

Laurie Smith reviews Arundhathi Subramaniam, Susie Campbell and Colin Bramwell

The Gallery of Upside Down Women

Arundhathi Subramaniam
Bloodaxe Books, £12.00

Wastelands

Susie Campbell
Guillemot Press, £12.00

Fower Pessoas

Colin Bramwell
Carcanet, £12.99

As more and more poetry is being published – in books, pamphlets and online – publishers are increasingly interested in ‘concept’ collections – books of poetry written according to a predetermined structure rather than sequences of individual poems expressing the poet’s thoughts and feelings at the time of writing. These three collections use structural concepts to varying extents.

Arundhathi Subramaniam’s ***The Gallery of Upside Down Women*** has three sections of which the first and third are mostly sequences of individual poems. Subramaniam, who lives in Mumbai, Chennai and New York, expresses her reactions to the modern world swiftly and lightly, in short lines which often convey a numb helplessness. But there is always the possibility

of escape, often expressed through references to a simpler way of life in the past. *Masks Off*, for example, is full of selfies, disguises, Russian spies, badges and billboards, except for “the /slow / caravan / route / of / the / smile”, although, in these days of trucks, caravans of pack animals are used very rarely.

This reaching into the past achieves mythic qualities at times, as in *The Tailor* where the Covid pandemic is viewed through a tailor sitting under a village peepul tree sewing masks – work his predecessors have done for thousands of years but, in his case, in a brilliant fusion of the ancient and modern, “he’d been / survivor enough / to darn his share of black holes”.

The timeless history of Indian rural life can also provide opportunities for wry humour, as in *Some Said He Looked Like James Dean* in which a self-glamourising man is finally seen by his wife as resembling “the cow / in her village in Punjab, // ready for slaughter, / ready for another day in the barn” – if the cow isn’t slaughtered, she must continue mating to produce milk. And in *Forgiving Teachers*, teachers may promote growth in their pupils like lotus blossoms, but the origins of such blooms is not forgotten: “waiting their turn / beneath the roiling sludge, / made in equal measure / of guano and sky”. It takes a good deal of aplomb to identify much of one’s education as bird shit.

This mordant sense of humour, drawing on the timeless history of rural life in a deftly sketched modern world, comes to a triumphant climax in the six poems which form the book's central section. These, with three other poems elsewhere, are written in the voices of women poets, Buddhist nuns and other female mystics who lived between 500BCE and the 18th century. At least two were initially courtesans.

In Subramaniam's rendering, their voices are clear, mocking and implacable. In *That Girl From Karaikkal*, a 6th century Tamil mystic known for her skeletal demonic form finally speaks:

'No need to flee to the forest, seeker.
Stay right here in the madcap town.
Do exactly what you've always done.
Just do it upside down.'

This provides both the sequence and the book with its title. In *Questions for Akka Mahadevi* (a 12th century mystic who walked the world naked), the poet finally advises the repressed women to go swimming – "Enter the body like a summer ocean" – and, after an ecstatic cavatina of 17 single-word lines, cries out, "That's all it takes. // Go skinny dipping in yourself."

The theme of all these poems is freeing oneself from the restraints of society and sometimes from the body itself. They build an extraordinary power, but at the same time self-mockery is never far away. In *Where the Yoginis Wear No Heads* (yoginis are female yoga adepts), the 8th-century mystic Lakshminakara finally tells us:

So I watch them grow quiet
when I tell them of a land
where a sweeper of palace toilets
(and now they wince)
might become guide and mentor
of a Lankan prince.

Looking to these women of the past, Subramaniam has found a structure for expressing her concerns more intensely and memorably.

Susie Campbell's *Wastelands* is initially puzzling. As a lengthy Afterword explains, it is centred on a stretch of the Pilgrim's Way in West Surrey with a nature reserve and a former quarry now used for landfill. Lewis Carroll walked the area when staying with his sisters at Guildford and may have composed *The Hunting of the Snark* while doing so. The book contains several sections:

- 32 pages of 128 short statements, four per page, each relating to the bearings on a navigational compass and most echoing its predecessor, e.g.

N

here is hollow as this head of rotting is no more than your face on what is lost

N

lost is fallen here into death and bewildered as the empty trunk of Knowledge is uprooted on the Path

N

a path where you fall as North is and echoes inside its hollow navigation or any

N

and any here is always hunting for a there around this compass

This section also includes 10 short quotations from *The Hunting of the Snark*, but none is witty or memorable, e.g. "just the place" and "absolute blank".

- A colour photo of two knitting needles, one marked "here" and the other "there".
- 40 pages of quotations chiefly from the notes of the leading archaeologist who investigated part of the area in the 1960s before it was used for landfill. Each is attached to a map coordinate and some are erased.
- 12 pages of quotations chiefly drawn from the Environment Agency's schedules of permitted landfill.
- 8 colour photos of a hood that Campbell created from a decomposing fragment of

carpet taken from the landfill and wore when returning there “during the darkness of a new moon, to perform a ritual meditation in situ”.

- 5 pages of quotations from Hilaire Belloc’s ***The Old Road***, his 1904 account of walking Pilgrim’s Way.

The clue to this puzzling sequence is given in its first two words. The title of the first section is “Stein’s Snark”. Stein appears nowhere else in the book and the reader has to deduce the reference to Gertrude Stein, the modernist American writer (1874-1946) whose writing was chiefly self-referential and hermetic, focussed on its own mechanics. As Stein wrote, “I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences.” Stein’s most famous sentence is about a rose. Referring to it, Susan Sontag noted: “The interesting writer is where there is an adversary, a problem. Why Stein is not, finally, a good or helpful writer. There is no problem. It’s all affirmation. A rose is a rose is a rose.”

Campbell relates Stein to Carroll’s ***The Hunting of the Snark***, a quest for meaning that inevitably fails because nonsense is non-sense – the Snark turns out to be a Boojum. (Delightfully, one of Carroll’s seekers is “a maker of Bonnets and Hoods” like Campbell herself.) We can therefore see ***Wastelands*** as nonsense of the most serious kind. Like Stein and Carroll, it doesn’t describe or comment on its subject (whatever it might be) – it presents aspects of it in six “Fits” as Carroll does in his poem. And the book is beautifully produced with a golden beaver on the front, one of the other seekers of the Snark. It feels a pity that the book isn’t titled “Stein’s Snark”; ***Wastelands*** seems rather flat and derivative by comparison.

Colin Bramwell’s ***Fower Pessoas*** is a rendering in Scots of 42 poems by the Portuguese writer, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). Pessoa is unique in writing poetry (and much else) in the names of invented writers besides himself. Among over a dozen

heteronyms, he created three other poets and wrote substantial bodies of work in their name: Alberto Caiero, a rural poet from North-East Portugal who writes in a simple traditional style; Alvaro de Campos who trains as a marine engineer and is interested in Modernism, sometimes writing under the influence of American poets like Whitman; and Ricardo Reis, a doctor and Latin teacher who writes traditional odes in the style of Roman poets like Horace. Together with his own poems in their plangent meditative style, Pessoa enacts the fragmentation of the self in the modern world.

Bramwell provides versions of poems by all four poets. As he explains in an Afterword, he was “raised by parents who didn’t speak Scots ... and so have no way to write in it with native authority”. He has taught himself to write in “a very rough west-Scotland orthography/pronunciation” derived from living in Glasgow. His versions of the poems are brisk and energetic, drawing on the blunt directness of Glaswegian Scots. However, all four poets are rendered in the same style. Here is Alberto Caiero’s *If I die young*, his gentle meditation on dying unpublished, first in Keith Bosley’s version in Carcanet’s ***A Centenary Pessoa***:

I was happy because I did not ask for anything,
Nor sought for anything,
Nor found that there was any more explanation
Than that the word explanation is meaningless.

And this is Bramwell’s version, titled *Regret*:

I didnae ask fur onyhin,
didnae seek onyhin oot –
didnae ken onyhin really
cus ken’s jist a ward,
disnae mean onyhin onyways.

Here is one of Ricardo Reis’s traditional odes (Bosley again):

Come and sit down with me, Lydia, on the bank of
the river.

Quietly let us watch it and learn
That life is passing, and we are not holding hands,
(Let us hold hands)

And here is Bramwell:

Come and sit wae me, Lydia, here bi the burn.
Caum like, watch it take its coorse. Lat's learn wir
lives'll
pass like thon, til we canna haud hands onymair.
Lat's haud thaim noo but.

In both cases Bramwell alters the meaning, which is fine as he is making versions, not translating literally; but the terse movement of the Scots is similar in both and throughout the book. As a result, the differences in tone between the four poets disappears. It might have been possible to render Alberto Caiero, for

example, in the Scots of the Western Isles and Ricardo Reis in genteel middle-class Edinburghian, but Bramwell doesn't attempt such distinctions. In consequence, Pessoa's poetic *raison d'être* – the fragmentation of modern consciousness – is lost.

A final minor grouse: Alvaro de Campos's *Opiary* consists of 43 quatrains but Bramwell provides only 7 of them, and Pessoa's *Slanting Rain* consists of 6 substantial sections and Bramwell provides only the last, titled *Sklent Rain*. The book doesn't mention these major surgeries which feels disingenuous.

Laurie Smith helped to start *Magma* and has co-edited several issues. He teaches at the City Lit, Central London, and has been a trustee of the Poetry Society.