

Rishi Dastidar reviews Martina Evans, Rachel Carney and Dylan Brennan

The Coming Thing

Martina Evans
Carcenet, £12.99

Octopus Mind

Rachel Carney
Seren, £9.99

Let the Dead

Dylan Brennan
Banshee Press, €10.00

“To me,” said Patti Smith once, “punk rock is the freedom to create, freedom to be successful, freedom not to be successful, freedom to be who you are. It’s freedom.” Where this freedom was especially felt was away from the big metropolises. As artist Billy Childish put it in 2015: “My theory is that punk really lived in the suburbs, the provinces. We believed the lie pedalled by Malcolm McLaren – that you could do it yourself – so it became real.”

This punk sense, of freedom being won and explored, is one of the forces that pushes forward the latest long narrative poem by Martina Evans. ***The Coming Thing*** is set in 1981 in Cork and features, as its central protagonist, Imelda, previously seen in 2012’s ***Petrol***. Here, against a backdrop of records by The Clash and

Joy Division being played, and The Specials coming to town, she has an energy both brittle and vital, which emerges in her interactions with the gang of college friends around her: “I heard Justin saying / *Show me your company!* I couldn’t bear it so I said to Murphy / *Jesus I’d love some Pondies now!* & he said I was a hard woman.” (34.)

Powering everything is Evans’ choice of form: 75 free verse sonnets. These are big blocks through which the action moves quickly – and at points the book does grip like a thriller. But they are also flexible enough to show off some tart aperçus: “*Human beings are absurd because they look / for meaning in things that have no fucking meaning at all.*” (29.)

While the events and worries depicted might feel predictable in essence – friends struggling to get to grips with their studies, a lack of certainty about what comes next in work and life – the verve with which they’re depicted gives everything a fresh feel. Some of the set pieces are wonderfully comic: the fierce aim when it comes to gobbing at gigs; gathering around kitchen tables for seances; frantically scrabbling through books in the library to try and find out how to solve problems that can’t be named. And as the mood darkens, and it becomes clear that Imelda will need to travel to London to deal with her ‘coming thing’, an unwanted child, the language becomes insightfully precise:

to read up on the subject standing up in a corner
because
she hadn't had a period for sixty days & at that,
an icy-blue plume poured into my stomach.
(46.)

This precision only becomes sharper as Imelda checks into the clinic, undergoes the operation and then wakes up to call one of her friends in a pub on the other side of the city:

I stood on the blue tiles of the
cold hallway & wondered who owned the yellow
dressing gown
I was wearing. *Ghost Town* was playing at the other
end.
I could hear myself crying like an echo down the
line.
(67.)

All this is sharply observed, without the pieties of a simple morality tale. What's left is a sense of the panic of something lost, but something gained: "*IT will be another life for you now*". (75.)

According to the NHS website, dyspraxia is "a common disorder that affects movement and co-ordination. Dyspraxia does not affect your intelligence. It can affect your co-ordination skills – such as tasks requiring balance, playing sports or learning to drive a car. Dyspraxia can also affect your fine motor skills, such as writing or using small objects."

For Rachel Carney, who was diagnosed with dyspraxia as an adult, it is something much less prosaic. As sketched out in *Dyspraxic* it is: "a quirkiness, a body / out of balance with itself."

Octopus Mind, Carney's debut collection, is positioned as an illuminating, metaphor-filled exploration of living with dyspraxia. A bird in a cage, preening its feathers before the thought fox appears to unsettle the calm, as in *Self-Portrait with Words and Feathers*. A tree cast adrift in "neurotypical streets" with "unruly branches" longing for "the unencumbered . embrace of earth and fellow trees" (*Self-Portrait as a Neurodivergent Tree*).

The titular brain of the eight-limbed mollusc, a tiring internal interlocutor: "each tentacle takes a turn, / latching on, jabbing and prodding, // until each word / is worn down to the bone".

While the book does this metaphoric play with great aplomb, where it gets really interesting is in how it makes us think about how we – neurodiverse and neurotypical alike – move through the world. Take *Apologies*, a banger of a poem to open with, which illustrates the tension between politeness, the effort of trying to keep it together, and the disordered nature of living that is always potentially there:

Pardon my muddy trainers.
One of them did not quite make it
to the shoe rack yesterday.

Pardon the piles of unread magazines,
the lack of trains in my station,
the confusion.

Carney's use of ekphrasis as a mode for showing us both inner and outer appearances is well judged. She is especially good at contrasting serenity with confusion. *Unremarkable*, after Gwen John, is a superficially placid set of recollections ("A woman paints a corner of her mind, a half-open window, to let the / sunlight in.") which reveals itself to be something more existential – a sensation which is heightened by the poem being placed opposite *Exhibits in the Museum of Dyspraxia*' a self-explanatory list, that has its pathos deepened by the seemingly ordinariness of its contents: "The soft static between memory and recall. // [...] A duvet cover, forever tangled."

What is really touching about **Octopus Mind** is the strong sense the poems have of the self-kindness it takes to put a self together, a self that can survive in a world it has previously struggled to inhabit. It's perhaps worth noting that, in the sentence above, I first typed 'a self back together', and then reflected that that phrase actually implies that the self here was broken. And, actually, I don't mean to imply that at all. Because that would suggest neurodivergence is something that needs to be repaired. And the poems

don't do that. Instead, with grace, and enviable and radical clarity, they show us that self-knowledge is the first step to accepting ourselves.

Did you know that a kingfisher after death need not rot? "I followed the wisdom of the day and kept him dry, placed him in a box. I stuffed the box into my wardrobe [...] the halcyon bird will ward off moths and preserve your clothes with its pleasant odour."

Kingfisher Haibun, an early poem in Dylan Brennan's second collection, is emblematic of **Let the Dead**. With a startling, unexpected idea or motif, often borrowed from mythology (in this case, from Gerald of Wales's **Topographica Hibernica**), Brennan seeks to remind the reader that The End shouldn't be ignored but rather dived into, examined from many angles, celebrated even with a vivid immediacy.

It's this willingness - fearlessness - that animates many of the poems here. A sequence called 'Cocoon' is a brilliant braiding together of different literal and metaphorical ways of thinking about death: as meat and its pleasures; as a clearer of space for our species and the fuel modern civilisation relies upon; as playful companion; entropy too. It's a startling run of poems, powered by words that revel in their physicality:

texture of tongue meat sporadically toughens
valves that are sliced were blue before cooked
the blood in your body settles
in accordance with the laws
of gravity.

(i. city (resignation))

Shorter poems called *The Dead* that stud the book perform a similar function, in language that is less revelatory perhaps, but still beautiful: "silver glimmering / down in his heart // the silence in / a man's throat". (*The Dead* (ii))

There are tender moments here, with poems detailing the struggle to start a family made visceral, such as in *Botany*: "This solstice it's just the two, no, three of us: the tiny boy (unwithered) punches softly in your belly." And Brennan has a way of conveying wonder about

scenes that, in others' hands, might be absolutely horrible. Take *Things You Can Do With a Grasshopper*:

If you decapitate a grasshopper it will sing
for you sweetly for a while before dying.

If you place a grasshopper up to his neck
in the snow he'll stay congealed for a time

until you return to find and decapitate him
then (the dulcet tones all the more delicious

for having waited a full season for that insect
melody).

It's not without flaws. Now based in Mexico, Brennan can sometimes lapse into a vague and unrevealing travelogue, aiming for a James Fenton-like mood but falling short. *Christmas, Oaxaca* is a particular offender here, with "Fireworks exploding" and then later the eyewitness to the celebrations being "On the shores of obsidian sleep", which had me almost throwing the book across the room.

But these missteps are rare. The comparisons with Joyce that the book's blurbs trumpet don't feel far-fetched - what connects him and Brennan is not so much the dazzle of what's on the page, but rather the insistence on a very human, animating vitality of the spirit, even in the blackest of times that living brings:

there is flowery death
and there is joyful death

my little heart be brave
nobody here will live

(*Incnuicat!*)

Rishi Dastidar's third collection, **Neptune's Projects**, is published in the UK by Nine Arches Press. He also reviews poetry for *The Guardian*, and is chair of *Wasafiri*.