

Richie McCaffery reviews Jane McKie, Abigail Parry and John Robert Lee

Carnation Lily Lily Rose

Jane McKie
Blue Diode Publishing, £10.00

I Think We're Alone Now

Abigail Parry
Bloodaxe Books, £12.00

Belmont Portfolio: poems

John Robert Lee
Peepal Tree Press Ltd, £9.99

The appearance of new work, especially a new book-length collection, by Jane McKie is always a cause for celebration and **Carnation Lily Lily Rose** finds McKie in particularly efflorescent form. I've written elsewhere that poetry collections have sometimes been called 'anthologies' and the origin of that word is a collection of flowers, but some collections are pages of withered weeds and others are luxuriant fields. McKie's is certainly in the latter camp:

The nap of a peach
in the lantern's fold,

in the lilies' peppery throats.
against the girls'

cheeks, a special pelt:
carnation, lily, lily,

antler-velvet-rose.

(Carnation Lily Lily Rose)

David Kinloch has percipiently pointed out the leitmotifs of skin and touch in this collection, but this is also a work that has a flowing current to it. Repeatedly we encounter the image of people carrying pails of water: in one instance to help with wildfires; in another to slake the thirst of others. While these are noble, well-meaning acts, we also see the fallibility of human effort: "You pictured yourself taking water to your distant neighbours / but even in your daydream you couldn't lift the pails." (*The Universe Ticking*). And again:

Nothing is softer than water. Water cleanses,
assuming some measure
of pain before it moves beyond the body, feeding the
bath, the drain,
with a spiral of tenderness. Today I will try to bear
water to others.
Some will spill on the earth; may what is left reach
them.

(Water Carrier)

The fact that we may, and probably will, spill the water does not mean that we should give up striving to deliver it and this, in itself, is an invigorating way of thinking

about how poems work – does that cargo of meaning reach its destination intact? Does it matter if it doesn't? More than mere water porter, McKie (or the speaker of McKie's poems) is an elemental force, acting as water themselves, bringing life to whatever they flow towards and through:

It is water, of course, that fortifies, water that fills every available space. I felt it this morning, inside me,

the great beast's whirlpool coil as it turned back to the deep. And then dressed itself as a human being.

(Pool)

Much could also be said about the empathy that imbues McKie's poems. Upon buying a blouse in an Oxfam shop, the speaker wants "the transaction more than I want the thing. / To buy, to give." (*'Next' Blouse, Oxfam*).

Elsewhere we encounter the unfeeling and perfunctory language of our built-up, commercial worlds and McKie's words, again and again, provide an antidote to this. In *The Adjacent Estate* we get the marketing spiel: "The adjacent estate / has something for everyone: / two-bedroom flats / and five-bedroom houses" and yet this is not enough the capture the complexity and "many versions" of human existence. In *Versatile and Spacious Living Accommodation*, a viewer of a house is more drawn to the life that was once lived there, and the poem closes with an image of great compassion and solidarity, characteristic of the collection as a whole:

... On the mantelpiece,
a black and white photo of a blonde whose face, in
focus, eclipses
grainy forms grazing in sunshine. I want to kneel at
her feet.

In contrast to McKie's often limpid and lyrical poems we have the intellectual Wunderkammer that is Abigail Parry's second collection *I Think We're Alone Now*. Rich with allusions, pop references, intertexts and lapidary and exotic words, these are poems that don't pander to the reader but present them with the challenge of comprehension; it's that process that ultimately makes this book a rewarding and often

exciting experience. I was reminded of Veronica Forrest Thomson's theory of 'poetic artifice' and the third strain of poetry between something merely depictive of the world and something that vanishes into rarefied obscurity. This is particularly apparent with Parry's use of footnotes and marginalia and her engagement with the knottiness and slippiness of language:

Do note that this syntactic switch-around is typical of very ancient languages and English-speaking learners will, with practice,

subordinate the subject to the rule;
may even come to understand it better
than the English verb to have. Its grasping hand.

(*English-speaking learners*)

This collection is something of an intellectual dance through the ups and downs and loves and losses of a life, taking in basilect and acrolect, humour and pathos, and high and low cultures to show that this is all something of a false antithesis: that synthesis and understanding is the aim. The image of the mirror recurs regularly, as do questions of gaze, where the observer is also the observed and human life, for our lack of understanding of ourselves and others, becomes some sort of maze-like mise-en-abyme:

No way back now, to the place
where we first looked in a mirror

and cringed into our borders, turning
inwards. But I want a better metaphor than this
dull fuss of sloven pinks, or a room

partitioned off. Like Alice in the sequel,
slipping through, to find everything she knows
inverted on its axis and nonsensical.

(*Speculum*)

Much of the collection, I feel, is about trying to find a means of escape, not just from trauma and failure but from the narrow confines of language and culture itself. In the final sequence we see the world through the dark aperture of a mediaeval leper's window. Poem V of *The Squint* sequence recalls more insouciant youthful days listening to music, and the same three chords "getting

wound around / the same cheap thrills". This hints that Western music is arguably restricted with its seven core chords and often predictable chord progressions, and a parallel could perhaps be drawn with poetry as well. As for the absurdist prison of the English language:

Consider, for example, the word *free*.
As in *free from obligation; free from care;
from bondage, subjugation*. Do note the irony

by which the word must name its own constraint;
learners would do well to remember
that we never speak of one without the other.
(*English-speaking learners*)

Note also the great duality of that closing line, which also takes onboard the deixis of 'them and us', 'oneself and the Other'. Does Parry eventually free herself from this immurement with only a small lacuna to see through? The triumph of the collection is that she doesn't and doesn't seek glib or pat answers to her most aching ontological questions and settles instead for the power and mystery of things not disclosed. To see and understand fully and have all questions answered would render poetry itself obsolete, but Parry is one of the few who is not content to walk around the world in a blinkered reverie.

While Abigail Parry's work is marked by its innovation, novelty and ludic wordplay, ***Belmont Portfolio: poems*** by John Robert Lee – one of the doyens of Saint Lucian letters – is a return to a more traditional, rhetorical and high Modernist form of poetry. Canonical figures like Eliot, Auden, Cavafy, Walcott and, most significantly, God, preside over the collection as tutelary figures. At its heart, this collection, imbued as it is with fugitive up-to-date contemporary references to conflicts, technologies and musicians, is about the tireless artistic and spiritual quest for the sacral and supernal in a very broken, entropic world. Against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic we encounter a plea for the redemptive power of faith:

plague has turned after us
with the calendar pages of this apocalyptic decade
like some medieval demon taunting exorcists;
town seems reduced, more empty lots, shuttered
stores,

tattooed Babylon more pagan with blasphemies &
obscenities ...

[...]

if your soul longs for the sacred scissor-tailed seagull,
salt-air, life,
come out to the beach-side food-vendor, get some
peas dal
& sitting in the pew of your old car, offer grateful
grace, so we pray.

(*Office Hours: Terce*)

Robert Lee's poems typically use complex sentences that run on, giving the impression of something homiletic or sermon-like. This works best when Robert Lee is emphasising the healing force of religious belief and joy (he is a practicing Baptist):

and the joy that is
the sacramental grace that always is
lifts the house of I
to embrace with surging heart
Belmont Circular vernacular.

(*Belmont Portfolio: Belmont Circular, vernacular*)

While I am a secular reader, I do also believe in syncretism, or the validity of all world faiths to their practitioners. As such, some of Robert Lee's messages transcend religious faction or denomination to make positive comments on the nature of our temporal world. While Robert Lee's metaphors strive to see the metaphysical in our physical world, the language of devotion could also be argued to be vitally metaphorical to a non-believer, such as myself, urging us always to be better:

The diary guides: renewal of covenant through
today's devotion,
hopeful resolutions to close off last months' chores,
abandon lost causes, call estranged children
& open new files for new work that promises
something more
than we've had before... well maybe... we pray...

(*Office Hours: Prime*)

Robert Lee's work sometimes risks falling down when he moves into a more didactic and portentous mode, railing against and itemising all of the evils of the modern world. While he is often preaching to the converted, the reading experience of having every horror recounted is an ultimately lowering and disempowering one: "we had mocked conspiracy theories of ghosts in voting machines / & extraterrestrial paedophiles sighted in palaces & silicon-valley mansions" (*Office Hours: Sext*). However, this collection, overall, is nothing short of Robert Lee's forceful artistic and spiritual credo, where the poet is always in service to a higher power. This closing stanza has all the hallmarks and metre of prayer:

 this island pilgrim
 bears the Caribbean voice
 to the table of world literature,
 placing there in canticles,
 our accents, our history, our songs, our dances,
 that in particular celebrate our apprehensions
 of the Sacred, the Divine, the Transcendent and
 Immanent,
 Alpha and Omega, the Holy City,
 Incarnate Christ, Pantocrator.

(My island-pilgrim's progress)

Richie McCaffery's latest poetry collection is ***Summer / Break*** (Shoestring Press) and in 2023 he published the critical monograph ***Scotland's Harvest: Scottish Poetry and World War Two***.