

Selina Rodrigues reviews Rebecca Goss, K Patrick and Laurie Bolger

Latch

Rebecca Goss
Carcenet, £12.99

Three Births

K Patrick
Granta, £12.99

Spin

Laurie Bolger
Smith Doorstep Books/The Poetry Business, £6

Geographical, familial, and political locations – and the experience of the self within them – are the foundations of these three collections. The landscape of East Anglia is described and inhabited in **Latch**, which focuses on Rebecca Goss's childhood experiences and, as an adult, her own family's return to the area. Occasionally the exact timeframe in which the poem is set is opaque, or the lines jolt between past and present, but the mesmeric flow through the poems keeps the reader engaged.

In *Woman Returns to Childhood Home, Remembers*, the father searches at night for the mother with the "field swallowing him whole". It contains an appropriately child-like perception of alcohol consumption:

Her mouth had a new,
difficult smell. She carried

a glass bottle quarter full
and sloshing.

In the final verses, the child imagines her own desired resolution – her mother sleeping outside at ease, and the child joining her at breakfast, "in the high grass and she / could plait my hair beneath / the oak tree."

In addition to family, there are observations of people that are likewise rooted in the area – a blacksmith, a retired agronomist, and (with humour) a rock musician, which give important insight to the experiences of rural living. In the evocation of the terrain and its characters, scenes of danger or loss are re-counted. Goss describes the allure of a fire as four children are thrilled by "stubble burning". The heightening language matches the voracious passage of the fire:

Riddance of sunned-stubs
that scratched our ankles,

bloodied our socks
during the chase.

We lure it. Fire's reel
over field.
(*After Harvest in the Eighties*)

The poems are lyrical and rendered in harmonious shapes across the page, but there is a continuous implication of threat throughout. Some poems do not name the danger and this can initially feel perplexing.

Rooks is a mysterious poem in which the parent/watcher observes the child lifted by the birds “to spend dusk in a walnut tree.” Despite its magical premise and the beauty of the final lines, where the parent/watcher sips tea and considers waving, it is difficult to avoid the unfamiliar in the poem overall. The threat is the loss of the child and, as in other poems, if someone slips or storms out of the house, they could be lost forever. Individual poems refer to ‘latch’, used as a noun, but its meaning as verb is resonant – as a way to achieve connection or safety. The hazards may be real, but are also anticipated or sensed, and the pervading nature of their presence is constant.

Later poems provide linguistic flexing. *Deadwatch Beetles*, *Gate* and *We Are Buried Under Lime* re-define their own titles by re-framing the subject matter – the beetle becomes “a call to love”. Goss considers the longevity of physical objects and their re-interpretations over succeeding generations:

The craftsmen who paused their tools
to add their trade and autograph.

It will take half a century of weather
to expose us, a gift from the fault.
(*We Are Buried Under Lime*)

Latch interweaves past and present and absorbs the reader in this journey. The poems have a ghostly quality, particularly in the startling, haunting *Woman Returns...* poems, where the woman is both present and a spirit from the past and future. Through Goss’s exceptionally skilled choice of language and form, the poems imbue their meaning. The collection left me with a sense that not only the personas but the emotions, traumatic and joyous, are still held there in the environment.

Three Births is in four sections, each entitled with a season. K Patrick presents the passage of time as a route through the poems, which contain repeated motifs: family members, singers and actors, the landscape and monuments. There is a continual placing of images and associations that attract the poet’s gaze, and provide landing-places within the collection. In addition, the poems consider adjustments and changes within relationships, alongside the poet’s own gender or bodily identity. Many poems contain descriptions of landscape, and its

reverberations with the poet. *Have*, set out as a prose poem, intertwines descriptions with perceptions:

A blowy walk. The weight of
birds enjoyed through your binoculars. To be so far
away
from sound. The human eye is beautiful with unreliable
qualities.

The poetic voice was close to my ear, sharing personal, moving details finishing with the intimate, “The tidemarks on your hand are mine.”

Words and phrases gleam with dexterous balancing amongst the almost frenetic movement of the poems. In *Again*, on a relationship receding, there are allusions to temporality, including in the changing seasons, “Clouds sent up by clasped hands. Cupped light. Bouncing leaves. A squirrel’s bullet voice.”

In *Blood Comedy*, the reality of a hospital visit is shared in the lines:

The hospital
forces a blood comedy, pinkish blood, blood with
chunks, blood in a plastic carry
case, blood upright on the bedside table

and closes with:

There is nothing hard enough to bite down
on anymore. Each tube of yours is a one-way system.
I will not make any comparisons to love.

Reflections on men and maleness recur through the poems, whether actors or singers, family members or strangers. They are placed centre and examined in the poems or are set with the poet’s eye as the pinpoint, with men radiating outwards. Monuments are a fascination in *Procession* and *Butch*, and are juxtaposed with poems on changes in gender, the physical human body, and its emotions. The significant long poem, *Three Births*, exemplifies Patrick’s acuity, and is both a lament and proclamation. The opening verse states:

Instead, this painstaking appearance.

God,

what a thing to arrive already left behind.

Patrick then writes with knowing humour:

the stone priests wait to ascend.
Modelled into glory, how lovely. Eyes turned upwards,
but still casual ...

The confidence to be a shrine!
How dare they.

The exclamation is with the monument, followed by the contemplation of this state of existence in “how” and “dare” and “they.” Later in the poem, Patrick considers Twombly’s art, and writes of “The body’s / unclenching in his red carnations,” and concludes that verse with an internal and external sensibility:

Scars on my chest like his red carnations!
Noise sealed up. Touch my own skin like a lover might.
Without dissociation, a lump in my own throat.

In addition to the poetic skill, the key attributes of these poems are their ability to hold multiple viewpoints and to share them with agility and generosity with the reader.

Laurie Bolger’s *Spin* presents a range of locations, from cafes to domestic settings, to gym classes and to parks. Its title represents a kaleidoscope of experiences about absence, relationships and where the challenges of girl- and woman-hood collide with the inherent need for freedom and independence. Nonetheless, there is a coherence within the individual poems and throughout the pamphlet, which proves both satisfying and intriguing as the poems link, cross-refer, and give space to their themes in their expansive form across the pages.

Many are narrative or long poems, with explorations of the dynamics between personas and situations. *Roadside Café* is based on a two-person interaction, but the verses dance through speech, memory, and the everyday transactions of a café. The language is colloquial and evocative:

When the waitress puts the bubblegum chairs up ...
I finally hand him the cigar tin my nan left, I’ve been
holding it this whole time like a shell.

Some poems contain clear depictions of inequality, holding a mirror to the situations foisted on men and women “watching the heavy drip of men leave the pub // watching women who would look after them until the end / sewing names into trousers” (*Washing*). Other poems effectively imply this:

she’s wearing chiffon of course
with long socks up her arms - she’s like some dying
bird and her parents don’t understand how her long
legs work they can’t meet her sad eyes -
(*Roadside Café*)

The one-word or ‘place-based’ titles may be misleading in their apparent simplicity, as they unlock in-depth examinations. Images in *The Things I’ve Tried* convey absence in all its absurdity and longing. *Spin Bike 53*, is a protest:

small small towns where the women
take their joy out with the bins

...

we are calorie counters even now
our wrists. clinging to 50% of

With its urgency and drive, I also found this poem a manifesto on resilience:

we don’t want to pose under flower arch now
we want to glow
in the queue for pizza fierce listen
rock back
did you get out did you come back did you make it
did you find love here?

Selina Rodrigues’ poetry publications are *Ferocious* (Smokestack Books) and *The Visitors* (Wild Pressed Books). She is a host of the Poetry Shuffle and a *Magma* editor and reviewer.