

# Godelieve de Bree reviews Amaan Hyder, Shash Trevett, and Helen Ivory

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## **Self-Portrait with Family**

Amaan Hyder  
Nine Arches Press, £11.99

## **The Naming of Names**

Shash Trevett  
Smith|Doorstop Books, £10.99

## **Constructing a Witch**

Helen Ivory  
Bloodaxe Books, £12.99

Amaan Hyder is alert to language, deconstructing words at a granular level. His sensitive and probing poetics makes itself apparent in *what is your language?*, where the word 'Urdu' is pushed to a sonic and associative extreme, raising questions about British-Indian identity: "Ur like the English say err is human / du as in do you speak English?" By drawing attention to the physical plane of language – how certain syllables are pronounced ("the open mouth should be rounded") – Hyder reveals the extent to which language is embodied, signalling language as a specifically political act that can both generate connection but also can be violently inflicted by nationalist forces that seek to alienate.

Language connects, and complicates, the speakers' relationships to their cultural lineage, in *how do we live*:

your eldest brother starts  
school with no english  
your youngest brother starts  
school with no urdu.

Nastaliq calligraphy features throughout and Hyder transforms the Abecedarian into *Alifbehpehrian for extended family*. Words are often defined, both generously inviting the reader into Urdu while also raising questions of translation and meaning. As much as family, the familiar, are examined, so is the flipside; the alien, or alienated, and the struggle for communication, particularly what needs to be covertly communicated, often due to threat: "the look that a man gives another man / the look that means a man's weakness" (*subtitles*).

The speakers of ***Self-Portrait with Family*** exist in vigilant attunement to the threats of racism and homophobia: "when sex for him came to mean the possibility of a fast death my parents newly in the country were circled by a gang in the street" (*i found a man shallow*). The absence of punctuation and fiddly syntax here gesture to the unrelenting force of prejudice.

Recurring use of slashes speak to the collection's resistance to clean categorisation or either/or-ness. This comes to a head in *Translations*, a series of eight poems concerned with the political deconstruction of language in which Hyder displays a flare for experimental form. As a launch point, a statement

about community tensions is dissected into poetic form, pulling out the subtextual violence by adding line breaks. Then, the same statement is splintered: “and liberal politicians” becomes “a/i/era/a/politic”; under Hyder’s attentive eye these fragments become their own statement: “i era a politic.”

Family is both genetic and chosen as Hyder creates intimate portrayal of both the joys and hardships of queer life. As much as the speakers of the poems are brimming with desire – waiting for men in bars, imagining sex “bracketed by cubicle walls” (*In terms of cottaging*) – this is juxtaposed with coming out to their parents and experiencing homophobic violence. *ancestry* opens “after i came out my mother said / why did you choose this”. Temporal considerations are also rife – ***Self-Portrait with Family*** is reflective, attuned to memory, looking back into personal, familial and archival history. Turning the page, the reader is moved from a study of queer boyhood in *nice legs mahmood* to broader community experiences in *Templates*, constructed with feature titles from *Gay News*. The various experiences of gay men wrestling with compulsory heterosexuality are artfully composed, with Hyder’s tactful eye, into small poems here:

23 October 1975  
Lonely  
Reactions  
Out is right.

Shash Trevett’s ***The Naming of Names*** opens with an appeal to the reader to pay diligent attention to the names throughout the collection: “They are staccatoed prayer of remembrance” for those killed in the Tamil Genocide during the Sri Lankan civil war from 1983-2006 (*Dear Reader*). Statistics are difficult to verify, due the very nature of systematic anonymising, but it estimated that over 150,000 people were killed or disappeared: Trevett’s project is ambitious but effective: as the collection’s title simultaneously implies, it both honours and accuses.

The backbone of the collection is a series of eleven title poems composed of lists of names catalogued by the North-East Secretariat on Human Rights. The

names of murdered civilians are presented as hypnotic and relentless, in alphabetic grids or using metre and rhyme which work to honour the lives lost, while attempting to give a sense of scale:

Jamunakumari	Janagaraja	Jeevamalar
Jeevanathan		
Jegarajasingam	Jegatheesan	Jeyalingham
Jeyamalina		

(*The Naming of Names 3*)

Frequently incantatory – and often overwhelming – these lists are their own form of tribute, intended to affirm the representative power of a name; each with its own story of mourning. Alternating in scale from these larger catalogues to briefer stories of individual lives, Trevett strategically reveals the scope of suffering: in *Her Name was Thulasi* the story of one woman’s name and family are intimately told:

When she was born her parents named her Thusali,  
after the plant. (In English it is called Holy Basil).  
She was their threshold between heaven and earth.

Naming works to counteract the systematic anonymising, and consequent abstraction, of Tamil lives through identification. *How to Dispose of Tamils* is an incessant record of techniques used by the military to kill Tamil people, and discard of their bodies, referencing the harrowing realities of mutilation – “11. Babies are easily dispatched / under hobnailed boots.” The poem ends:

20. Use Emergency Resolution powers  
to prevent post-mortems.  
No identification, no accusation.  
No name, no crime.

This punctuating double syllabic mirrored either side of the comma creates a disturbing sense of finality, while the repeated “no” evokes increasingly desperate disbelief. This idea of denial returns in *The Dubs Amendment 25 April 2016*, an initiative which sought to assist vulnerable refugee children by bringing them to the UK from mainland Europe: the names of MPs who rejected the amendment are formed into a large capital letter NO. Denial returns

again in *Ann Lowe 1953* in which a black woman's labour is anonymised: "no name, no voice."

In *Illegal Migration Bill* the inhumane response of the Tory government to humanitarian disaster is exposed through the reappropriating of bureaucratic language in governmental documents. A block of text from the Bill is progressively blacked out to construct, or expose, new meanings until only one statement remains: "A bill to make provision for // detention", demonstrating the collection's broader preoccupation with what language is in/capable of containing or depicting. **The Naming of Names** is an impressive reckoning which urgently forces its reader to attend to the realities of systematic violence and the brutalities of history, pertinently speaking to the ongoing atrocities perpetrated in Gaza.

Helen Ivory's **Constructing a Witch** reclaims the figure of the witch from the patriarchal forces that attempt to disempower women and make them abject. Ivory's collection is extensive, almost compendious, in its referencing of historical and cultural figurings of witches in the West, and feels disappointingly apposite as women's rights are under threat.

Witches are figures of resistance, summoning their own powers in cultures which frequently attempt to disempower or restrict the agency of women. *The Answer* describes the internal split inflicted on women who are expected to have their lives dictated by domestic roles; a woman is cut "in half" and one of these selves goes "home to her family" to domestic responsibilities, while the other steals "deep into the woods" and is "joined by a cat with a murderous yowl." The false dichotomies of 'good vs. 'bad – or 'behaving vs. misbehaving' – are also unveiled in *Only Bad Witches Are Ugly*, while *Some definitions of Witch* broadens its conceptual horizons: "The worst mother / man ever invented" or a "Deliverer of silence/ to the henhouse."

Composed with reference points as broad as William Blake, the Bible and **The Wizard of Oz**, as well as film characters and paintings, Ivory is audacious: reinterpreting Genesis, and uphauling historical events

such as the Pendle, Fife and Salem witch trails.

**Constructing a Witch** is thoroughly researched and is impressive, not only due to this rigour but also its imaginative leaps. Some poems operate as mouthpieces which revive, and reinterpret, the voices and experiences of women affected by these trials. *Margaret Johnson*, for example – a historical figure with a complicated involvement with the Pendle trials – speaks:

Yet history casts me out as *not a witch* –  
if I was *not* a witch,  
how did I meet the night's wings? how did I fly?

Some of the poems feature as colourful, and often striking, collages that Ivory, in the afterword, describes as "alchemic": this taking and transfiguration of existing material is emblematic of the collection's larger project of assembly and transfiguration.

As much as Ivory looks back into the historical and cultural world, she also addresses the material realities of women's bodies, especially aging women, with care and vulnerability. In *34 Symptoms of the Menopause* an internet forum becomes a community space as women validate one another's experiences:

And all the women on the internet  
faces blazing in the blue light of their screens, say  
*yes, this is normal*  
*we are here*  
*we can hear you now.*

The summoning of sisterhood is the essence of **Constructing a Witch**: one which supports, celebrates and fights for women. As Ivory writes in *Votive*: "each woman should make her own figure from scratch."

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