Tom Branfoot reviews Ali Lewis, Martin Figura and Caroline Bird

Absence
Ali Lewis,
Cheerio Poetry, £11.00

The Remaining Men
Martin Figura
Cinnamon Press, £9.99

Ambush at Still Lake
Caroline Bird,
Carcanet Press, £11.99

Flaubert had a dream of writing a book about nothing, which would contain "the least matter" – a euphemism for both physical stuff and content. Taking nothingness as its subject matter, Ali Lewis' ***Absence*** is a searching, cerebral and electrifying debut. Forsaking any grand narrative, Lewis' poems have magic woven into them through a prodigious command of the form and line-level precision operating in the metaphysical vein of Wallace Stevens and Peter Gizzi.

Sonnet, for example, is a single simile executed acrobatically:

> Leaving our bed
> in the quiet dark
> and walking
> to the light switch
> in the hall
>
> we have to just
> step out and trust
> there'll be a floor
> beneath us
>
> as bellringers
> pull their ropes hard
> before they've heard
>
> the note before
> the note before

Distilling a sonnet into its essential components – fourteen lines, volta and end couplet – with a tentative, submerged rhyme scheme, Lewis uses the forms characteristic strengths in a vibrant and musical sculpting. The pealing between "hard" and "heard", plus the repetitive couplet, ballasts the simile as the poem steps faithfully into the unknown. These poems chime with Barbara Guest's idea that "the poem needs to have a spiritual or metaphysical life if it is going to engage itself with reality".

Carefully arranged in sequences, ***Absence*** guides the reader through an emotional spectrum and range of themes moving between questioning representation, faith, love and loss. Adjacent poems converse with each other, often contradicting or offering divergent perspectives in different styles as in *The Best Thing About Falling* and *Rules for Comedy* which deal with losing loved ones to suicide. The former uses the science of gravity to convey mental distress – when falling, the

body's centre "asserts itself", bending into a bowl, "pelvis-first":

> as if you were being crushed
> beneath a vast
> invisible boulder
> which is what
>
> you'd been trying
> to tell people all along

Lewis mediates between science and mystery, imaginatively filling in unexplained gaps. *Rules for Comedy* approaches narrative authenticity and veracity in both comedy and poetry, forms which perform identity and voice, navigating honesty and artifice within language for an emotional or humorous response. Or both. Starting with an anecdote about finding a dead body, Lewis probes the function of a set-up in a joke and how it necessitates the tenor: "The dead guy's just part of the journey that gets me to my friends, who died". It's a clever, interrogative and recursive poem addressing sincerity, storytelling and authorship, particularly in how they relate to memory, grief and personal experience. The speaker wonders "Did I make that up, or is it true, or both?"

A pair of sonnets near the end, *Putting the World Away* and *Expanding Universe,* exemplify Lewis' attuned, scientific and emotive poetics. In the former, things contract and nest into the "the two of us bedded down / tessellated Pangea eased back together". Conversely, in *Expanding Universe*, things pull apart, thin and widen until "we wake / on opposite sides of the bed having not made / love".

Martin Figura's ***The Remaining Men*** sings for the English working class, those dismissed, failed or forgotten by the state. Carers, migrants and soldiers take centre stage in narrative-driven poems about childhood, war and austerity.

Figura is at his best when experimenting with form as in *The Bomb*, which revolves around the anaphoric axle "is". Lodged in a sequence memorialising ordinary soldiers used as pawns in the global war machine, this unpunctuated romp is for those exposed to radiation from atom bomb testing in the 1950s. Suggesting unforeseen contamination, the bomb "is an unopened box" and "the brightest fungi on the forest floor". Tonally, the poem adopts an assuring register "allay[ing] unreasonable fears", yet the poem's engine undercuts assurance with irony, especially in the final line, "*anything that casts a shadow will protect you*", italicised to suggest an external voice. Human shadows were etched in stone after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima; a terrible resonance contained within the line that also recalls the 'long shadow' cast by nuclear fears during the Cold War.

Written for veteran Stewart Harris, *Bear* allegorises PTSD through an uncanny tale about the soldier's relationship with a bear. Waking next to each other in hospital, a menacing bear comes home with Stewart, causing carnage, fear and isolation in the domestic setting. Together they walk into the sea and the poem breaks to "Stew [standing] alone on the kitchen floor, water pooled / about him".

The Remaining Men admonishes the state and its wilful, unsustainable neglect of those who sustain, obey and risk their lives for it. Hardened and worn down by coal mining, with nothing to do after deindustrialisation, men "became like street signage, / A-boards, parked prams or tied up dogs", Figura writes in the dystopic title poem. These remaining "men began to petrify into monuments" though "Most were broken down for aggregate", fossilised into geological states in the absence of work. Other poems such as *Sand* and *Seams* follow similar themes but are at points overwritten.

Midway through, the collection dips into a conventional, unexciting mode of poetry featuring dramatic monologues of historical figures and political satire veering toward ranting. Of these, *Harold Wilson Rows Toward Bishop Rock* and *Tony Blair's Sleep App* are enjoyable, inventive and subvert expectation. That said, the satirical mode which Figura rests on lacks an incisive, innovative and incandescent edge, and this ultimately dampens or trivialises the political rage behind discussions around austerity, disenfranchisement and deceit.

My Mother, My Father is an almost palindromic attempt to rewrite personal history in which:

> … I am someone else entirely. This was never written;
>
> my mother never met my father when seventeen, did not
> die at his hands at thirty-two, because he never

At which point the poem abruptly stops. Figura's disappearing act is a textual rite redeeming personal tragedy. Paired with *Dead Dad*, we realise the patrilinear relationship was fractured by military conflict: trying to get to a place where "sorrow and forgiveness / meet", the speaker confesses "we never got past the war". The men characterised in this collection are damaged by historical events beyond their control which the poet sees repeated by austerity and deepening social inequality following Brexit. He breaks an inherited chain of violence and silence by writing these "empathy machines", as Roger Robinson refers to poems.

Caroline Bird's seventh collection with Carcanet, ***Ambush at Still Lake***, expands on the familiar themes expected from one of the UK's most comedic, surreal and boisterous poets: lesbian relationships, addiction and recovery, and the absurdity of everyday life in late capitalism. Bird writes that these poems operate as "upside-down jokes": at the beginning the audience are laughing and by the end "they're staring at me and the room is silent". The opening poem, *The Standstiller*, demonstrates this approach in an extended metaphor about a ride at an imaginary theme park which doesn't move. The speaker's partner panics, bailing on "the wheelless train":

> … 'I'll be right here
> on the platform,' you say, waving
> as the restraints come down and off
> I go, staying beside you.

A commentary on long-term relationships, the paradoxical phrasing and tenderness of the ending comes unexpectedly from this dreamlike scenario, defining the parameters for this collection which probes the complexity and drama of lesbian parenting. "The three-year-old boss / of our imaginary café / is conducting his daily stocktake", begins *Dream Job*, another early poem mourning the waning imagination of the speaker's son. After "magicking / a bunch" of carrots from her pocket, the son responds '"That's not carrots'… 'That's nothing'". The fantasy disintegrates, "Business suffers". The speaker reflects on all the "international calls" and "lucrative deals" made from a phone revealed to be her hand. Raising the stakes, the son gets arrested for embezzlement, turning to his mother saying:

> *… wasn't it great*
> *while it lasted though, Mum?*
> *Didn't we want*
> *for nothing?*

The end leaves you enthralled and affected by this comedy of menace. Enabled by Bird's imaginative capacity and storytelling ability, the impossible hilarity of a scandalous child melds with a fear of them leaving, becoming someone different.

Bird has stated elsewhere her admiration for the American poet James Tate, whose irreverent surrealist poetry informs hers, although idiosyncratically transposed into a queer, English setting. Tate's final poem was found on his typewriter after he died: a prose poem composed of a litany of lies and gags ending with a doppelganger moment: "He was looking for someone who looked just like me and had the same name. What are the chances?" There is an echo of this final line in Bird's *Siblings*: "What are the odds / of both being resummoned / by the same womb". Ludic gestures abound ***Ambush at Still Lake***, the masterstroke of which is the poet's ability to tease out and arrange the latent terror and absurdity in dailiness into an imaginative set-up with an emotional, tragicomic punchline electrified by love.

Tom Branfoot is the writer-in-residence at Manchester Cathedral. He organises the poetry reading series More Song in Bradford, and is the author of ***boar*** (Broken Sleep Books, 2023).