

Lisa Kelly reviews Jane Clarke, Jacqueline Saphra, and William Letford

A Change in the Air

Jane Clarke
Bloodaxe Books, £10.99

Velvel's Violin

Jacqueline Saphra
Nine Arches Press, £10.99

From Our Own Fire

William Letford
Carcenet, £14.99

Critical to Clarke's celebrated third collection, ***A Change in the Air***, is how land bears witness to history. Shortlisted, at the time of writing, for this year's T.S. Eliot Prize, Forward Prize for Best Collection and longlisted for the Laurel Prize, the politics seep through like water in a bog. The voice avoids the rant and is more seductive and convincing for it. The six sections excavate loss at different periods, lending a hazy sense of time travel. Loss of a parent is the focus of the first section where the speaker is "becoming mother/ to my mother" (*Becoming*). The shift between caring roles is tenderly evoked and filled with sensuous details related to the land and food and the work of feeding: new potatoes that taste of the earth; raspberries from yellow stalks; the mystery of yoghurt, milk; memories of eggs gathered by a grandmother. Sorrow at the loss of a mother converges with sorrow for a lost way of life, a time when sustenance came from the soil rather than a supermarket.

In other sections, mounting losses are not measured with such equanimity. *Pit Ponies of Glendasan* has poems with a more jagged and elliptical syntax. Miners have "fist fights at the brothel door" on Christmas Eve but, "Like copper and zinc at the jig table", they divide to go either to mass or morning prayer (*Christmas Morning*). As a nod to the Troubles, the simile is stunningly subtle. Pit ponies and miners are "comrades in toil" (*Pit Ponies of Glendasan*) as the drive to exploit the land swallows them both up and spits men out "hard of hearing, half-crippled," (*The Pay*). In the following section, *When All This is Over*, land is once more dug up, this time for the trench warfare of the First World War. But the focus is not on the desperate conditions, rather on what the Irish soldiers miss, in some of the most delicate and moving poems in the collection.

A sprig of heather falling
from his sister's letter

carries him home
to the slopes of Slieve Donard –

(*Ling*)

Thoughts of a soldier digging "another twenty graves" turns to home and his grandad "digging potatoes" in *Bouchavesnes*, highlighting the tragic reversal of land receiving bodies instead of tubers. Potatoes, and their association with famine, and the failure of the British to intervene due to colonial policies, crop up in other poems, again underlining how the land, death and

history are entwined. *Lazy Beds* is an elegy for the method of planting potatoes in poor soil, where “rain still ripples / down the furrows they built” and in the final section, which brings us to the modern plague of Covid-19, socially-distanced mourners swap tips about planting potatoes: “our litany’s only hushed / by the hearse coming down the road.” (*First Earlies*).

The land bears the scars of tragedy, but also offers hope and points to the cycle of life. *Wife*, a dedication to Clarke’s wife, Isobel, is a glorious poem that is full of wonder and echoes the musical strength of the collection as well as the shared love of their home where they “plant bluebells/ under the oak” and

I practise saying *Isobel is my wife*
and it sings to the tune of my life.

Saphra is a virtuosa of form, especially the sonnet, but her fifth collection, *Velvel’s Violin* – an exploration of Saphra’s relationship with her Jewish identity and a wider examination of the Jewish diaspora – refuses to rest easy. The book is divided into four sections and family – past and present – feature strongly in all four. Joyful poems, such as *Mazel*, dedicated to her husband Robin, and the final poem, *Love*, underscore Saphra’s commitment to relationships and life.

What Saphra questions, as someone who doesn’t believe in God, is the shifting territory of belonging and expected behaviours based on her identity. While the back and forth of a telephone conversation with Ephraim on a visit from Brooklyn who “*would love to meet other Jews in London*” (*Jewish People in the Area*) provides rich comic dialogue spotlighting why Saphra is also a successful playwright, other poems reveal the risks of complacency: “however / Jewish you are not, they won’t forget / your Jewish children and your Jewish god” (*Anxious Jewish Poem*). The final line culminates in stark advice: “Accept your Jewish bread / unleavened; always be prepared to move.” Movement, is of course, intrinsic to the refugee experience but Saphra’s compass point circles on relationships: “I never know where I am / I know only whom I love.” (*Bavaria*).

Many of the poems are darkly humorous – a standout is *Going to Bed with Hitler*, about the obsessive and uncomfortable experience of reading Hitler’s biography at night – and the risks Saphra takes pay off; they leave the reader with much to reflect on because there are no emollient answers. Particularly disturbing and disruptive within the trajectory of the collection are the three numbered ‘found’ poems, *Overheard on a Train*, which appear in their respective sections as snatches of conversations revealing passengers’ anti-Semitism and ignorance. Trains are a potent symbol as the European rail network was used to deport Jewish people to killing centres, and the significance of the setting is not lost on the reader. All three poems are right-justified, underlining their refusal to fit with expected norms – including eavesdropping as poetic inspiration – with the unpunctuated, choppy note form accentuating the sense of casual racism:

Overheard on a Train 1

& all of queen victoria’s kids
were rothschilds

sorry
that’s wrong

i mean all but one

one wasn’t

it’s on youtube
rothschilds
nobody tells you that

Saphra turns the lens on her own responses to the current crisis of the war in Ukraine and the binary idea of taking sides in *The Moment a Russian Helicopter is Shot Down* – an arresting six-line poem which highlights the contradiction of a pacifist who watches the clip online “eighteen times / then put it on my favourites list”. The poem’s brevity invites the reader to flesh out the narrative and, by implication, how we consume and respond to wars and disasters that are filtered through social media. The collection, at a time of war in Ukraine and the Middle East, urges love and vigilance in equal measure.

Hybrid forms, mixing poetry and prose, are increasingly popular and offer poets a chance to explore challenging subjects on multiple levels. The choice of a prose diary on the verso mirrored by free verse on the recto feels apt for William Letford's third collection, ***From Our Own Fire***, which jumps into a dystopian future grappling with contemporary fears over artificial intelligence (AI), the environment and globalisation.

The plot, narrated by stonemason Joe Macallum, centres on a cast of characters, who are all good with their hands, escaping from the existential threat of Andy – AI gone awol, spreading an infection via empathy, turning people into loved-up zombies. Themes – which include the failure of globalisation, and how a post-catastrophe society must rely on its hands and knowledge of the natural world – are tackled with wit and lyricism. How the poetry comments on the prose is reminiscent of the Japanese form, haibun, which combines prose and haiku; the poetry slows the action-packed pace of the prose and gives the reader a chance to reflect on unfolding events. Despite the high stakes of survival, demotic language and witty imagery offer some laugh-out-loud moments, as in *Starlings*:

The global economy is gone
Good. It was just
murmurations in the sky
Opulent and undecipherable
and occasionally
we'd get shat upon

Sharp political commentary and scatological humour is a compelling combination and skirts any danger of preachiness. The prose uses traditional punctuation, while the poetry uses capitalisation but eschews full stops, lending a freedom of movement, echoed by the action of the escaping protagonists. We get to know the individuals in the gang and the emotional fault lines that cause cracks in the collective.

Descriptive quirks hark back to another infamous dystopia and ratchet up the offbeat humour and tension. In *Crazy can be clever*, Joomack, a plumber

and a cocaine dealer, wears makeup reminiscent of Alex DeLarge in Stanley Kubrick's film of Anthony Burgess' novel, ***A Clockwork Orange***:

He carries a small bottle of
mascara like it's a treasure
Every second morning he applies
the mascara to his left eye only
and within that dark frame
his left eye sparkles

Children in the party adapt the quickest to life in the wild. Ella, a nine-year-old, learns from Uncle Joe how to sharpen a knife on a whetstone, and is able to kill – be it a wood pigeon or a person – to survive, while Jason, a vegetarian, holds onto his principles in the face of hunger, and becomes the outsider. Reminiscent of a reality TV show, we watch how our favourite characters respond to the threat of Andy and extinction and the challenge of living off the land as the threat of AI, climate change and global wars play out every day on social media, implicating us all.

Lisa Kelly's *The House of the Interpreter* (Carcenet) is a PBS 2023 Recommendation. Her debut, ***A Map Towards Fluency*** (Carcenet), was shortlisted for the Michael Murphy Memorial Poetry Prize 2021.