Alice Tarbuck reviews Em Strang, Tamar Yoseloff, Victoria Kennefick

Firebird
Em Strang
Shearsman Books, £10.95

Belief Systems
Tamar Yoseloff
Nine Arches Press, £12.99

egg/shell
Victoria Kennefick
Carcanet, £11.99

Em Strang's collection, ***Firebird***, is a book in three parts. The first, *The Spark*, is a collection of nature poems, which move between the meditative and the vibrant, concerned in minute detail with the comprehension of the natural world. The second section, *The Flame*, is a collection of ekphrastic poems responding to Caravaggio, contemplating light and darkness, and their twin purposes in uncovering the divine. The final section, *The Fire*, responds to the work of a rather lesser-known artist, Meinrad Craighead, and is concerned with the devastating aftermath of a fire in New Mexico. Throughout this compelling collection, Strang manages the particular and the thematic in excellent balance, kindling a conflagration which the reader sits with long after the book closes.

Whilst Strang's ekphrastic work is deft and wholly equal to the complex subjects to which it relates, it is her nature poetry which is particularly compelling. Within the *The Spark*, an extraordinary thesis emerges: Strang situates the natural world as something to which the "bog-eye of the human" (*Water of Ae*) is not wholly suited. To perceive nature is, for Strang, a bodily and spiritual undertaking. In her poem *Mistle Thrush*, the speaker can only see the thrush "in the mind's eye" and so produces "something bigger than a thrush / and brightly coloured / like a bird of paradise". Inherently unsatisfied by the realities of nature, the human observer must enhance and embellish the natural world.

The only remedy to this, Strang's poems insist, is to think *with*, rather than *about*, the natural world. This is shown to great effect in *Lonicera Vulgaris*, where the poet speaks of honeysuckle leaves "So green, humans have to close their eyes / to imagine it". The poem suggests that, instead of seeking to directly perceive, we seek instead to enter into meaningful coexistence with the plants by asking questions: "How to sit so well / on a stem alongside others!" Through thinking with the more-than-human world, we can be called to our place in it. This is a political place, in the sense that the collection has a keen eye toward ecological crisis, but it is also spiritual.

In a particularly strong poem, *The Brink*, Strang discusses liminality – what might the brink be? It is everything: it can be found in the "thrush tapping the snail shell", the "particular stone" he uses, the "low river". Rather than liminality being represented by something externally observable however, the viewer – and by extension the reader – is implicated too. *The Brink* is also "the time of watching" the bird and the snail. The poem ends with a summation – "the brink" merely "is". The final word of the poem, "is" delivers us back to our present moment, asks us to find the liminality of our surroundings. Strang's collection is a masterclass of immersion in the world – it teaches us that, whether looking at the natural world or a Caravaggio, the impetus is on the viewer to find a way to move beyond mere seeing, to enter into meaningful relation with all that surrounds us.

In Tamar Yoseloff's newest collection, ***Belief Systems***, we encounter poems which are always reaching out beyond themselves to commune with other artists, continuing the deep interest in intra-media conversations which we have seen in her previous work.

In particular, the book contains a series of poems grouped as "Combines", responding to multi-media artist Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, the series of hybrid/collage artworks he constructed in the decade 1954–1964. Wonderfully, colour images of the work are included, and this guides the reader through his extraordinary, three-dimensional creations. Ekphrastic response to non-figurative art might have its complications, but Yoseloff finds in Rauschenberg's work what can be explored when categories collapse, when 'things get messy'. In *Rhyme*, Yoseloff responds to a work composed of almost-identical brown and white panels, overlaid by shape and colour. She suggests that searching for meaning is impossible, asking "Where's the artist? He's disappeared / in the blinding white of another year". The poem's structure of half-rhymes ("gospel" / "impossible", "earth / wealth"), form a pattern of response which speaks directly to the composition of the original work. Here, then, response is both interpretation and description, without requiring explanation.

Composer John Cage is a companion throughout this collection – even greeting the reader 'at the door', with the epigraph which opens the collection: "Ideas are one thing and what happens is another". This is particularly true in the poem *Trophy IV (for John Cage)*, which responds to a Rauschenberg work of the same name. This matryoshka-nesting of artist, composer, and poet brings a rich layering of response, forming a chain of artistic reception and conversation which is particularly fine. Here, the poet posits that "A picture is like a tyre, / flattening space and time onto surface". Similarly, here the poem seeks to take the temporal and three-dimensional and compress them into language. That the poet's response takes the form of a sonnet is significant, an embedding of the experimental within the formally traditional, a way of understanding the seriousness of art which seeks to move beyond convention, whilst maintaining conversation with it.

Cage returns in a formally innovative poem, *Noise: A Lecture*. A visually delightful explosion, it is a thesis-in-practice of the overlapping, interrupting nature of noise, and how it might be understood. We are invited to "find a pattern" within this tintinnabulation of words. Cage's observation that "music is *an organisation of sound* so a horse could be considered music" guides us to the idea that poetics, an organisation of sound represented visually, might also qualify. This poem-score offers up the idea that disturbed left-to-right reading might be similar to the interruption of thought through sound: the interference of another plane or medium that forces the mind to rearrange and regather itself.

Throughout this collection, Yoseloff asks us how writing and reading talk to other forms of artistic engagement, where they fall short, and where they create another layer or angle from which to consider them. It is a rich and beautiful collection, and vital for anyone who wishes to consider how art talks to art, and how art talks to the world.

Within ***egg/shell***, Victoria Kennefick's delicate, beautiful collection, themes of loss, transformation and wonder intermingle. The collection is in two

parts: the first a meditation on early motherhood and repeated pregnancy loss; the second an account of the breakdown of the poet's marriage, in light of her partner's transition. This is a collection which asks difficult questions: what are the limits of romantic love? How are they different from platonic love? What does it mean to lose emotional intimacy, or to never have it, through transformation or infertility?

One of the most fascinating aspects of this collection is the poet's tightly honed awareness of the emotional landscapes of loss. This can manifest in an awareness of self which is ruthless, allowing a view of the ridiculousness of all human moods. In *Ode to Self-Loathing*, for example, the tragi-comic deflation of the ode takes place through its short lines. Beginning with "O little knife / O tiny knife", any self-pity is mercilessly cut out until the end lines, "O Pain! – / O unbearable sadness – / you are such a prick". The elision of a clear subject here allows the reader to consider who is the prick: the sadness itself, or the one who writes odes to it?

In other places, however, grief and loss are found lurking in the most prosaic of places. In her poem *Dead-in-Shell*, Kennefick compares pregnancy loss to the loss of chicks in chicken-keeping. The poem is fascinatingly paginated – headings, seemingly excerpted from a chicken-keeping manual, sit above bullet points giving causes and solutions for different kinds of chick death: "Chick death at any age … Infection … Darkening around the yolk sac and a foul smell". On the other side of the page, in a grim marginalia of grief, sit what appear to be reader's annotations, providing a simultaneous commentary on human pregnancy loss: "I waited, I waited, … shivering in bed socks … for it to be over". The poet's skill here is in capturing the all-pervading quality of loss.

This is true also in the second part of the book, where the focus shifts to the disintegration of a marriage, as one party finds themselves. Someone else's transition is a difficult subject to tackle, particularly given concerns around the privacy and dignity of the person transitioning, but Kennefick is loving, respectful and skilful in her depiction of grief and growth. Again, there are moments of humour which leaven the heavy subject matter. Reflecting on the impossibility of romantic love after transition, the poem *Orientation: A Tragedy*, is a one line poem which reads "I am so straight I give myself paper cuts". There is something deeply touching, deeply human, in that grief-tinged admission.

Indeed, throughout the collection, Kennefick's relationship with the myriad emotions that make up the self means that readers find many moments of recognition, regardless of personal experience. A powerful collection, it holds grief under a microscope and finds that it is an extraordinary and complex landscape.

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