Aoife Lyall reviews Rosamund Taylor, Karen Downs-Barton and Theresa Lola

Filly
Rosamund Taylor
Banshee Press, €18

Minx
Karen Downs-Barton
Chatto & Windus, £12.99

Ceremony for the Nameless
Theresa Lola
Penguin Books, £10.99

Rosamund Taylor's ***Filly*** is astounding in how it portrays the pervasive social silencing at play in Ireland in the early 2000s.

Taylor's hybrid and fragmented form allows the reader to move between people and perspectives, places and platforms with a cinematic prosody, visually reinforcing the barriers between the different facets of Orla's life: the verbal and sexual abuse she suffers at school is separate to the bewildered and exasperated safety she experiences at home; the damaging physical relationship she has with her teacher, Mrs. Wall, is separate to the healing digital relationship she has with Liverpudlian Valerie through MSN Messenger.

The power of the text is in its threaded, episodic nature. In *Part One: The Good Wool Coats* the reader learns that, Orla, when bullied in primary school, is blamed by her teachers for being "too sensitive"; that her parents "had cried; had shouted" when they discovered her self-harming; and that when she is outed to the entire school after kissing a female friend, the recrimination is pronounced, and formatted by Taylor in a style reminiscent of the space between rows of desks:

> When no one
> would pair up
> with me in history,
> Mr K said,
> *Well, Orla,*
> *what did you expect*?

And when the abuse becomes too much, dissociation fills the white space around the declaration:

> I blinked out.

And it is this culmination of social failings that creates such a dangerous false dichotomy: that Orla's relationship with her teacher is not abuse. Throughout the clandestine affair, around which the verse novel pivots, we witness the uncomfortable

dynamics of sex, power, passion, and self-harm. As the relationship reaches its zenith and begins its decline, form emphasises the dissatisfaction they begin to feel towards one other:

> I hardly saw anyone but Orla and she
> was terrible company, no conversation.
> I'd ask her about college, and she'd sigh.
> These years are the happy ones, I'd think,
> when you're in college and you don't know
> that nothing will work out the way
> you want it to. I didn't say it …
> (*Irene Wall Longs for Snow*)

While Mrs W's thoughts here are circumlocutory, critical and condescending, Orla's expression of disappointment more closely resembles one half of the untidy bed they have been sharing:

> Mrs W moaned
> When I opened
> the paracetamol,
> gave her a glass
> of water. Smell
> of stale alcohol,
> and puke.
> So tired I was dizzy,
> but I couldn't lie down,
> not with her breath
> on my face.
> (*Part Nine: The Gold of It)*

It is through a series of MSN Messenger conversations that Taylor captures the youth and vulnerability of her protagonist, while simultaneously highlighting the fear she has of breaking her silence, given the anger and apathy it has been met with elsewhere:

> **V: Er. Listen. Are you actually thinking about dying?**
> O: I mean. Don't we all think about dying?
> **V: NO**
> **V: I'm sad a lot. … But I don't think about dying. I feel fed up**
> O: Yeah, I know. I'm making a big deal out of nothing
> **V: THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEAN**
> **V: You can feel crap and not want to die. It's different**
> O: I shouldn't have brought it up
> **V: You say all this intense crazy shit and then if I try to actually TALK TO YOU about it you just BACK AWAY and pretend it never happened**
> O: I don't want to bother you with it
> (*MSN MESSENGER, 14/12/08, 23:08, ORLA & VALERIE*)

Verse novels are hard to crack, and yet Taylor has written something extraordinary here: a novel that never forgets it is constructed of poems; poetry that weaves plot theme and character together with the salient, sporadic nature of memory. In short, it is an exquisite combination.

Minx. "Derogatory". "Humorous". The first three words of a collection replete with terms as off-hand as they are offensive, as innocuous as they are insidious, underpinning the peripatetic lifestyle of the speaker and emphasising the twists of form and language throughout the collection.

The opening poem *The Tattooed Door* is written on its side. 35 lines of it work carefully around the unavoidable declaration:

> FUCK OFF HOME
>
> KEEP BRITAIN
> WHITE

Though only a small percentage of the text across the two pages, it is the first thing the reader sees, aligning as it does with the expected formatting of text on the page. All capitals and no punctuation, ignorant, aggressive, and relentless, it dominates from its small corner.

Origins and rituals are significant features of this collection. Downs-Barton traces not only the beginnings of things but the significance of the beginning of things. Poems such as *A Confluence of Reds and Silks*, and *The Bastard Files* explore the etymological and ecological roots of the word bastard, while the significance of the speaker's cultural rituals come out most strongly in *The Home for Crying Children*:

...
Boys
force each other's sweaty heads into piles
of knickers, scolded by laughing nurses
...
You learn what a *Romani chai* should know:
... this *mokerdi*
lore shapes the rituals of cleaning
...
I'm looking for the clothes I arrived
in. it won't be stealing. No one here wants
to wear clothes worn by a 'dirty Gypsy'.
(*Mageripen: The Rules of Hygiene*)

Where origins are unknown, undetermined or unsanctioned, the poems here serve as the speaker's efforts to gather stories, memories and incidences, and to twist them into threads of meaning, visually represented in the series of immured sonnets that populate the collection. This effort is also reflected in the poems titled *Dear Faye*, a series of letters addressed to the little sister from whom she has been separated:

Dear Faye,

Don't worry, I'm here in the house where every room has a name, but children's names are often forgotten. I'm in a room called Fledglings. Are they turning us into birds?
(*The Home for Crying Children*)

And later,

Dear Faye,

Don't get used to this place. This is not our home
...
Children who stay here become line drawings
nobody
colours in.
(*The Home for Crying Children*)

The collection ends with *Mi Loki Gili: My Song of Life*, a specular in which the speaker practises the language "my grandparents forgot" while parked in their van in a layby. It is a seminal poem to finish on, leaving the reader with a sense of the present holding the past and the future and, significantly, giving equal weight to both:

And I stopped running just to stop looking
backward.

I learned new words, ***limos***: acceptance, ***smirom***:
peace.

To stop looking backward I just stopped running
and

Ceremony for the Nameless is an immersive and arresting exploration of the names we take, make, and break. In *My Name is My Home*, which begins:

Every time someone mispronounces my name
they break its windows, dirty the floors,
replace things, take things.

Lola wrangles with her given name, and again in poems such as *My Names Converse, Ceremony* and *My Middle Name Returns from Work*:

My middle name hesitates, then joins us.
We try ... but conversations falter.
There has been too much distance.
We know longer know what makes the other laugh.

Greeting the Elders is one of several poems that explore the, at times, exhausting acrobatic acts of social transition and translation the speaker must constantly perform, and the sharp cultural reprisals that await should she stumble:

Hi Liz, I utter so fast
my own gasp startles the air.

Who are you calling *Liz*?
She sparks.

...

I must not forget what I was taught as a child:
That with age a name becomes a guarded mystery.

Above we have a momentary lapse, a fleeting absence of hierarchy, whereas in *Situationship* we see the power of a name being used instead to avoid connection, commitment, and accountability:

> What are we? you ask.
> He says I am … and you are …
> But what are we together? you ask.
> He says labels irritate his skin;
> he needs a patch test first.

In *Nakedness*, through which the speaker envies those with unburdened names, Lola considers the economic importance, and indeed necessity, of a name:

> Without a name I am an unverified existence. All I seek
> snakes away; a home, a bank account, a passport, a living, *ease*.
> At least in death I will be granted a name, 'Jane Doe'. All this ends.

But Lola knows this cold comfort is a contemporary one, and not something that can be taken for granted. *Burial for the Unceremoniously Buried* recounts the exhumation of 150 enslaved people, listing the many ways in which a person's name is used to connect them to the world, to trace and to place them:

> Forgive this mass address;
> there are no passports, no diaries,
> no phone books, no birth certificates
> no nosy neighbours to call.

The collection opens with the epithet "To live is to have a name; / to have a name is to live." (Niyi Osundare): if so, then to die and remain nameless is a double-death.

The final poems in the collection speak to names of affection, hope, fortitude and affirmation. *Our Appellations: Orúkọ Ìnagijẹ, Wrestling with God* and *Our Appellations: Orúkọ Oríkì'* remind us how naming, and being named, connect us, not only to each other but to ourselves:

> Henceforth, I'll sing my own name,
> Let it spring from my mouth,
> …
> I'll dance like the future is watching.
> (*Our Appellations: Orúkọ Oríkì*)

Ceremony for the Nameless is a powerful reminder of what a precious, fragile and important thing a name is: as much a gift as a burden; as much a privilege as a responsibility.

Aoife Lyall's books include ***The Day Before*** (Bloodaxe, 2024) and ***Mother, Nature*** (Bloodaxe, 2021). She is Reviews Editor for *Magma*. She lives in the Scottish Highlands with her family.