

Cheryl Moskowitz reviews Fahad Al-Amoudi, Gregory Leadbetter and Elvire Roberts

when the flies come

Fahad Al-Amoudi
ignitionpress, £6.00

Caliban

Gregory Leadbetter
Dare-Gale Press, £7.00

North by Northnorth

Elvire Roberts
Five Leaves Publications, £7.00

In 1868, aged seven, Prince Alemayehu of Ethiopia was captured and taken to England by a British expeditionary force along with many of the country's national treasures. It's an all too familiar story of crimes committed in the name of the British Empire. The stolen artefacts remain locked inside glass cases in British museums and libraries. The orphaned prince, despite longing for home, was made a ward of Queen Victoria and eventually died of pleurisy in Leeds aged only eighteen. His remains are still held by the Crown.

This skilfully woven debut pamphlet **when the flies come** by Fahad Al-Amoudi explores personal longing and grief against the backdrop of cultural theft. Threaded through the collection is a sequence of imagined letters in Alemayehu's hand, allowing the communications denied to him during his lifetime.

In the opening letter-poem, *Cicada*, the prince tells Ayat (Amharic for grandmother) "This island is one grain of rock salt slowly dissolving in the water ... everything is bitter."

Here Al-Amoudi borrows an image from the hip-hop duo Armand Hammer. Elsewhere, his poem *Bedtime* takes its title directly from a billy woods (sic) track and contains something of the rapper's hard-hitting, haunting style. Punctuated by solidi (/) *Bedtime* is a passionate plea for a return to self, a reclaiming of name and personhood. Each slash is a disturbance, an interruption of breath, an unsettling collision of conjunctive and disjunctive emotional experience: "I am delirious / howl my name at the trees / wait for someone to claim it / I steal flickers from the streetlamp / play keepy-ups on the second hand of a watch /..."

The final words of the poem, "my name hasn't come back yet" are left without a full stop. The effect is devastating.

The centrepiece for me is the fifth letter, *in the time it takes to pose for a photo a country disappears*, based on a real photograph in which Alemayehu is seen reading a book. Abyssinia blurs, the poem coalesces. It is as if the poet and Alemayehu have become one:

when did you first see your country's name
written down. abyssinia. i must have stared
at the text for over two minutes and still i

couldn't tell you exactly what it said. abyss. ...
i try to measure the distance between myself
and the words.

Using no capitalisation, Al-Amoudi draws powerful links between language and loss. His is a palette rich with fable and fact, place and music, one in which he gathers ephemera of pop culture to paste together a forgotten past with the fragile pieces of real, lived experience.

In *the god of bad news and soft drinks*, a poem that concludes chillingly with news of his own mother's death, the poet tells us:

I made offerings to the god of coca-cola:
a dice-throw of dead flies, crossed cutlery on paper
plates.
These were the games we played.

Games too are played in *Cinnabar Island*, merging what's real with what isn't. Cinnabar Island is a Pokémon invention, a fictional place in the Kanto region supposedly home to a large volcano:

Island is having one of his tantrums
again, the wind asides, the joke being
the volcano is long extinct, until it isn't.

Al-Amoudi's inventive use of fiction breathes life into Alemayehu's story. One of loss, bewilderment, and a deep ache born of absence, it could be assumed by the pull of so many of the other brilliant poems in *when the flies come*, Al-Amoudi knows a fair deal about.

The island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, too, is both a real and imagined place because, as Shakespeare proved, language possesses magic of its own and has the power to influence the way we think and feel about a subject, and in so doing further our imagining.

This is precisely what Gregory Leadbetter has done in *Caliban*, a beautifully produced pamphlet published by Dare-Gale Press containing a sequence of five new poems presented both in English and transposed into original pronunciation (OP), a relatively recent linguistic reimagining, and a first, the intro tells us, for contemporary poetry.

The original dramatis personae for Shakespeare's play describes Caliban as "savage deformed Slave". Elsewhere in the text he is referred to as "mooncalf" or "freckled monster". Caliban was left to fend for himself as a young child when his mother, Sycorax, died on the island. That is, until Prospero came and claimed Caliban as slave, damning Sycorax as a "foul witch", one capable of sorcery "so strong / That [she] could control the Moon." (5.1.324-5)

In Leadbetter's stunning reimagining, set 12 years after the events of *The Tempest*, Caliban returns to the island and reconnects with his origins. In turn, the double setting of these poems in English and OP also returns the words to their origins. Delicious! Especially when savoured aloud...

The opening poem begins with Caliban's arrival. Here I quote from both versions:

I. Landfahl

I duyve from the ship hwen I suyt 'err:
the crew cry 'hwaire!' but I knohw betterr:
it is muy motherr uyle and I swim

I. Landfall

I dive from the ship when I sight her:
the crew cry 'whale!' but I know better:
it is my mother isle and I swim

There is a liveness that happens, a definite magic, that cannot be explained, but only experienced, through Caliban's telling as rendered through Leadbetter's pen. It is as if some assumption about the narrowly viewed and much-maligned character of Caliban from the crusty annals of English literary history, locked in by language, might now become unstuck by the same means. The figure of Caliban, orphaned boy taken captive and unjustly used, whose surrogation has always been related to colonialism, is somehow rebirthed in these poems. He dives into the waters of his beginning, and he swims.

Second in the sequence, *II. The Graihve uv Sycorax / II. The Grave of Sycorax*, has Caliban discovering his mother's grave; "I foller a seed afloaht on the wyind" / "I

follow a seed afloat on the wind". Then comes *III. The Cell*, in which Caliban is led by sprites to the site where he, and Ariel before him, were once kept captive. The fourth poem in the sequence, *IV. The Cairve uv Setebos / IV. The Cave of Setebos* might, perhaps, be seen as Leadbetter's answer to Robert Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos* (1864), a reflection of Caliban's thinking on the Patagonian god once worshipped by his mother.

The fifth and last poem of the sequence in Leadbetter's ***Caliban***, a standout, must-read pamphlet, is pure joy – a wild fire-dance, epiphanic and ablaze with gorgeous detail. Any who may come looking for him, Caliban tells us in his final lines, will "fuynd me as I am: nairkid" / "find me as I am: naked"!

Elvire Roberts' debut pamphlet, ***North by Northnorth***, is a masterclass in laying bare originality and stripping away poetic convention. Roberts is a queer poet from the LGBTQ+ community in Nottingham. Born in Yorkshire, she spent her early years in Zambia, has an MA in Creative Writing from Nottingham Trent, works as a signed language interpreter in forensic, mental health, academic and arts settings, and has completed a first degree in Chinese studies at Cambridge University.

I was intrigued by the title and made conscious of the many mythical and political associations gathered around the word 'North': North, of course is the direction a compass needle normally points; the Global North distinguishes economically advanced societies from those that aren't; the North Star always leads to home. Or does it?

In ***North by Northnorth*** Roberts bypasses all that and veers wildly off-compass in search of something newer, stranger, queerer, less familiar. These are poems that explore fragility, the natural world, metamorphosis in human, animal and mineral form, as well as the supernatural, the spiritual, and the psyche. This may sound like an impossibly intellectual expedition, and it is, but what is most remarkable is the inventiveness with which it is undertaken. Each page presents a surprise, something new to puzzle over and to learn from.

Roberts writes playfully and invites the reader to play along. There are poems here whose sections are segmented by dotted lines marked with scissor symbols,

suggesting the work is there for cutting up and messing about with, should we so wish. This is visual poetry. The six-line sonorous verses in *Beautiful demoiselle* are laid out inside hexagonal shapes and tessellated into two flower shapes across a double spread – a fun job for the designer and a delight for the eye of the reader too. The word 'demoiselle' has several definitions: a) a small, graceful crane; b) a damselfly; and c) *slang*: an unmarried girl or woman. Is it mad that I also saw the word 'mademoiselle' stripped of its own (mad)ness, as an invitation to lose my mind and not search too hard for logic?

Language, so many languages – from all corners of the globe – feature here. Some real, some invented no doubt, although perhaps their origins are all due north of where our usual encounters take us. In places, certain letters seem to be formed of hieroglyphs, but I trust this poet, and sense that everything has been mined from a true source, has purpose and is waiting to be drilled for deeper meaning.

Queerness is at the heart of this pamphlet. ***North by Northnorth*** leads us into uncharted territory. One could spend days, even weeks, getting lost in its pages and still find things to wonder at and discover. Take one of the titles for example, *Syzygy*. In astronomical terms, this refers to the alignment of three celestial bodies in a gravitational system. In Jungian terms, 'syzygy' is the integration of the anima and animus, male and female aspects of the conscious self. Elsewhere I found it as the name of an artwork by Columbian artist María Berrío depicting three women aligned and transforming a fourth into a half-bird hybrid. Roberts' *Syzygy* appears as a block of text bisected diagonally to form two triangular (winged) configurations, the left in roman, the right in bold. Mirroring? Opposites? Even the title inverts itself at the end and becomes "Ygyzys". The effect is soaringly joyous, as is the whole of this fascinating, quirky, and deeply intelligent work.

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