson  
Granta Poetry, £12.99

## **Took My Way Down, Like A Messenger, To The Deep**

Linda France  
Blueprint £6.00

## **trimming the wick**

Laboni Islam  
Ignitionpress £6.00

**We Play Here** is a powerful collection – a single long poem divided into four parts, each one reflecting the individual experiences of four twelve-year-old girls in an impoverished Protestant area of North Belfast in 1988. The four voices belong to Nell, Max, Sam and Ellen, also known as the “The Ghost Tigers”.

The four sections of the poem form four lyrical monologues which detail each girl’s experience of living and, crucially, playing amongst sectarian violence, poverty, neglect, and domestic violence. Death is never far from the four girls – the prologue ‘Summer 1988’ details that Nell’s “dad was a very tall hospital nurse. / He died of cancer he caught in the

ER.” Sam’s dad “was hanging from a tree” at Easter, but “is OK”. Max’s dad “is important and scares people” and even proximity to where he lives reveals his violence: “If you go by her house, you hear her dad / hit her and her mum.” What is set up in the prologue is played out throughout the collection; whilst these four young girls are always proximate to – and often the victim of – violence, their understanding of why violence, illness and death occur is not adult or fully developed. Instead, cancer is “catching”, and the adult world is remote, full of very little sense. It bears only slant relation to their existence in the strange topography of their area, which they navigate without adult supervision.

Watson’s specificity and attention to cadence and language mean that the poem never seems long; it unfurls like a winding path, moving across the unreliable landscape of childhood, where nothing stays as it should be for long. In *Queen of the Sticklebacks*, Nell’s house is demolished and at this point, everything she knows begins to liquefy: “There sat my alley. [...] Everything else had turned to water.”

In *The Starlings of Dunmore Died on the Eleventh of July*, Max – in sympathetic rhythm to her life of domestic violence under her father’s rule – hears all the starlings drop out of the sky dead, “like pound coins falling / out of trouser pockets”, an observation that

presents the reader with the miraculous and terrible all rolled into one. In this poetic world, fear is given symbolic outlet in imagination, and the poem treats the real and unreal – or semi-real – with equal sympathy and weight. When Max’s dad goes missing in *We, Ghost Tigers*, the story unfolds through multiple games of It – the tragedy disclosed as the girls sit “crouched in the mud” eating honey-suckle dew. His absence seems to chase them “to the new estate / wired to the bottom of Ashfield”. There is no sense of where he might be, although the girls are not naïve – they search the park in case he has hanged himself there. Then, they are distracted by rivals, ‘the Red Fang Gang’. The abstract world of adulthood is always secondary to the concrete encounters of their early adolescence. This is a moving and accomplished snapshot of four lives, neither pitying or sentimental, but beautifully wrought.

In Linda France’s recent pamphlet, *Took My Way Down, Like A Messenger, To The Deep*, the reader is given the opportunity to read strangely, to undo the traditional poetic reading which lingers over each poem as a moment in itself. Instead, France has written a crown of ‘ghosted’ sonnets. In these, the last lines of each sonnet – or parts of them – are gathered together, like jewels, to form a final crowning sonnet, composed of these ghosts, or fragments. These gathered lines drop down in repetition from the final line of each sonnet, repeated in italics, giving the impression of an almost-echo, or moment of stumbling before turning the page. The reader is, therefore, propelled toward the final sonnet and, once there, is haunted by each poem which has come before. This has an unmooring effect, somewhat like being lost in a maze of thought. This unmooring is quite deliberate, and its effect profound. The pamphlet was written in 2020, in the early days of the pandemic, and reflects the unsettling of normality, and its replacement with deep strangeness. COVID begins to rear its head as the sonnets progress, incorporating legal and medical language into other registers: “Every law is an experiment. // There are rumours of vaccination.”

Many of the sonnets break the neatness of the final couplet, subverting expectations of summary or ending. Moreover, many of the lines are complete

sentences, hearkening back, the reader feels, to the many declarations and legislative acts of the pandemic, which would brook no argument.

However, COVID is not the only inspiration for this pamphlet; the imagery and setting are drawn from an exploration of the work of surrealist artist Leonora Carrington. Carrington’s extraordinary imagery inspires every sonnet – each one referencing a different painting. It is here that the central frustration of the collection occurs – the reader finds themselves wishing to see the pictures which are being described, in an attempt to better parse the surrealism of the sonnets. In this lies France’s skill; just like the virus, the images which might help us grasp the poems remain invisible, never manifesting into a tangible reality – an excellent example of how poetry can respond creatively to the pandemic, through ekphrasis and surreality.

Laboni Islam’s beautiful chapbook, *trimming the wick*, is a wide-ranging exploration of self, climate change, and the ways in which knowledge and stories are familiar, geographical, vital. In the opening poem, *Salt*, Islam explores Bangladesh’s rising sea-level through a familial and Shakespearean lens. We might understand the final line to be a sort of manifesto for reading the rest of the collection: “I would say my love is a complicated country, barely above sea level.”

Throughout, personal relationships are made and undone through climate crisis, with stories, places and people changed irrevocably. The reader, however, is not expected to stay grounded. In *Lunar Eclipse* we see the poetic voice identifying with the Moon. Throughout the collection, there are poems of humour and profundity; here, the reader is left to ponder the moon’s appraisal of its current circumstances, “I have mixed feelings about gravity”, as well as the moon’s consideration of female identity and visibility which elegantly closes the poem: “Why is everyone’s interest in me / greatest when I am disappearing?”

Islam is alert and responsive to the potential of the line and her differentiations in line length and pagination mark the winding potential of the stories she wants to tell, while acknowledging the inability to

pin any knowledge down completely. For example, in *The Parrot*, Islam explores how stories might both soothe and fall short; where the titular parrot is afforded neat couplets for its “clack-clacking” and its small life, the lives of those who own and interact with it hang in single, open lines across the page. This layout makes poignant the trick of the couplet: to reduce to seeming simplicity something deeply complicated. This intimate relationship between form and content is seen again in *Echoes, Assynt*, a poem detailing the poet’s father’s journey from East Pakistan to Scotland for study. The poet’s experience of following in his footsteps puts them in parallel relationships with one another, as “two mountains” who “keep records of their past”. Although the place can contain them both, it can never do so at the same time – there is always distance.

Reading *Echoes, Assynt* gave me pause – Scots words, so intimately familiar to me, italicised as if exotic – a rare moment of defamiliarization for someone whose native language is English. However, in *The Wind*, Bangla words are used with their written forms both in and out of parenthesis, broken down into vowels and built back into full words. This beautiful incorporation is not seamless – the poem is about trying to recall words in one’s familial language which “stumble / from my mouth like fawns”. However, the act of making language, of recording stories, is generous in this pamphlet, and leaves the reader delighted by Islam’s skill in making work that truly is “a vowel / between two continents / changing shape.”

**Alice Tarbuck** is an award-winning poet and arts professional based in Edinburgh. She holds a doctorate in experimental poetics from the University of Dundee.