

# Jessica Traynor reviews Kwame Dawes, Milena Williamson and Neetha Kunaratnam

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## **Sturge Town**

Kwame Dawes  
Peepal Tree, £12.99

## **Into the Night that Flies so Fast**

Milena Williamson  
Dedalus Press, €12.50

## **Cauc/asian**

Neetha Kunaratnam  
Blue Diode Publishing, £10.00

“*We are the darkness, as we are too, the light*” begins the epigraph of Kwame Dawe’s twenty-second collection, **Sturge Town**, heralding a collection concerned with history’s dapple of shadow and light. We find Dawes in an expansive mood in these poems, which crisscross history and time, building on a personal mythology developed over the course of a long and fruitful career.

Dawes revisits the past with a vigorous curiosity that animates these poems. We find his father in a Welsh bar, and he’s conjured for us again in the summer of Dawes’ birth – in the poem *A Year* – which ends with the refreshingly self-conscious “It was a good year; / I say it was, so that is how it is”. Dawes gestures, too, to future generations, with a series of poems about his children, now approaching midlife. It’s a testament to Dawe’s skill that these poems eschew easy sentimentality, communicating a deep love tempered by time and self-

awareness. Particularly affecting is the final meeting with the poet’s daughters, imagined in *It Begins with Silence*:

My daughters, perhaps this will be the register of the dark  
and light of last meetings, those repeated again and  
again,  
and you will, I hope, walk into a long dusk, the light  
perfect in its tenderness ...

The great seductive power in these poems comes from the poet’s voice, resonant and dextrous. Where some established poets settle into an easy groove, Dawes shows us there are still corners of experience he’s keen to delve into. Most moving are the poems that deal with the loss of the poet’s sister – sibling loss being perhaps one of the most intimate kinds of loss. *Deathwatch*, with the wonderfully surreal cameo appearance of Wallace Stevens as death’s accountant, captures the tragedy of words left unspoken:

“Protect me,” you say to your sister,  
with her pointed nose and crooked  
stick. She stares at Mr Stevens,  
then mutters softly, “It will be fine,  
sweetie, you go...” And you know  
she has not heard you, you know,  
for you have not spoken.

Bob Marley, Dawe’s great guiding spirit, crops up here in the third and fourth sections of the book in some of the most unflinching poems of self-examination. *Work*, with

its Marley epigraph, draws a direct line from slavery to our late-capitalist age: “Work is always behind, always owing / somebody something – payment in June / for debt from December...” Similarly striking are poems which explore racism towards Black communities in America, and the numbness that creeps in as lives become statistics:

I am feeling the news,  
the chattering noises, the illogic  
of another black body broken by bullets,  
by the heaviest of sorrows.  
Forgive me, friend, for asking you to take me  
into your verdant backroom. Forgive me  
if I sit quietly in the corner rocking, hoping, maybe,  
for earth to hold steady my vegetable self.

*(On Hearing the News of Another Black Man Shot)*

A more slender version of this book might have allowed its strongest poems to sing all the sweeter. However, this is a comprehensive and vital collection and one that will surely win Dawes new readers while satisfying those who have followed his work for years.

***Into the Night that Flies so Fast*** by Milena Williamson is also concerned with history and mythmaking. Williamson, American by birth but resident in Northern Ireland, tackles the tragic history of Bridget Cleary, a Tipperary woman who was burned to death by her family in 1895 – they claimed she was a changeling. This event, and the court records of the trial which follow, give rise to a deeply atmospheric sequence of poems which channel these long-dead voices. Bridget’s mother, her dog, her husband, and the cousins involved in the murder all speak, often in cryptic fragments that build, over the course of the collection, to a disturbing picture of small-town resentment and misogyny:

She melted into air.  
We carried the body up the hill  
and buried her with care.  
She melted into air,  
every inch of her.  
It makes me ill,  
how she melted into air  
and we walked down the hill.

*(Every Inch of Woman in the World)*

With a historian’s precision and a dramatist’s flair, Williamson sets these short monologue-poems within a theatrical space, sparked by the trial judge’s propensity to quote Shakespeare. The result is a sequence of delicate but tightly-coiled poems, packed with intriguing allusion to local events and Shakespearean drama. In his testimony in the book’s ‘Act Two’, Bridget’s husband, Michael Cleary, channels Othello, another violent husband:

I have no wife. It was the very error of the moon—  
she came more nearer earth than she was wont  
and made men mad.

*(Sweeter Creature)*

Somehow, in spite of the challenge of synthesising historical and literary references, the voice of Bridget sings throughout the poems – it almost feels as if these constraints set up a safe fourth-walled space for the characters to share truths they might not have been able to access in life. Their almost automaton-like speech is truly uncanny: “Give me a chance”, Bridget pleads in *I Must Be Thy Lady*, “You are making an emergency of me.”

Williamson takes her intertextual experiment further with a sequence of poems reflecting on the writing and research process, which intercut the monologues of the historical figures. These flashes of reality pave the way for a sequence of poems in ‘Interval’ which detail the poet’s own lived reality, giving hints towards the wanderlust that sparked the book’s larger project, and also imagining a happier destination than Bridget’s:

At the end of the line,  
we will find the castle and boats setting sail.  
She asks how to alight, whether people  
go one at a time or everyone alights together.  
The platform number is days spent in love.  
A train arrives from the right direction.

*(Charm for Catching a Train)*

In ‘Act Three’, Bridget returns, family in tow, but now the poems are interspersed with a fractured sequence responding to episodes from ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***. These almost-found poems of female agency in a dark world, where “This body is mine until it’s not” (*Before the*

*Music Drops*), speak surprisingly clearly to the voices of nineteenth-century Tipperary, unearthing unexpected connections. At the end of another day spent struggling with attacks by patriarchal and eldritch forces, perhaps the best we can say is: “It’s been lovely talking to you./ It’s been so lovely fighting with you.”

This is a debut in which execution matches ambition – a rare and promising thing.

**Cauc/asian** is Neetha Kunaratnam’s second collection of poetry, following his 2019 debut **Just Because**. Out of the two, the poems here feel more strongly tethered to the present, and fearful for the future: here, themes of climate crisis, bigotry and racism are brought out of the realm of the existential and into the real. In *Seed*, we enter a dystopian future – or is it present-day? – where “The man who sought the patent / heard the court decree / that he alone had fathered the Seed.”

The threat posed by racism is palpable throughout the collection, most memorably in the collection’s nail-bitingly tense title poem, in which a group of young white men threaten the poet while he is out with his daughter. Kunaratnam is a master of atmosphere, and the clipped lines evoke a lasting sense of dread:

Step out. Unscrew the cap  
in the warm evening  
haze of the tiny forecourt.  
Urge the unleaded  
to the brim, as a white  
minivan pulls up,  
three young Caucasians,  
all six packs and drill.

Violence, capitalism and race are also approached through a reassessment of the character of Batman – this proves a fascinating angle through which to approach themes of white privilege and aggression, especially given the collection’s eco-poetical bent. In *Vigilant/e*, Kunaratnam imagines the “young heir to / an industrialist’s empire” taking a different path:

Countless spin-offs spawn  
across pale patriarchies,  
in which only the strain

of his masochism varies.

A scholarly version surfaces, in which his brooding begets rumination so intense that he will major in phenomenology, devour *What It’s Like To Be a Bat*, question his assumed identity.

Kunaratnam’s poems often exist in a state of alliterative flow: a musical torrent shot through with moments of playfulness which deconstruct language, presenting it afresh. The results are witty, thought-provoking and surprising, in poems such as (*dead white men*):

Who lounge in the crisis of the overheating sun,  
as sprinklers kiss their grass iridescent.  
Who nuke the bindweed’s white flower trumpets,  
as their tired, old tongues are devoured by wasps.

On occasion, the musicality of the language can give rise to a slight overdependence on alliteration – a hospital waiting room is a “sterile sanctum” (*This book belongs to... A & E, NHS*), Jerry of ‘Tom and Jerry’ fame threatens his persecutor’s “dextrous digits” (*Cat Concerto*), refugees who died tragically in a container find themselves in the “dark deprivation of the refrigeration trailer” (*Freight*). But this is a minor note, and of course these alliterative constructs may appeal more to another reader. Overall, this is an urgent, witty, and thought-provoking collection.

**Jessica Traynor** is a poet, and poetry editor at *Banshee*. Her latest collection, **Pit Lullabies** (Bloodaxe, 2022) was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. A new collection is forthcoming from Bloodaxe in 2025.