

Greg Thomas reviews Jessica Traynor, Sean O'Brien and Miranda Cowley Heller

New Arcana

Jessica Traynor
Bloodaxe, £12.00

The Bonfire Party

Sean O'Brien
Picador, £12.99

What the Deep Water Knows

Miranda Cowley Heller
Penguin, £12.99

Jessica Traynor's **New Arcana** is a bit of a nostalgia fest. There are a slew of references to cult 1980s-90s movies, in particular the early Tim Burton canon (as in *Movie Night with Lydia* and more); memories of hanging around Irish suburban "laneways" with a "naggin of vodka" (*I've Been Meaning to Say, Lydia*); and poems about practicing teenage witchcraft, like *Satanic Panic*:

Then we're off into the laneways
to hex all our enemies
with matches, tea lights, bottle-tops,
to be so present-tense

...

I need you,
because every girl needs a friend who goes too far

The addressee of all these poems – in fact, of a huge swath of the collection – is Lydia, aka Lydia Deetz, the goth teenager in Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988), who can commune with the dead. In one poem, *i'm lydia deetz and all my friends are dead*, the character even seizes the reins of narration, announcing "thanks for welcoming me to the circle/ i didn't think it would end like this. even though/ i asked for it by wearing black."

Here's the wrinkle though: this Lydia is a stand-in for another, an adolescent friend of the narrator's recently lost to suicide; and it's the circle of the dead, we suspect, that this Lydia is being welcomed into here. Overlaying Winona Ryder's cult film character onto that real-life subject is perhaps a way of imaginatively inhabiting a dear departed friend's mental landscape without the pain of direct exposure.

The dual-Lydia motif is one of a couple to get your head around to appreciate the emotionally freighted intensity of Traynor's new collection. The other has to do with tarot cards – truly, it's a 90s-alt-girl-bedroom of a book – with a whole slew of poems conjuring up new archetypes within the tarot deck (hence **New Arcana**), like *The Hive*, XXIII, *The Glacier*, XXVIII, and *The Conductor*, XXV.

The latter is one of several poems in which narcissistic male partners loom large:

one flick of the wrist and he conjures
a solipsism so orchestral
it sounds like empathy.

That's one of a few white-hot put-downs of dark-empath toxicity. Seemingly, both the narrator and Lydia have had "bad boyfriends", to quote the back-cover blurb, but Lydia didn't make it out of their snares: "i swear he had charisma./ ok. he saw me like no one else ever/ saw me", she exhorts in *i'm lydia deetz and all my friends are dead*, with the qualifier: "even if that means that he saw himself/ in every mirror i looked into".

The whole sequence builds to a heart-rending series of missives to the dead friend, in which plaintive second-person address melds with surreal, fever-dream metaphor:

Lydia, i went back to our school.
everything had shifted 90 degrees
so all the nuns' hidden corridors
were jutting up out of the ground
and into the sky
...
i could hear the teeth rattle in their heads

(I've Been Meaning to Say, Lydia)

Beyond this point of direct address and partial emotional closure, there are stories of children, and new family. We surface for air, find “points of light” and “laughter” (as in final poem *On Halloween*) at the conclusion of a powerfully subversive text.

The poem *After Hölderlin* opens Sean O'Brien's ***The Bonfire Party***. The verse speaks to a quality of encroaching anxiety – like being torn from a deep sleep – that pervades the text, with resonances both socio-political and biographical:

Above all you must have by heart
the gaze of the roses, the heat of the sun,
The pool's green shade,
 because blind and speechless
winter is coming

"You have lived without history," the poem concludes, ominously, "No longer."

At various points, this sense of the weight of history seems to be coded in terms of a fear of political cataclysm; of history repeating itself in a new age of extremism. Orwell's famous quote on the "deep, deep sleep of England", written on returning home from fighting Franco in Spain shortly before the second global conflagration of the last century, heads up another early piece, *Sleepers*:

Our age of afternoons was ending
all that summer while we slept
the little sleep the English call their own.

Soon “the weather changed and there we were// again, dry-mouthed on burning beds, ... with summer never yet begun”. Or take *Survivor*, in which a soldier and musician who helped liberate a Nazi camp returns home only to be ‘survived’ by his piano. Soon it too is abandoned to the “rag-and-bone man’s axe”. The poem ends on an address to this “Uncle Jack”, who played the piano “on the back of a lorry, the very same/ Bedford three-tonner he rode into Belsen”:

... Let's have a tune.
Let's roll out the barrel and hang out
the washing from the Siegfried Line
to the oven's mouth, where there is no one
left to care if smoke gets in your eyes.

What smoke, and whose eyes? Are we being blinded to the lessons of Western culture's recent past? Jack is one of several characters carrying his insights to the grave.

All that said, O'Brien is more comfortable looking backwards than engaging frontally with the present, let alone the future. In this sense he is more Larkin or Hardy than Auden. "Embrace futurity", exhorts the unnamed interlocutor and past almost-lover in *À la Carte*. But we sense this narrator prefers the company of half-remembered local characters (as in *The Butcher* and *The Old Crowd*) and of authors in whose work he has immersed himself, to the point where

memory and readerly imagination infuse.

By the end, that feeling of history pressing down on the mind and spirit seems more a reminder of individual mortality than anything else. Lost friends are recalled (“Sex and drugs and education/ did for some, and cancer claimed the rest”, as *À la Carte* has it), while the two closing poems are moving elegies to a dead friend, to whom “I look back from the water’s edge ... and find you gone” (*The Point*). Is the voice of these poems one that fears it, too, will be drowned without “ever learn[ing] who passed the test,/ or whether it was even worth applying”? (*À la Carte*).

Miranda Cowley Heller’s ***what the deep water knows*** is a decades-spanning sextet of poetic sequences, covering love and grief at different stages of family life. In a broadly confessional lyric style, it shuttles from childhood in the eastern United States to parenthood, marriage and divorce, therapy, pets, and secular spirituality. Ostentatious formal device is elided, and there seems no need to distinguish between narrator and author. What we have here is a skilfully plotted and paced poetic memoir, with all the allure and precisely delimited scope of that format.

Across the first two numbered sets of poems, we meet a subtly neglectful mother and the sleazy new man in her life. A cohort of rakish bohemian accomplices turn up in *L’Origine du Monde* (named after Courbet’s infamous canvas showing a prostrated female torso and vulva):

How I loathe these drunken artists my stepfather
brings home with him every Friday night,
shouting like bulls about Courbet and De Kooning,

The mother dances to “scratchy bossa nova” while the artists “sit and watch her, ... hoping,/ as her dress twirls upwards, for a glimpse of quim.” Two sisters vie for maternal affection in *The Difference Between Them* and elsewhere, while the mother is merely jealous of their youth. There are poems of virginity discarded in awkwardness (“I stared at the floor while he took off his shirt” (*Sixteen*), and about battling adolescent ennui: “I need to know what gravity/ pulls and tugs at my soul”, as the narrator puts it in *The Yew Tree*.

A husband and children arrive. The poem *Milk & Salt* is the last we hear of the mother, now a grandmother, who airily announces “He cried himself to sleep” when the new parent returns from a night out; “If you ignore them long enough, eventually they’ll stop.” The sleeping infant is promised “a better life”, but over the coming years succumbs to depression and drug abuse. Indeed, some of the rawest poems in the collection are about this mother-son bond, weighed down with a too-heavy love:

Oh, how I love that child. And how I hate him for it –
for a heartbreaking love that’s more than my body
can hold.

(*Red Moonlight*)

Ultimately, however the largest stretch of the book is given to another strained bond, with the boy’s father, as a relationship forged in love and lust unravels over decades.

There are frank and direct confessions of despair and heartbreak on that topic, like in *Fingerprints*: “I cannot say why I still long for you./ Forever, for forever”. Finally, there are poems of encroaching old age, torn between a bitter resignation to mortality (*The Days Ahead* talks of “the wild hair of gloom”) and a sense of calm, of enclosure in nature and, especially, water, as in the wonderful title-poem, *What the Deep Water Knows*, which closes this domestic epic:

Where every swim loosens and smooths the
ancient wounds,
the heaviness of millstones.
Water that when, one day, it changes shape again,
will carry my stories with it.

Greg Thomas is a writer, critic, poet and artist based in Glasgow. He is the author of ***Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland*** (2019) and the co-editor of ***A Home in Space***, a selection of Edwin Morgan’s concrete and sound poetry (Reaktion, forthcoming)