

# Andre Bagoo reviews Ilaria Boffa, Sean O'Brien and Safia Elhillo

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## **Beginnings & Other Tragedies**

Ilaria Boffa  
Valley Press, £12.99

## **Otherwise**

Sean O'Brien  
Dare-Gale Press, £7.00

## **Girls That Never Die**

Safia Elhillo  
Bloomsbury, £9.99

Endings are found in beginnings – this every good writer knows. So it is in these three publications, most explicitly in Ilaria Boffa's ***Beginnings & Other Tragedies***.

This is a book-length poem about environmental catastrophe and reforming worlds. In free verse, it braids three voices, designated only as (*chorus*), (*they*) and (*she*), with the third-person pronoun used in a collective as opposed to a singular, gender-neutral sense. While (*she*) is frequently in the first person, (*they*) is omniscient and expansive, with there being instances in which sub-headings demarcate some of its stanzas as stand-alone odes. There is an epigrammatic feel throughout, as though we are reading journal jottings. The (*chorus*) sometimes locates us "In the landscape / walking by the river", but we are not witnessing the re-writing of place as a score, as seen in Alice Oswald's ***Dart*** or ***Falling Awake***.

Boffa is an Italian poet, photographer, tai chi instructor and sound recordist, who collaborates with musicians and filmmakers on experimental works, including "sono-poems" involving field recordings from locations as diverse as markets to opera houses. She has said she composes her texts in English then "re-writes" or translates them into Italian, and snippets of these languages feature in her multi-media work. If you don't speak both – I don't – this might ironically add something to the work's sense of estrangement. But luckily, this book is a bilingual English/Italian edition. The poet encourages us to read it while listening to a "sonic documentary" completed after publication. There is also a video recording of a 45-minute performance online. All this invites tantalising questions: Where does Boffa's poetry reside? On the page? In the air? Somewhere else? Perhaps within that liminal place once described by J H Prynne as the reader's "mental ear"?

The answer is all the above. Boffa's title tells us about her overall poetic project. It is one concerned with yin and yang, with contraries. Tragedies involve matters that have run their course and ended badly; beginnings and endings are conflated in a way that suggests they need each other to exist. "For when the beginning comes," the poem observes, "each end will be forgotten / though the record of pain / will remain lost in translation". Even within tragedy are the seeds of paradox: the dramatisation of suffering implies pleasurable catharsis. But the effects of climate cataclysm are so dire, the potential for extinction so real,

the poem imagines a stop to time; “Do we still have a long term?” I am reminded of a philosopher’s statement that there is no time without man.

Yet, writing this review in Trinidad days after Hurricane Beryl, I wondered if there was something in the work far too languid, almost precious, given the subject matter. Or is this just another instance of the poet’s dialectics: lightness of touch for a grave situation?

There was one notably clumsy stanza, however, beginning:

Towards protestors we gravitate  
against the cost-of-living increase.  
Resignation and bitterness as if  
there were no responsibilities.

This is not the idea of dreams beginning in responsibilities from Delmore Schwartz or W.B. Yeats. The awkwardness of the moment is explained possibly through recourse to considerations of translation, which is a factor, despite Boffa’s stated method of composition; my Italian friends in Port of Spain point out the latter two lines in Italian have the benefit of rhyme. But it also has to do with the fact that the circumstances which inform the cost-of-living crisis are refractions of the greed behind the climate one. The voicing of this sentiment, thus, even if not technically attributable to the poet, feels jarringly short-sighted in a work of expansive scope.

An introduction from Allison Grimaldi Donahue states Boffa draws upon traditions of nature poetry, dystopian fiction and the Greek chorus. Another reference could be Walt Whitman, in the sense of calling into being a changed world. Her anguished, though optimistic, lines are less sprawling, but they have that aura of Whitman’s vivas to those who have failed: “The frontier, a future perfect / a yet to come”. There is a way in which the ideas point to questions of literary theory: Which comes first, language or things? The signified or signifier? Culture or “nature”? Sound or sense? Ultimately, there is something hopeful in a book, Boffa’s fourth, whose ending marks the start of a conversation.

Endings and contrapuntal play are also integral to **Otherwise**, the brief but potent pamphlet from award-winning British poet Sean O’Brien. This sequence of 15 poems, plus one translation, closes with the words “neither / ending nor beginning, only falling” (*Otherwise*). Like Boffa, the poet takes us on a journey into “the other life”, in which time works differently and we live trapped between the horns of dilemmas. In *To Cythera*, a poem alluding to an island associated with Aphrodite, a narrator remarks “I live for dying afternoons like this, / to dream of sailing half a century ago” and “then will time too have ended, ended”. An elegy addled by sensuality, endings are followed by endings: “I drowned and went on drowning there?” – the question mark prolonging doubt and, thus, the echo of experience.

There is tragedy’s mask, too, as in *The Tragedians*: “Let silence fall / ... once more you may begin”. *Sleepers* can be read as being concerned with helplessness in the age of climate chaos: “Our age of afternoons was ending ... / the weather changed”. *Lastly* could signal the end of humanity in which “stars have grown provisional”. There is a similar sense of general decay in *High Summer*, though a specific political reading arises:

This used to be England  
and now it is nowhere. The map  
can hardly wait to take its leave

Here we find an echo of the poet’s 2007 full-length collection **The Drowned Book**, where there is “One nation doing time” in jail. Or better yet, the “Imaginary England” of 2020’s **It Says Here**. *Siberian Birch* presents another echo of, or perhaps rejoinder to, that last book’s idea of immortal place names:

When we have forgotten our names  
and each other, the kiss you give me now  
will outlive us”

Panoramic sweeps add fire to the personal.

When we say a work of art is lyrical, we sometimes refer to its quality of moving back and forth in time. There is a latent element of that in the writing of Boffa and O’Brien, but it charges to the fore in Sudanese American poet

Safia Elhillo's second collection ***Girls That Never Die***, which opens with a poem taking us back in time to a specific moment. *Final Weeks, 1990* begins: "Hours before, the night outside is black as my grandmother's / hair". The poem was written in response to a prompt – to write about the day and time of one's birth – and its retelling of a personal family history is followed by an equally analytical dive into wider mythmaking. *Orpheus* declares: "I have no real use for those Greek myths, their dead girls, // women raped by men and animals". This apophysis, in which the titular myth is invoked negatively, works as a devastating critique: it is a reminder that what matters most in storytelling is what is missing; "all I know about Eurydice / is that she died. My every other fact about her is about him". It also informs the splitting of the "parallel self" through time, the necessary sense of regeneration, renewal and re-education.

The beginning-end dichotomy is everywhere. *Infibulation Study* involves repetition of the phrase "I will begin" in a way that suggests unending trauma. *Pomegranate* swiftly moves from "I am" to "I was". The title poem *Girls That Never Die* articulates transcendence through time, where victims of violence are "never heard from again" but still "everywhere". Fittingly, there are four poems with this same title, constituting a never-ending memorial. The revenant girls crop up in other poems, too, such as *Palimpsest* where the narrator declares "i wear the dead girl's clothes". The penultimate rendition of the poem asks: "But what if I will not die?"

Gender, narratives of migration, race and the American Dream undergird the stories told here. But in Elhillo's skilful hands, the upending of easy binaries also escalates into an existentialist questioning of the nation state. *Border/Softer* asks "& where is the end of my country / the beginning of the next how will I know i've crossed over" – the enjambment contrasting with the seamless transition from "next" to "how" in a poem with no full stops. In *Terra Nullius*, in which the title refers to the colonialist practice of claiming land belonging supposedly to nobody, the narrator declares "I am old enough to choose a country for myself, but by now I / do not want one".

It may well be such a searching, as opposed to rabidly nationalist, approach holds the key to addressing the transnational catastrophes covered in all three works. They each remind us that a single line of poetry holds, with its start, middle and end, the key to history.

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