

Jessica Traynor reviews Hollie McNish, Pascale Petit and Keith Jarrett

Virgin

Hollie McNish
Fleet, £14.99

Beast

Pascale Petit
Bloodaxe, £12.99

Hide Me Under the Blood and I Shall Be Satisfied

Keith Jarrett
Bad Betty Press, £12.99

Virgin attacks the eponymous word and all its baggage with Hollie McNish's trademark directness. Over five sections (or 'chapters') the poet explores the word through the lenses of myth, shame, law, memory, and finally, love. It's a creative way to explore the topic, and McNish enjoys skewering some of the more ridiculous hang-ups we have about pleasure, the body, and ideas of purity. Early standouts include *your dead grandparents are not watching you wank*, which unfurls into unexpectedly beautiful vistas in its middle lines:

they are swallowing stars at the edge of the cosmos
drunk in the roots of the moons, the universe laid

like forest like meadow like sea out

Before we get too high in the ether, the poet brings us back to earth with her inducement for us just to get on with it: "so wank away, my friend, wank away".

Alongside the humour in these poems, there lives a serious exploration of how femininity – in particular the nebulous and fiercely contested state of 'virginity' – is commodified, bartered, and ultimately used as a tool against women, making pleasure a currency controlled by patriarchy. There's justified anger in poems such as *questions we asked when we were 'virgins' / answers we were never given*, a performance-orientated poem structured around a series of desperate questions of the kind asked by young women who have been shielded from, or denied access to, proper education about their bodies. Its litany of definitions:

virginity is a porno
virginity is a dowry
virginity is a hoax
virginity is an honour kill

helps to crystalise a subject that feels too big for one poem, but the kinetic energy in the writing keeps us confident in the poet's ability to pull off the devastating conclusion:

a twelve-year-old girl was tortured and murdered
by her older brother when he saw her
menstruation blood and assumed, because he
knew nothing about menstruation, that she'd 'lost
her virginity'...

Alongside this anger, a series of poems in the final chapter, all titled *making love*, luxuriate in the utter gorgeousness of physical consummation, containing some of McNish's most vivid and visionary work to date:

i want to fuck like i'm falling, like everyone's
falling, like nobody knows how to land, like licking
the edge of a rainbow and tasting the colours of
hot splintered rain, like a raindrop burst open on
parched earth below soon to be gratefully sucked
up the stem of a wild garlic's green, greedy throat.

One of McNish's strengths is the sense of shared experience invoked by these poems – especially in her family or relationship poems – and isn't that what we need in today's divided world? However, one risk of aiming for a sense of universality is that you can forego a sense of the limitless strangeness of human experience. Some of these poems, such as the ones quoted above, access this sense of strangeness with real aplomb. While *Virgin* highlights what women may sometimes be precluded from saying by patriarchal mores, it still at times suggests shared attitudes (the attitude to anal sex, for example) that some may not share. But overall, this is wide-ranging, ambitious and intelligent collection.

Beast by Pascale Petit continues the poet's interrogation of family roots, unpacking layers of heritage and identity in a wide-ranging collection that takes us from Cornwall to the Camargue, with frequent visits to the Petit's lush and strange rainforest landscapes. These are poems that journey inwards, even as they engage with the natural world and ecological crises, opening many dimensions of interiority and unpicking the stitches of history so what flows together is surreal, but true. The question of birth, agency and inheritance is explored in the poem *House of Puberty*, which examines the choices that can be made freely or forced by society: that transitional moment from girlhood to womanhood; the choice to procreate. These crucibles of becoming come into sharp focus when the mother figure projects their resentment onto the next generation:

She sat in her chair, rocking back and forth,
repeating, *I shouldn't have had children, shouldn't
have this trans-American highway carved up my
belly,*
all these tracks bearing off with my virgin trees.

It's a measure of the clarity of these poems that we can empathise with both figures here – even if it's clear the child is the victim: one woman stymied by generational pressures handing her damage to another. As the collection progresses, we visit the wild and mythic landscape of the Camargue where the poet weaves mythologies around the elusive father figure. Standouts here include *The Tarasque Tattoo*, where the beast is tattooed on the father's back. Seen (or imagined) after death, it reframes the dead man's history, leading the poet into a contemplation of cruelty and where it resides in us, the eerie refrain of the tattoo's motto echoing throughout:

Could I have tamed my Papa? Led on the leash

of an oxygen tube, following me down
the paths of his room where he would die –
Lagadigadèu, let me out, he says, *I'm going to
dance!*

Petit's language is both taut and lush, balancing intrusions of the surreal with a tight control of the poems' parameters. Even as reality collapses into a profusion of animal imagery, we feel we are in the hands of a confident guide. In the collection's final section, 'Beast of Bodmin', the poet brings us to a Cornish landscape where human life recedes in the face of the mastery of beasts – a Galloway bull, a roebuck – and, of course, the Beast of Bodmin Moor itself, imagined here as the animating force of the landscape, taking the form of everything from an escaped panther, to a pool, to the sharp-thorned gorse. After the close exploration of family dynamics in the preceding poems, these landscape poems allow the poet to shift into another gear. This ecological animism grants these poems a sense of urgency, provoking us to experience a visceral empathy:

I am written in rare fonts of ambrosial inks,
in bog asphodels and heath orchids, marsh violets
and sundew.

My belly is plush as sphagnum.
My ears are cists and cairns.

(*Beast of Bodmin*)

Hide Me Under the Blood and I Shall Be Satisfied,
Keith Jarrett's third collection, takes its lead from the
Apostolic hymn of the same name and extends that
sense of ardour and lyricism to the collection as a
whole. These are polyvocal poems, and while the
poet approaches themes of colonial history and
contemporary politics through a personal lens, the
reader is warned in two epigraph-like poems placed
before the Contents Page to beware too literal an
interpretation of what's to come:

my mother is not my mother / my father is no
longer my father / god is
usually a metaphor / for folds in the map /
placeholder for anger issues:

*the poet grunts and grins twisting the neck
of words blown
into a helium-filled bouquet of convenience.*

Language is not a currency that can be taken for
granted in these poems, and the poet unpicks its
evolution as it travels from mouth to mouth and
country to country, in poems that are always keenly
attuned to the variousness of being, and our attempts
to decode one another. There's a biting wit to these
poems, alongside their erudition, exemplified in
poems such as *The Sugar Next Time* which opens with
the line "I have acquired a queer taste for substituting
words". It continues with an interrogation of sugar-as-
symbol from the days of slavery and sugar cane
plantations to the contemporary sufferings of those
with Type 2 diabetes, drawing lines back and forth
across time in a manner that makes history's disparate
layers feel present and connected:

Don't shush me. I am a palimpsest of the sweetest
violence,

unrefined grains decaying in the mouth. Nought as
corrosive
as absence, the untoothed of hard edges. If
history suggests
fading to somewhere beyond present relevance
then I reject
history.

Jarrett also pokes fun at disingenuous attempts to
centre diaspora narratives in the era of the Windrush
Scandal's continuing fallout, and the British
Government's pursuit of policies such as Home
Secretary Shabana Mahmood's recent plans to end
permanent refugee status, in poems such as *Re: The
Caribbean 'Experience'*, addressed to
'revisionism@uk.gov'. Here, the very real threats faced
by immigrant and diasporic groups in the UK are
rendered as symbol by the poet (with tongue firmly
in cheek) so that they might be palatable for those
unwilling to confront their own complicity. In order to
gain our sympathy, the Caribbean diaspora member
must be the author of their own tragedy:

...While humorous, it is ultimately a
tragedy: unaware of their endeavours, they are
doomed
to stumble over what they've conjured/resurrected,
leaping at shadows, misinterpreting the past in
front of
their eyes.

This is an expansive collection which, alongside the
themes above, explores issues of spirituality, in the
form of repeated callings back to the hymns and
biblical quotes of the poet's upbringing, and to art, in
the form of a series of poems written around Camille
Claudel. Benjamin Zephaniah is another guiding spirit
here, alongside a host of Black writers who provide
the allusive warp and weft to these rich, rewarding
and multi-layered poems.

Jessica Traynor is a poet, and poetry editor of
Banshee. Her collection ***Pit Lullabies*** (Bloodaxe 2022
was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and her
next collection, ***New Arcana***, was published by
Bloodaxe in 2025.