

Zakia Carpenter-Hall reviews Fawzia Muradali Kane, Wendy Pratt and Kevin Young

Guaracara

Fawzia Muradali Kane
Carcanet, £12.99

Blackbird Singing at Dusk

Wendy Pratt
Nine Arches Press, £11.99

Night Watch

Kevin Young
Cape Poetry, £13

Fawzia Muradali Kane's second collection **Guaracara** is more mixtape than concept album. Named for the Guaracara River in south Trinidad, the collection's overarching theme could be summarised as memories of home and explorations of history and heritage. There are an assortment of shapes and forms in **Guaracara**: poems in couplets or tercets; prose, list and sequenced poems; lines indented across the page; gaps between words like fault lines. A range of English is being used here: standard UK English, Trini Creole, and combinations of the two. There's lyricism and journalistic reportage. And, as one might imagine, the collection is multi-voiced.

I go send for you is a poem of two columns that represents two different voices: 'Rasheedan', the poet's paternal great-grandmother, and 'Boodhanie', the poet's great-great grandmother. Each column

recounts the different women's experiences with their respective husbands upon migrating to Trinidad:

Rasheedan

Boodhanie

My family refused him, said his skin
was too dark. He built them a palace.

My husband once saw a mongoose battle
a snake while cane stalks were being set alight.

One night he came to my window.
I wrapped jasmine sheets with dowry gold.

Through these two perspectives, placed in parallel, are the grandmothers' similarities and the gulf between them. However, the women aren't talking to each other, which becomes a missed opportunity to articulate something more palpable in the space between.

One of my favourite poems, *Washing the body*, centres the perspectives of family members, a funeral director, and the deceased's mother through the speaker's reflection. Each voice amalgamates to enhance the narrative, to reveal what a feat it was for the speaker – and perhaps all involved – to wash the woman's body in a ritualistic cleansing after she died:

Middle sister unwrapped the bedsheet from Mammy
slow and careful and then we all didn't, couldn't

move. Then youngest sister steps and said, all you stop this stupidity ok this is not her ok this is just a shell. She snapped on the gloves and held her hands up like a surgeon and said let's get to work. Brisk brisk just like so. And then and there we saw the 15 years of her A&E nursing ... not the images of our forever youngest etched in our minds ...

The attunement in this poem comes in part from the shared activity: washing the body is something the family must do and so the sisters and cousin face the death, and the "shell", of the mother – together. They find synchronicity in that activity with the youngest as the lead.

I enjoyed Kane's use of her first language, Trini Creole, her humour, her creation of multi-voiced poems, and the wide-ranging themes and stories of childhood. Nonetheless, I think there were missed opportunities for more balanced and reciprocal exchanges within and among the poems. On the whole **Guaracara** reads to me more like a multi-authored anthology rather than a single authored collection.

Wendy Pratt's **Blackbird Singing at Dusk** lands somewhere between a mixtape and concept album, establishing its unifying conceit from the beginning. The poem, *When I bring you my body and tell you it is the landscape I grew up in*, is a place where a corporeal home and the poet's local surroundings merge:

My body in this context is not sand
but the carapaces of tiny creatures
crushed into sand, the cartilage-star
of a thornback ray, a lone albatross.

In the poem, as throughout the collection, the speaker's body is not *like* the landscape but *is* the landscape. The poet-as-speaker exists in various states of overlap or permeability with her surroundings, including so-called inanimate objects like boulders and glaciers, as well as other animal species. As Pratt's speaker asserts in *Sometimes I Pretend I am a Dog*: "I did not pretend/ to be a dog. I was a dog. I willed myself to canine".

In the second poem, *The Men Who Drive Tractors*, Pratt's speaker laments her position as mere backdrop to the men who "drive tractors/ ... as if they are riding a great red bull// into a Greek myth", ending the poem:

and this is often how the story is told:
I am so often the tree or the fence
and so rarely the bird singing at dusk,

stopping the world.

In the penultimate line, "bird singing at dusk" references the title but also speaks to a central theme: the world-stopping impact of a backgrounded voice and perspective suddenly being foregrounded. With this understanding, boulders, burial mounds and mountains are among the features that take centre stage in Pratt's poems: qualities of the landscape that express and coalesce with the speaker.

However, Pratt's title poem *Blackbird Singing at Dusk*, like Kane's *I go send for you*, misses an opportunity for greater intra-textual communication. Pratt's poem also has two columns, the left is in bold (a human speaker who is inside) and the right column is in plain text (a kind of omniscient reporting perspective). This excerpt is taken from the beginning of the poem:

The ear is the interface the pale rim of it
the place for the song of the blackbird is
curved so softly into my neck a physical place of
winding ivy dense green fern curve
a funnel for the blackbird song from a blackbird
taut with the keen stress of existence

The poem reads three ways: down the left-hand side of bolded text, down the right-hand side and across both, synthesising the columns. The strongest of these reading experiences was down the left column, missing an opportunity for all three readings to interact. Pratt's **Blackbird Singing at Dusk** has a plethora of forms and shapes of poems on display: a duplex, a golden shovel, sequences, poems with couplets and looser forms. While I preferred the first two thirds of **Blackbird Singing at Dusk**, the collection as a whole

offers an extended conversation. The images and concepts build upon each other throughout and the poetry is emotionally resonant.

Kevin Young's **Night Watch** is fascinating for the latticework of links within and between poems and sections, in the way its imagery emerges and later reappears in some other context or redefined form. More concept album than mixtape, **Night Watch** explores an overarching theme of the 'in-between' as mentioned in *The Two-Headed Nightingale*:

Is there a moment
between death

of the body
& the beyond?

It is this gap
we live in

(*Whiteville*)

Significantly, this gap between body and the beyond is where the entire collection lives.

This 147-page book is made up of a single page poem, *Cormorant*, and three long sequence poems, *All Souls*, *The Two-Headed Nightingale* and *Darkling*. *Cormorant* establishes the title bird as a "Besmirched/crow-cousin", a relative to the speaker and occupying a similar position in the hierarchy of birds as American 'Negroes' in the hierarchy of race and class. *All Souls* appears to take its name from the 'All Souls Day' of Roman Catholicism, when the living pray for, and intercede on behalf of, those who are believed to be stuck in Purgatory, a liminal space of suffering between leaving Earth and reaching Heaven. *The Two-Headed Nightingale* explores the experiences of conjoined twins Millie-Christine McCoy, who were born enslaved and then kidnapped as toddlers. They became known for their vocal prowess, and often referred to themselves using the singular 'I'. You may recognise their names if you've read Tyehimba Jess' **Olio**. The final long poem, *Darkling*, especially its first section *Dark Wood* is inspired by Dante's **Divine Comedy**.

The first connective link in **Night Watch** is Young's inclusion of African American history and experience and his use of repetition, both of which are featured in *All Souls*:

For the journey,
jettison nothing

Let autumn do that –

how it sheds
clothes like a runaway

heading steady north.

*

So cold, you cry
when the wind

meets your eyes

Here autumn's only
winter in disguise

Here, Young likens Purgatory to a kind of autumn and the plight of a runaway seeking freedom in the North. And it's not just the sense of liminality expressed in several different ways that holds this section together: it's also the alliteration of "journey" and "jettison", the repetition of "autumn", and the assonant 'l' in "cry", "eyes", and "disguise".

It is in the middle poem, *The Two-Headed Nightingale*, where Young's use of slant rhyme and assonance, often repeating vowel sounds only, becomes more apparent, forming a circuit of connectivity between two or more words: conjoining sounds, harmonising. In this persona poem where Millie-Christine McCoy speak, Young makes use of the contradiction and paradox of 'cleave' meaning to 'split' and 'cleave' meaning to 'stick to strongly'. The poem repeatedly asks in different ways:

If ever
 one day she died
before I
 would I perish too?
 (*Whiteville*)

which asks a broader question about which kinds of separations and losses we can survive:

She was the body
 I the soul
Without one
 Perishes the whole.
 (*African United Twins*)

Darkling, the final poem, asks its speaker, and therefore its reader, to survive the deaths that untether us. Here, we come to understand that the intercommunication in **Night Watch** is between, and among, the varied aspects of self; what we cleave to, and from:

 After,
let what I've torn -
the myself I mourn -

be mended & start
over, like a scar,
or star.
 (*XVIII. Rapture*)

In **Night Watch**, repeating images and rhymes gain significance and momentum as they are defined and redefined: the visual and sonic refrains expand into a mood, become melody, and weave their way through the reading experience. It is in the speaking, in the harmonising of visual, linguistic and conceptual 'chords' that Young transforms words on a page and brings them to life.

While the collection has some minor weaknesses - section endings, at times, some slightly awkward syntactical phrasings - the work overall is highly successful. Ultimately, Kevin Young's **Night Watch** is a masterclass in succinct expressive intercommunication.

Zakia Carpenter-Hall is an American writer, tutor, editor and critic. She has had reviews in *Jhalak Review*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Wales* and elsewhere. Her pamphlet is **Into the Same Sound Twice** (Seren, 2023).