

Freya Jackson reviews Billy-Ray Belcourt, Annemarie Ní Churraéin and Sunni Brown Wilkinson

The Idea of an Entire Life

Billy-Ray Belcourt
Carcenet, £12.99

Hymn to All the Restless Girls

Annemarie Ní Churraéin
Gallery Books, €12.95 / €19.50

Rodeo

Sunni Brown Wilkinson
Autumn House Press, \$17.95

“How we exist in the world/ depends on how we describe it” (*Autofiction*), is the first line of poetry in ***The Idea of an Entire Life*** by Billy-Ray Belcourt. This is the concept the entire philosophically focused collection is built around. Instead of feeling overly theoretical, this collection feels vibrant and welcoming to the reader.

Opening the contents page, I was struck by the simplicity of the titles, as well as the fact that quite a few of the poems have the same title. There is something very conversational in the language of this collection: in places it almost feels like a one-sided conversation between friends rather than a poetry collection. At the conclusion of *An Entire Life*, the speaker turns to the reader and asks:

What do you make of the aspen trees,

by the way? Oh, how their leaves tremble
even when the world is completely still –

I, for one, am really no different.

The historical context is a central aspect of this collection, but the poems are as much about the present looking at the past as they are poems about the past itself. ‘The Cruising Utopia Sonnets’, the brilliant sonnet sequence at the centre of this collection, looks towards the future and thinks about the present by understanding a specifically native (and queer) history. This history is both expansive and incredibly personal. In the first sonnet of the sequence, the speaker writes “Our historical consciousness is a difficult dream;/ the same way memory is an enduring indeterminacy.”

Some of the poems explore historical sources. The incomplete nature of many of these sources is key. The past is present within this text and at the same time it is erased, scrubbed from the historical archive. In the third ‘Fieldnotes’ poem, the speaker writes in response to this erasure “On both sides of the river I wept.”

There is something earnest about this collection. Belcourt writes in his poem *Sincerity*:

I treat the world
with a kind of critical
sincerity because
I know it can't possibly
last forever.

Belcourt's speaker seems incredibly honest; his grief, loneliness and pain are part of him, and these emotions are neither central nor sidelined. In *The Problem with Pleasure*, the speaker reveals the extent of his emotional openness, in both the historical context and within the level of future foresight that is a key feature of this collection. In this poem, he writes that:

I felt everything, I was constantly coming apart, like an orange, half-peeled on the table, ...
towards the past, which I couldn't free myself from, and toward the future, which is to say, toward both ecstasy and pain.

It has been a long time since I have read a collection that is simultaneously emotionally unbarred and controlled. Belcourt doesn't have to sacrifice his cleverness to make way for emotional sincerity. These are poems of the heart and of the mind, which amazingly seem to fulfil the ambitious title of the collection. I have gone away from this collection with the strange feeling that I understand ***The Idea of an Entire Life.***

There are some collections you read and come away from feeling like a powerful woman. ***Hymn to All the Restless Girls*** is one of those collections. To match the energy Annemarie Ní Churraéin is putting down I will commence my review with a series of statements about the work:

This collection is expansive and wild. This collection is throbbing with magical energy. This collection is both individual and universal.

In this collection, history is not just something that has happened, but something that is happening. The specific archival facts seem less important than the

emotional reality. In *Self-portrait as a Fallen Girl*, the opening poem of 'PART ONE (*from the Donegal County Archives*)' the past becomes the present and the future. Ní Churraín writes:

I come for the women who did or did not come
before me.
I come for their uncome ghosts.
I come for their bodies, hungry as grass.
I come out of the archives of hunger
and I ask that, by this river,
you kneel for me.

Some of the poems in this collection reminded me of my great aunt who left Ireland to escape a Mother and Baby home after she had a child out of wedlock. The Mother and Baby homes are mentioned in many poems in this collection. In her poem *The Home for Unmarried Fathers*, Ní Churreáin movingly imagines a world where it was the men who were forced into a home, before concluding:

The Home, sketched up,
was never built, and the bunks where men
might lie awake at night, silent as candles,
never installed. Because who would wish
that penance on anyone?

Although the speakers in this collection face up to the figures that oppress them, they are not asking these figures of the patriarchy to suffer the same kind of oppression. These are poems of justice, not revenge.

The sequence of *Raven Chorus* poems in ‘Part Three’ are a particular delight. These poems are interlaced with other poems. Each *Raven Chorus* is white ink on black paper: this stylistic choice could have seemed gimmicky but instead felt very much in keeping with the rebellious spirit of the collection. The poems are written in the collective tense and are full of visceral language. The ravens are “hurling our hungry bodies along your path/ our sun-black shimmering bodies/ our vice-like beaks/ grobbing and cawing/ an unkindness/ a conspiracy/ a rave.” (*Raven Chorus* #2).