

A Sense of Largeness

Lance Lee

Shanta Acharya, *Imagine: New and Selected Poems*, Harper Collins 2017

The publication of *Imagine: New and Selected Poetry* by Shanta Acharya provides readers with a much needed selection of her five previous books, the first four out of print, together with a set of new poems. Those new to her work can discover why she has become a leading poetic voice in England and India. She moves beyond the exhausted canons of modernism and its various post-modern reactions; hers is the example of the poetic project now, the attempt to forge an integral self within a redefined, shared lyric 'I', an act of rebellion against the ever swifter technological revolution of our times that destroys our sense of historical or personal coherence, of what it means to be human.

Acharya is uniquely situated to do this, a woman and poet who has worked as an investment banker, a feminist butting her head against corporate and academic glass ceilings, her family largely on another continent, her sense of 'being at home' torn between two homes, two languages, and two life-visions. Nonetheless humor threads through her work, sometimes overt as in poems like 'Dear Tech Support' and its companion, 'Dear Customer', which re-imagine the difficulty of relationships in terms of computer programs with 'Husband 1.0' acquiring a mind of its own, driving the poet to ask how to restore it to 'Boyfriend 5.0'.

Hers was a double debut in *Not This, Not That* (1994) and *Numbering Our Day's Illusions* (1995); in 'Creation' in the former she realizes after she 'bled' that she must be involved in creation, that, in fact 'God does it everyday!' and so 'I make my life too/in my own way.' 'The Night of Shiva', her first great poem, sounds many of her later themes: memories of India, her struggle for meaning, solitary life in London, the source of life, and the eerie visitation from a god. On 'Shiva's commemoration night' in her Highgate flat she realizes she is willing to meet Shiva under any guise, and how unlikely that is in London, or of '... Parvati break-dancing down Trafalgar Square.' The phone rings: Shiva is calling...

The poems in *Numbering Our Day's Illusions* vividly add the experience of enthralled but baffled passion. Before love's fruition or even friendship we must be 'turned inside out.' Then passion, then rapture, and then the bitterness of loss. At once evocative and personal and general they show her use of the lyric 'I' that connects to us all as opposed to confessionalism with its dreary narcissism.

'Loose Talk' gives insight into the development of Acharya's unique voice. Her grandmother counseled holding her tongue to hold her peace, but 'With tongues of fire I must speak/for grandmothers and mothers in silent revolt.' She fuses her strands of meditation and passionate knowledge at times into irony, giving a lover's disappointed turn to 'Know thyself.' 'Knowing it not, whatever one desires/one is; knowing is all.' What we ultimately know is the shape our desire warps us into: knowing brings us up against our own blindness, 'Knowing it not'.

Ten years passed before *Looking In, Looking Out* appeared, followed a year later by the masterful *Shringara* (2006), and then by a fluke of publishing *Dreams That Spell The Light* (2010), made up of earlier poems. In these she *sees* tellingly, as in 'At The Edge Of The World' in *Looking In, Looking Out*, or in 'Broken Glass', where 'You wanted no other man to see the face of my satisfaction.../With each passing breath, I died a little with you./With each death, I learnt to live a lifetime without you.'

This shaping of our passing, amorphous experience into a coherence is a 'stone' in the flow of worldly experience. This passing in a poem like 'Of Magic And Men' collides with the scientifically 'hard-headed' and confronts us with a sense of mystery: here, the 'faithful' are those not caught up in traditional religious observance, but those keeping faith with the underlying mystery of our experience ('of the universe') for whom miracles are possible. Those too are passing; Acharya is a poet able to speak of no longer being able to remember being desired...

Her prosody is a lively journey, too. Acharya resorts to line enjambments, to 'plainspeak', and casual expressions simultaneously metaphysical in implication. Here she rhymes, then moves to free verse; meter gives way to cadence; freedom is constrained in each individual piece, uniquely, replacing the traditional grab-bag of meter and rhyme.

Like Rumi, who uses the language of love as a metaphor for the varieties of divine love, Acharya uses poems as metaphors for greater concerns, as in the initial poems in the 'Imagine' section. She speaks as directly as her great forebear, Tagore, and like Whitman at the end of *Song of Myself*: 'Missing me in one place search another./I stop somewhere waiting for you,' her mission is to bare *and* to share the true self in the midst of its mundane entanglements.

All this places her in a larger poetic house and family of poetic traditions than we are used to encountering.

Two masterful poems bracket *Shringara*. In 'Highgate Cemetery' she hears the voices of school children as she arrives at Marx's tomb and reads its inscription:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world
in various ways. The point however is to change it.

She imagines Krishna and Marx in a debate, bringing her Western and Indian strands into direct collision, and coming down not on some grand reconciliation, but on herself: 'It is easier I confess to alter myself than the world.'

This reality is given a positive spin: in the title poem she 'prepares for illusion' while dressing, using 'Elizabeth Arden' foundation, 'Shahnaz Hussein's sandalwood face cream' etc., preparatory to going out into life's stream of experience, where 'all the things that happen to me and those that do not/keep defining me in some inexplicable way.'

If I am the result of unrepeatable circumstances,
what use is there in seeking escape from self-enunciation?
In the end we are all dead. The days become my *shringara*.

We can live so that who we are shines forth in our actions. Will that change anyone? The world, as she doubts in 'Highgate Cemetery'? Yes, as in *Middlemarch* with its splendid concluding evocation of how minute acts of goodness flow into the broad stream of experience and alter it—imperceptibly.

This process is inevitably a 'bearing witness', an idea steeped in Emerson who emphasized how the deepest, most private introspection

brings us in touch with our common humanity, not an atomistic isolation. Acharya wrote a book on the connection between Emerson and Indian thought. Given her heritage, she is open to the way our self, however self-made, relates to the greater Self that is the being of the world and universe.

'The Sundarbans' in *Dreams That Spell The Light* imagine a contrasting utopia. There we encounter an actual and imagined land of dream and sandbar, tiger, and dispossessed men settling in, one where the sea and land meet each other—the edge of mystery. Men are caught in the natural rhythm of the year, along with the surrounding waters and wildlife, even a sated tiger who watches children play in the mangroves, '...swinging like strange fruit'. Even drought has its time and place, together with renewal. But should the natural cycle of balance, courage, life, death, fail 'no man will be fit to take the measure of another.'

How many of us live so linked to natural rhythm and need? In which case, why be surprised we cannot take each other's measure? Our place in nature is erased, our lives are imbued with false values, and so we suffer the consequences daily, repetitively.

The first group of new poems in the 'Imagine' section are metaphors of creation. 'What would it be like if we could live each moment/as a masterpiece in the throes of creation?' she asks in 'Painter Of Gods',— or, live like God. 'Among the Immortals' shows how van Gogh's self-portraits simultaneously 'touch the heart of humanity, open a door to eternity' that lets us 'walk among the immortals...' A flamenco dancer like Shiva dances worlds in and out of existence— like a poet...

But—and it is a very large 'but', as Acharya contemplates Shiva and Parvati in the British Museum in 'Meeting Shiva And Parvati' she wonders '...how long must I suffer/alone buffeted by life's crosswinds before I find shelter?' The attempt to fashion an integral self does not end. It is a never finished. It is a tremendous burden. How easy it is to try to avoid this freedom.

Ashoka, in her final poem shows the perils of self-making as he turns towards enlightenment after outward triumph by asking himself: 'What have I done? If this is victory, what's defeat?' In turn he extols the 'dignity

of man' and 'the sacredness/of life', his amoral worldly power chastened by his attempt to do good. But ironically as violence is no longer associated with him, his empire crumbles: he ends 'disappointed, disillusioned, divested of his mighty power'. In fact, his grandfather, who renounced power and became an ascetic, was the more fortunate man.

We will not become ascetics. Her challenge is to change our actual, evanescent, unsupportive world and endangered self, however imperceptibly. She returns a sense of largeness to the poetic enterprise, and should be read, laughed with, thought with, moved by, and enjoyed.

Passing on the Baton

John Killick

Elizabeth Burns, *Lightkeepers*, Wayleave 2016; Ruth Sharman, *Scarlet Tiger*, Templar Poetry 2016

Elizabeth Burns as a person is no longer with us; her poems, however, are very much alive, and will continue to enthral discerning readers for many years to come. This collection, her fifth, is a posthumous one (there are also seven pamphlets); it has been edited by her friends Gerrie Fellows and Jane Routh. The publisher, Wayleave, is already closely associated with her work, having brought out her three last pamphlets. It is their first full-length collection and is an extremely handsome volume, as might have been expected from Gerry Cambridge, currently the best book designer and typesetter in the UK.

There is a painting on the cover by Jane Rushton, the title of which 'Distance and Proximity' gives us a clue of what to expect of these poems. The poet is a master of closely observed detail: time and again one marvels at the exactitude of the recreation of objects and places, and yet one never senses that she has become lost in these particulars; there is always the perception that, whether stated or implied, she is aware of the wider picture, the value and significance of meaning at a profounder level.

Elizabeth was a 'lightkeeper', cherishing her gift for illuminating much that she saw with her penetrating but empathetic gaze. The title of the book, then, is appropriate. She celebrates those who share her preoccupation. One of these is R.L. Stevenson, the ostensible subject of the title poem. It ranges more widely over childhood memories of seaside trips, supplemented by recent visits with her own family to the East Lothian coast. Her description of one of these occupies the centre of the poem. She stresses its impermanence:

I walk until the Fidra lighthouse starts flickering across the sea.
Wet sand holds the sunset, makes it liquid, and I want to store all this
—landscape, happiness—inside me, preserve it. But it's fragile as glass,
a lantern-slide lit for a moment, then laid over others and blurred.

The words here are carefully chosen: 'flickering' stresses the temporary, the glass belongs to the lighthouse as well as standing for fragility, the lantern-slide is a lighthouse image as well as a recollection of a past way of seeing. The long lines (very typical) have a prose precision whilst encompassing poetic perceptions.

In the tenth verse we find the lines 'We're lightkeepers, making ready/ for sundown, revealing that tiny glimmer and refracting it.'—again the actual paired with the symbolical. The final line:

We take what light we can to keep us through the night.

is a philosophical statement which moves us far beyond the confines of this subject and poem.

Many of the poems take their inspiration from women; Elizabeth is revealed as a quiet feminist. One of the most striking of these is 'Wildflower hunt'. The subject is an anonymous collector and follows a season in her eightieth year of finding and naming and describing and photographing (never picking) the beauties in all kinds of locations. The reader is almost overwhelmed by the passion and industry involved. Then it is all over: 'Yet there's nothing to hold in your hands'. The poem is clinched by a seemingly obvious yet powerfully profound image:

here's the treasure trove: your knowledge
flying out like windblown seeds, and taking root in all of us

who've watched you exploring and observing and recording
bearing witness to what's growing all around us.

The book is really in two halves: the first of poems like the two I have chosen, and the second where Elizabeth was experimenting with shorter forms: haikus especially; some of these are very fine, such as

sun lays silver
on the backs of sheep
creatures from another world

But one keeps returning to the longer pieces, more complex but never obscure, and ending often with metaphors both confirmatory and expansive:

we are all/drops of water in the enormous breaking wave.

We are woven vessels/as airy as those made out of ash or hazel,
willow, ling.

Our lives are.../opening up like the petals of the lilies overnight.

Ruth Sharman's *Scarlet Tiger* is her second book of poems, ten years after her first, 'Birth of the Owl Butterflies', which came from Picador. It has been well worth the wait. The work is undemonstrative, consistent, and quite outstanding. It is also all-of-a piece with the first. You can approach with confidence a poet of such modesty and determination; also technical skill.

The best way to approach Ruth's work for the first time is through her website and the film 'Borderlands' which is embedded in it. Here we see her in her landscape, talking on and off camera and speaking the occasional poem. It is absorbing and slow-paced, allowing for the viewer's reflections as well as the poet's.

Ruth describes herself as 'a nature poet', and yet somehow 'standing outside time, cheating time' and exploring 'the tension between celebration and loss'. In the former pair of observations we can see an indirect connection with Elizabeth Burns: the immediate sensual experience and yet the cultivation of an objectivity, the ability to

analyse and comment on what has occurred. In the second remark on reflecting the dichotomy between happiness and distress she joins hands with all the poets of the ages.

In fact the nature poetry contained here, especially in the first section, is inextricably linked to feelings about the death of Ruth's father. This must have been an extremely close relationship, and the imagery of butterflies which pervades her work (themselves a potent symbol of evanescence) derives from the parent's passion for lepidoptery, which he passed on to his daughter. She is painfully conscious that her knowledge of these creatures does not match his own, and there are poignant references to her lost intimacy in which she could have her questions answered.

The very first poem here 'By Heart' is full of it:

to know which brood of holly blue
feeds on ivy, spring or summer,
and what distinguishes the gatekeeper

from the meadow brown, at twenty feet.
To hear you talk of flight patterns
and favourite plants, how wood whites drift

like snowflakes in the sun,
and even where the devil's bit persists,
the marsh fritillary's now rare.

Some of the poems, particularly those such as 'The enemy' and 'Morphine', descriptive of her father's reactions to being hospitalised, pack a punch; others, even where they engage in life and death speculation, such as 'At the LHC lecture' and 'Silver washed fritillaries' maintain an extraordinary poise in the face of grief.

The second section begins with a poem which ends with the surprising (in its context) words 'shifting/as the course of marriage'. This sets the theme of this part of the book: the failure of a relationship and the effect on the young son. It is handled very discreetly (one imagines what Sharon Olds would have made of it!). Nothing is dramatised, nothing really destroys the even tenor, the lovely flow of the lines, but there is an underlying unease: you have to read the lines and between them:

she's see-through,
a cluster of cells so slight

she can slip through a crack
into silence, as remote

from his rages
as a shadow on the moon.

There are poems here too, which debate the nature of a possible afterlife. But here it is Ruth's musings, not those of her father. Rejecting the alternatives, she comes down on the side of the present moment:

I'd want this, here, now,
this muddy bridle track,
these thistles, that buzzard, those sheep.
I'd want to feel the wood of this stile,
smoothed by innumerable hands,
its warmth in the sun.

This leads directly into the last section, where landscape dominates, alongside the evocation of works of art. A poem like 'Bone china' has its clear counterpart in Elizabeth's poems in the pamphlet 'Clay'. An example of Ruth's ability to express the quintessence of a subject, however small, is her poem 'Valerian'; here it is complete:

As a hermit carves
his niche in the cliff face,
subsisting on berries and roots
and the small offerings
of valley dwellers, so it asks
almost nothing of the earth,
satisfied with the meanest fissure,
anchored between rocks,
but always straining
to get a little closer to the sky.

I don't know whether either poet was/is aware of the other, but reading them together I am very conscious of a commonality of subject matter, of style, of sensibility. In that sense I like to see Ruth as the inheritor of all Elizabeth's virtues, of taking on the baton of a poetry characterised by clarity, honesty and spiritual awareness.

Ways with Words ... And Birds Roger Elkin

Will Daunt, *Town Criers*, 2015; Patrick Lodge: *Shenanigans*, Valley Press, 2016; R.V. Bailey, *A Scrappy Little Harvest*, Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2016

I have long admired Will Daunt's poetry for its intellectual honesty, its imaginative drive, and its use of a wide range of poetic skills which tease out the subject matter in an adroit and captivating way, with clear visual images and precise verbal play. His descriptions of landscape in which he applies the exactness of a photographer's eye to produce observations, not only realistically but also with heart, are particularly fine [see *Powerless* (Indigo Dreams Press, 2010) and *Landed* (Lapwing, 2013)]. Occasionally, he applies a gnomic wit and an economy of expression that make the poetry enigmatic; but whatever he writes it is always worth the effort of working out meanings.

Town Criers, his seventh collection, marks a somewhat different direction, the treasures of which are not immediately in evidence from the book's appearance. It is a slight volume in length, honestly unadorned: no author information and biographical detail, no publishing imprint, no spine identification, no acknowledgements—just a front-cover centred photograph of a robin framed above by the title in bold lowercase, **Town Criers**, and, beneath, the author's name; and on the back cover the price, £4, and ISBN number: 978-1-329-66546-0. A tiny insert (125mm X 85mm) carries a similar photographic image, and under the banner 'About this book' explains the work's genesis and purpose in four shortish sentences: 'Designed for Christmas 2015, this project aimed to be a very small book, with as little accompanying detail as possible (e.g. page numbers, contents, 'blurb' on the back cover etc.)'. So far, so right. The next sentence reads, 'It was, however, allowed to have two names.' **Two** names? And, yes, there atop of the insert in bold capitals: **TOWN CRIERS/TOWN FLIERS**. The puzzle of this is confirmed when opening the collection the title page reads, **Town Fliers**. What is Will Daunt up to? A partial answer is provided by the insert's remaining two sentences: 'The last couple of pages give some clues as to the book's ornithological purpose. There are only *nineteen* poems about urban birds.' More puzzling; more head-scratching. And there on the final page is the point of what is gradually being revealed

as the reader is encouraged in italics to '*Collect the collectives, spot the birds ...*'. The penultimate page lists these 'FLOWN COLLECTIVES': sixteen in all, the final one in italics, '*colony*'. More clues methinks! So, what do we have:—a sort of Christmas game of charades, but with words, not mimed actions: 20 numbered but untitled short poems about 19 types of urban fliers that are to be discovered by the application of 16 collective nouns—though, remember, one of these 20 is not a bird! Do the italics provide a clue: it's there in poem '20', this '*Night beast, not bird / nor nomad ghost*' that '*colonises emptiness, / shadows rats*', and

as she flies seeks
the bugs,
like pinballs,
bunged through playfields

to her flipper-wings.

You'd be bats not guessing the identity of this 'Town Flier'!

Although there are eighteen or so direct references to specific birds within the poems, because of the absence of titles, the reader has to tease out the subject matter of each poem. Some birds are easily identified via the exact descriptions that bristle with visual accuracy and verbal delight. Here, for example intuited not only by the use of 'gold' to describe both flight and song, but also by the wordplay of 'charming' with the collective noun of 'charm', are goldfinches:

these jagged marbles,
charming colours

play at swarms
or pollen clouds

as gold in song
as flight; (5')

here, humorously pictured in a mix of the colloquial and the exact, with much punning and wit to the fore, are pied wagtails:

monochrome pals

and flashbacks of cousins,
nit-picking the courtyards

with tails that wagged
like nagging fingers; ('18')

and here, similarly imaginatively described, are woodpeckers, their identity revealed via reference to their collective noun, 'descent':

harlequin
by beds of crimson,

in descent
you skewer ...

when we wish
that you would peck
our tiny trees. ('7')

Other birds—the 'owners' of such collective nouns as 'bevy', 'cloud', 'loft', 'scold', 'worm', and 'stare'—take more effort before their identities are realised. And revealing them might spoil the purposeful fun behind the collection ... But, be assured, it will be well worth the effort. Throughout, the writing in this wonderful puzzle of a book is hard-edged, clear and inventive without being meretricious. There is, as with all of Daunt's poetry, much to admire and enjoy. And, as a final arm-twist if there needs one, given the imminent approach of the season of goodwill, *Town Criers* would make an admirable stocking filler, to be savoured and shared across the generations. If you like birds, if you like words, if you like words about birds, then seek out this book: you will not be disappointed.

As evidenced from the title of his second collection, *Shenanigans*, there's no doubt that Patrick Lodge likes words. Thus there is some irony in his claim/protestation/admission that 'I could never get the words right' in 'Abandon Ship, Dad!'—a superbly rich and moving poem recalling childhood times, remembered in the period of his father's decline into death. Rather than the restrained anger of Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle', Lodge exhorts in a more positive manner, 'Abandon ship, Dad! Don't cross the bar; / get out of the boat, stay here on this shore with me.' What he particularly celebrates is his father's special 'gift' of

a miser's hoard of words spent as if you knew already
they were not currency in that place, beyond the tunnel
you stared into, crimped in the chair.

Currency they are for Lodge! And he is in no way miserly as he invests his particular 'hoard' almost to the point of being spendthrift with his talents, and using such words as 'bulerias'; 'chthonic'; 'concelebrants'; 'corbel'; 'gadgers'; 'gelish'; 'gleed'; 'goss'; 'hypnagogic'; 'obol'; 'peruked'; 'sessile'; 'shim'; 'shtick'; 'tallywags'; 'thyrsus'; 'trilithon'; 'ullage'; 'cyhyraeth'; 'and 'be'shu'shu'—the latter two, like the collection title, sufficiently rarefied that they spawn an endpage Note. And it is not only the particular words that he chooses and puts to effective use, but also the moulding of them into thought-prompting conceits whose visual and verbal precision is as exciting as their intellectual and emotional genesis. Here are a few:

'cloister ruins are / a hand gathering up' ('New Year Hikers');
'a swarf of consonants' ('The Spa Quartet');
'a soviet / of children' ('Kite');
'rucksack / of cloud' ('The Ladies of Dona Sofia');
'stasis / choreographed' ('Lindos by Night');
'Rosaria genuflects / to pick up towels / from the bathroom
floor' ('Middlegame');
'a whirlpool of goats' ('The Bus to Ano Mera');
'skirt like a valance / under an unmade bed' ('Endgame');
'I drift between / worlds, like a li-lo in a pool' ('In Arcadia');
and from 'Ergo Sum', 'girls pulse like shining / platelets'; 'Voices trill /
like burnished castrati';
and 'the girls become as numinous / as Tintoretto cherubs'.

Clearly Lodge possesses a rich imagination, but, as several of these examples suggest, this comes at a cost. Too often, the poems seem to be dependent on the use of similes as exemplars and/or constructs of meaning. Coincidentally, and in keeping with the review title, this is seen in three of the four poems in which birds feature (unlike Daunt's birds, Lodge's are incidental, used to point or underpin the poem's message):

- In 'New Year Hikers', the witty image transposing the meditation of maps to the physical reality of 'floundering in the origami world / unfolding at their boots', is accompanied by the wind which 'sings bin-bag shreds // stalled on barbed wire like

- a choir of salutary crows', an image which seeds the subsequent conceit of the hikers 'standing still as notes / on a stave';
- in 'Mauerfall' which begins with a description of the fall of the Berlin Wall, as 'people / swarm like woodpeckers, chiselling / and drilling, expecting to fly free', the poem's third and final quatrain opens out to celebrate a baby, 'only a few hours born, laid / like proving dough on my chest';
 - and, in 'C'an Freixa', the finely-pointed opening image, both visually and sonically coined—

A kingfisher flies out of the trees;
as complete as a telescope
closing in on itself with a snap,
it hits the window hard, drops—

is compromised in the poem's remaining 16 lines by 4 similes: so, the dead bird 'lies, / useless as a lost evening purse' (v.2), while outside 'goodbyes hung like condolences' (v.3), and air is pictured as 'a rolling bolt of silk // like a neon ripple' (v.4); and leaves are 'wet with sour rain, / dropping like tears down a pieta' (v.4).

As the writing supporting these simile-rich examples reveals, there are some finely-realised poems which demand and repay repeated reading in this far-ranging collection drawing on experiences not only from Berlin, but also, among others, Greece, Italy, Lanzarote, Cambodia, Saigon, Puerto Rico, Australia and Africa; as well as poems that deal with historical personages and moments; artists and paintings.

For me, the real treasure of the collection lies in those poems based on experiences closer to hand and nearer to Lodge's home, such as 'The Spa Quartet', a group of poems alternating between the genders and set in a Leeds leisure centre. The touches of wit and gentle humour coupled with accurate observation and eye for detail work collectively to compensate for an element of stereotyping of working-class folk enjoying their leisure time. The sequence's opening poem, '1: *Changing*', focuses on a trio of men, almost caricatured with their 'exaggerated stiff-legged, / big-balled strut' as they 'pitch muscle against treadmill'. The men might adopt modern dress—'the wool blend suits are shed, / the shorts, the washed out Ts, / the branded trainers go on'—but the past of Turner's 'watercolour-city' of 'Leeds, 1816, the first industrial city' 'still sings aloud' in the cadences of their talk:

In that flat sheen of accent,
there is tappet—a clack of machinery ...

of loom and scotch,
bobbin and boiler.

In fact, such is the past's continuing hold that it is 'subterranean, dangerous' 'like tectonic plates ... making waves.' Here the final simile wittily foreshadows the men's leisure activity as witnessed in poem '3: *Swimming Against the Tide*', where 'Six old gadgers' 'breast-stroke forward'. [Can breast-stroke be done backwards, or is this an intentional gibe—hence the poem's title?] Elsewhere, the observational detail is outstanding: the 'pool water ... ebbs / away over speckled shoulders', their 'trout mouths / gasping in a frozen grimace, // a rehearsal for the fishmonger's / marble slab'—an image which is mirrored with much punning in the poem's final lines and the men's realisation of 'how gutted they are at the deep / end's resolute siren call'. The portrayal of the women in the paired two poems is equally arresting: in poem '2: *Women in the Whirlpool*', 'Six women relaxing on a 'girl's night in'' are 'scary in their dedication / to fun' as 'in a miasma of celebrity scents, / the clink of Poundland bling' 'they claim a clearing in the forest // of loungers, tables, chairs'. Once in the whirlpool bath, 'when the jets spring up with a bright tiger roar', 'Water becomes their element, / softens them': 'they stare up, vaguely, as nymphs in a forest / pool, waiting enchanted'. In poem '4. *Aqua Aerobics*', 'the elderly ladies' in the jacuzzi are 'bucking and gyring like hippocampi / escaping monsters from the deep', but their quest for a freedom of sorts is real:

Above water, all strike heroic poses,
as if Komsomol poster girls at a party rally;
below, hips and knees deny replacement.

Such finely-captured detail, here and elsewhere, transforms the quotidian into something approaching universality.

To move to those poems dealing with family members, such as 'Abandon Ship, Dad!'; 'Sure of Father: VE Day 2015'; 'A Simple Game'; and 'Trio for Roy' is to enter a completely different emotional territory. As the title suggests, 'Trio for Roy' is a tri-partite work written in memoriam of Lodge's father-in-law (?), Roy Bickford Jackson; and what a moving sequence this is, penetrating in its sensitive observation. The

use of a quiet, questing tone reinforces the poem's subtleties, and the expression of the inner worlds of a caring and loving family relationship. Part 1 concerns a hospital visit, and is built on a carefully-forged series of contrasts between visiting relatives, 'we', and patient, 'you'. We are 'large and loud', 'ambassadors from a world / with which there are no diplomatic relations' since we 'have lost you to this place now'; 'we won't get you back'. That sense of isolated foreignness is caught in the simile of 'you' 'propped like a pasha in a four-bed ward'; a sense further strengthened by the fact that 'the ward owns you'; 'You are theirs'. What Lodge is aware of is that family-visitors along with the medical staff are 'conspirators, / ignoring the truth we all acknowledge but don't speak'. The writing is clear, almost factual in its unemotional pacing, a factor which in turn rather ironically helps to heighten the emotional intensity of the situation, where 'nothing can be hidden'. As the poem's final line has it, 'we are only moving through, you will stay'.

Part 3 centres on 'Clearing the house', and again much of the writing has a distanced, unemotional tone, almost prosaic in its listing of possessions, events and actions. Of particular note is the use of the objective correlative to describe the house and its contents, thus echoing the sense of loss: the window frame 'faded matt, cracked', the iron 'a dead weight', its cord 'frayed'; and 'a bevelled mirror reflects / a depthless, empty blue sky / across which nothing moves.' However, the most moving part of the poem is an extended and powerful descriptive passage, whose individual qualities have to be savoured conjointly in order to appreciate its achievement:

Years of sunlight exploring through
the glass lean-to have fingered gently
the books; when we move them
there are book-shadows burned
onto the shelving like a valediction.
Panel pins tacked into the wall, now
hold down total eclipses where plates once hung.
Wallpapers—pink striped, yellow, embossed—
stand out; a carpet piece uncovered in a corner
shines too brightly in its original colours,
like a butterfly emerging in a winter garage.

The fresh observational detail, imaginatively-conceived similes and metaphors, and the carefully-plotted use of lineation to underpin

meaning and emotion make for mature writing. Such an admirable achievement bodes well for future collections. But, for the time being, there is much to like, share and learn from in this impressive collection. Buy it. Read it. Savour this way with words.

A Scrappy Little Harvest, R.V. Bailey's fifth collection, has such a self-deprecatory title that it would be easy to overlook it. And what a mistake that would be! The poems—inclusive, honest, open, and brimming with feeling—inhabit the domains of family, memory, parting, separation, loss and grief, while simultaneously celebrating the worlds of music, love and death. There is loads of fun, too: good, solid humour, and also wit—that understated wry kind to be met in the work of R.V. Bailey's former partner, U. A. Fanthorpe, to whom the collection is dedicated, and 'who supplied the title'. This is a wonderful book. There is no bombast here, no tricksie writing, no attitudinising or posturing, just writing of the first order—committed, direct, clear and unashamedly accessible. If there is any challenge, it is the challenge offered by a compassionate humanity. And, with such a sensitive and skilled wordsmith as R. V. Bailey, the writing throughout is couched in a straightforward, no-nonsense manner, in which the acute understanding of things lends their phrasings an almost aphoristic quality. Take these for example, and there are many more:

'The inner eye is not amenable / To dissection' ('Who's Fleur, then?');
 'The ligaments of everyday love that glows / Lively and bright' ('Archive');
 'Sometimes these bits of life, unspoken, unvisited, / Move slyly forward, as if their time has come' ('Cautious');
 'love is never free' ('Considering free love on St Mary's island');
 'only quicksilver // Love can find the cracks' ('Dark');
 'Hearts are breaking all the time' ('Seven years on: 28.04.16');
 'Perfect pitch in the art of being human' ('My mother deals with a case of *Vestibule Paralysis*');
 'All deaths / Are black' ('Song at harvest time');
 and 'Well-brought-up-women don't cry' ('Tidying').

Of the several poems memorialising and honouring people—family, neighbours, friends, writers—special tribute is made to Harry Chambers (1937-2012), the founder-director of Peterloo Poets, whose imprint numbered 240 titles, including 11 Fanthorpe volumes. 'Harry' it was who 'knew all the poets', 'who could quote / Us all', who could 'so

carefully' fix a launch that 'the room was full'. It was Harry, who like Howard Sergeant of *Outposts*, challenged the literary mafia of the South East, the established poetry publishing houses, and the Arts administrators, and 'fought for our innocent words / With London men in suits, across mahogany.' How economically exact is that description. And it was Harry, 'who took a chance on us, / Who opened the cage, let the birds free to sing.' No wonder, then, that birds figure so predominantly in this collection, not just the metaphorical kind—(Fleur Adcock is described as 'Nobody's fool. A nightingale')—but the actual. Birds there are, from the opening to the last poem; and, like Lodge's, in passing: 'rare red kites', a heron, 'a wren disguised as a leaf', an 'assembly of owls', the 'wings of a dove', a peacock and parrot, but most frequently (six times in all) blackbirds. To plot the blackbirds' visitations in the poems is to mirror several of the collection's concerns: music, loss and love. And, given the dedicatee of the collection, the frequently recurring 'you', it's not difficult to understand the reason for this. They are the 'Tame blackbirds that you liked' but which are also 'the blackbird, ruthless knave, / That tears the young heads off the poppies / I planted on your grave.' ('In the garden'). While 'a throaty blackbird fills the night / like a Wagnerian chorus' ('Await rescue'), as approaching death, 'Your breathing's bubble / ... drowns the April / Evening blackbird, will at last / Drown you' ('Tidying'), there is a need to, 'Forget philosophy. Listen to the blackbird: / What he says is urgent. It has to do with food, / And love.' ('Elocution lessons from Madame St John'). You'd needs be brave—or foolish—to challenge that.

It was Harry Chambers who published the first collection of Eddie Wainwright, a former academic colleague of R. V. Bailey, and like her, as a regular *Envoi* reviewer, a discerning champion of contemporary poetry. The poems in Wainwright's collection, *Growing Pains*, (Peterloo Poets, 1997) were arranged in alphabetical order by title, a feature interestingly adopted in *A Scrappy Little Harvest*. This practice pays dividends here in the way in which the collection's themes weave and interplay, thus gaining an extra intensity, albeit delicate if that's not a contradiction! You will see the full significance in this review's concluding comments. But suffice it for the moment to explore the following example, (listed alphabetically by title) in a strand of poems that feature song, sound and particularly music—its making, its qualities, its import: 'A song for the sun', 'Cistern song', 'Facing the

music', 'Piano', 'Programme Notes', 'Silver Band', 'Song at harvest time', 'West Side Story'.

Of these, 'Silver Band' is a rollicking work, full of humour and subtly-expressed observational detail: it fair oomphas off the page! The poem seeks to answer the consideration 'how can human mouth / Contrive such orchestration' of 'gentle hoots', 'Their honking and tweeting', from 'these vast bell-mouthed flowers'? The outcome is a real achievement: the members of the band being ordinary folk drawn from the locality, like 'the farmer just back from the field, embracing / His French horn and its astonishing innards'. For, though their sounds might in turn be 'deeply frivolous, deeply serious, / Deeply vulgar ... Always on the verge of a raspberry', they manage to 'Get nearer the heart than any orchestra'.

Of the other 'music' poems, two in particular develop these moments of getting 'nearer to the heart' to underpin the collection's themes of the celebratory sharing of moments of love and the awareness of death. 'Piano', a carefully-conceived work of six unrhymed tercets, is full of compassion and understanding. The tone is considered and quiet as the poem builds incrementally in a manner mimetic of the time and patience required to perfect a satisfactory performance. What is needed is 'practise, practise', for 'the great concerto' or 'Beethoven sonatas can't be achieved in a week'. And that is true of the poem's proper subject as declared in the opening lines:

Like having a piano in the house
We all need someone on whom to practise
Love.

Notice the skilful use of lineation to support the poem's argument. Employing musical and pianistic terminology, the poem opens out to offer love as a boundless, universal, and lasting quality to be performed in 'Arpeggios of passion, chords of content', 'Persistent scales', 'Short practice pieces, over telephones', 'quick suburban trills / In shopping mall or high street', 'Cadenzas in airmail envelopes'. That way we will be able to successfully bring off the 'urgently needed' 'concert performance' for 'child, father, friend, neighbour, / Stranger, enemy.' That all-embracing inclusivity is also hinted at, albeit on a private or personal level, in 'West Side Story'. The poem focuses on the significance of one particular 'popular song', the title of which though it

'Sounds like something lost / It wasn't lost on us'. Carefully plotting out the conception of the musical 'with a far-from-original theme' as crafted by Shakespeare from 'an old Italian yarn', the poem uses a mix of almost colloquial, throwaway lines coupled with chiming occasional rhyme, to comment on how sharing the musical 'Not the least bit stale' and 'In the up-to-date cinema dark' had such personal significance, a significance whose full weight is not revealed until the final tercet's suggestion of the song title:

Neither of us had words to guess
What might lie ahead of us,

Only the final word *somewhere*
Somehow suggesting a place in the air,
In the bright air.

It is not surprising that the fragile, ephemeral otherness of that '*somewhere*' should be confirmed just two further poems later on in the collection's final work:

Words, words, words

The neighbours are kind, and relieved
That I wind the clock and feed the birds.

That I'm clean and respectably dressed,
And not at a loss for words.

Shyly they ask how I'm feeling.
Oh better, you know, getting there.

(Out of the question to speak the truth:
Damaged beyond repair.)

Words have lost their piquancy,
They're treacherous as weather;

Ours, for instance, or *yours* and *mine*,
Or *happy*. Or *together*.

The poem's moving intensity, its quiet memorialising, the references to love (and to birds!), the inadequacies of language, the avoidance of

hurting others publicly by hiding the private truth, the keeping of dignity and face—all are skilfully tailored by the use of subtle rhyme and gentle cadential rhythm into a life-affirming garnering. Such effective economy of means confirms the ironic relevance of the collection's title. There is no way, though, that you will have your fill of *A Scrappy Little Harvest* with just one reading. Such is the wealth of this splendid celebration of the joys, riches and losses of being human that you need to return again and again to savour its offerings.

Playfulness and the Apposite Moment

Paul McDonald

Alex Bell, *Bad Luck Woman*, Eyewear Publishing, 2016; Alison Calder, *Connectomics: Poems of the Brain*, Iron Press, 2017; Victoria Bean, *Liberties*, Smokestack Books, 2017

Alex Bell's debut pamphlet, *Bad Luck Woman*, is playful in lots of ways—experimental, ironic, and, above all, funny. Often humour features in her pleasing brand of anthropomorphism, as with the poem 'Overnight' where the moon behaves like 'a total dick;' or it takes the form of sly surrealism, as when, in the same poem, 'alan alda appeared unfathomably/in a dream of a shipwreck.' Elsewhere the tone is comically confessional, as in the title poem where the speaker keeps dumping her boyfriends: the first for becoming unfit, the second for developing a fondness for her dresses, and the third for turning out to be a third rate painter of 'mantelpiece—romantics.' Throughout her images are inventive and quirky, and, like the best humour, they are not employed merely for effect: she has the knack of using her wit to throw the world into relief in interesting and surprising ways. This is partly due to her flair for striking incongruities, as in 'Björn Borg in Chicago,' where the Swedish tennis player crops up in what appears to be the speaker's dream:

Björn looks right at me as we walk inside.
'Halloween,' he says. He is sighing. His brows melt like wax over his
eyes.

...

Björn pulls up a stool and orders a Maker's, neat. He holds his glass too firmly, testing its strength, and the veins in his arm pop noticeably.
Good
shape for his age.

She creates a caricature of Borg through beautifully vivid imagery which—despite its dreamlike oddness—seems to offer an insight into the man himself, particularly the strange patina of gloom that is always a feature of his character. Bell is interested in such enigmas, and does an excellent job of revealing and probing them, albeit in an offbeat way. Particularly appealing for me is extent to which she seems plugged-in to contemporary culture, writing about it with nous and namechecking everyone from Bob Dylan to the Hypnotic Brass Ensemble. One of my favourites is ‘Alanthology,’ where she lists a series of celebrities who share the first name Alan, from Alda to Upward, accompanied by a succinct summary of their personalities. Thus Alan Bates reminds the speaker of ‘The English of thick knits/crow-mop, rugged cus,’ while Alan Rickman is invited to, ‘Tell me in Spanish, Alan, to brush my teeth in circles./That plummy husk. *The air is full of spices.*’ It is a typically spirited and inventive piece which, again, manages to illuminate its subjects with wit, deftness and concision. My only regret with Bell’s book is that its only 41 pages long—let’s hope a full collection will be forthcoming very soon.

While Alex Bell is adept at delineating enigmatic celebrities, Alison Calder focusses on the body’s most enigmatic organ, the brain. An award winning Canadian poet and academic, *Connectomics* is her first UK collection, and it comes complete with an introduction by the philosopher and neuroscientist, Raymond Tallis, not to mention a series of illustrations depicting, among other things, cross sections of brains and brain cells. The book’s title is drawn from the register of neuroscience, as are most of the poem titles, and each poem takes a term and imaginatively ponders and explores it. Usefully Calder includes footnotes explaining the jargon, where we learn that, ‘Roughly speaking, the goal of connectomics is to improve ways to map the neural connections in the brain.’ That she uses the word ‘improve’ rather than ‘perfect’ is appropriate given this book’s awareness of the brain as an enigma. Thus in the title poem she writes:

The idea is
to render the brain
transparent enough to be read through,
like trickles of water washing away thought.

While the objective of connectomics is clear, when it comes to the brain and the mind clarity is achieved only fleetingly, if at all. Thus the

reference to transparency is immediately qualified by a reference to transience, and the poem implies that knowledge is always likely to remain frustratingly elusive. It closes with a stanza that reinforces this point:

Like reading through a jellyfish.
The text, however, remains opaque.

It's the mystery of the organ that attracts Calder, and it's this that makes it a fit subject for poetry. The title of another poem, 'Clarity,' refers to 'the process by which the brain is made transparent,' but again the piece insists that its interior remains 'a maze/sizzling, fragments/of a film that's not replayed.' One of the many striking and enjoyable things about this book is how well the language of neuroscience lends itself to poetry; thus we have poems with titles like 'Glia,' referring to 'the cells that provide support for neurons,' and 'Synaptic Cleft,' which is 'the small gap between two neurons, across which information passes.' Of course Calder brings her own imagination and lyricism to bear on these concepts, unpacking them in ways which explicate them beautifully. Consider the poem, 'Flattened Cortex,' for instance, where the latter is compared to 'A grand piano dropped from a window,' and which ends with the following lines:

Metaphors unstack: the poem
is an ocean inside out. How now
describe the nesting doll,
the one inside the one that looks like you?

The only way you can know the brain is via the subjective experience of having one, and this presents a problem for science with its emphasis on objectivity and empiricism. Such a subjective business is better suited to poetry—one of the few modes of expression that can turn oceans 'inside out.' Thus in this poem we are reminded that it is human beings who are the subject of the neuroscientists' investigation—the 'nesting doll' at the heart of the investigation is us—and this fact alone necessitates a discourse more comfortable with enigma than with certainty.

It is enigmas of an ethical kind that interest Victoria Bean in her latest collection, *Liberties*—specifically the sort associated with, to quote the cover blurb, 'trouble—those who cause it, those who are looking for it,

and those who have found it.' Again there are no easy answers, as the following six word poem, 'He's Bad,' suggests:

He's bad
he's good.
he's misunderstood

Not all of the poems are quite this short, but most are fairly succinct, and in a book of over a hundred pages there are plenty of them. Most feature a similar moral ambivalence, as in another very short piece, 'Who Do You Love?,' quoted here in full:

Who do you care about, the judge
asks the young person
who nods towards their mum
the judge
says of course, but tell me
who else? Their nan
they say, nan's don't judge.

Clearly these are the sentiments of someone who never met my nan, but we take the point, of course, and it constitutes an important moral lesson. Just as the closer you observe something the more enigmatic it becomes (see brains), so the closer you are to someone the harder it is to judge them objectively. Proximity tends to augment complexity. The problem is that this leaves us with a tricky moral dilemma, one which Bean explores in many of her poems, including 'Nothing Hill,' again quoted in full here:

We step back to make way for
the large man cradling
a collection of vinyls to his chest.
We step back again to give
the record shop assistant
the chance to catch him.

I suppose the implicit moral question here is: which one of these characters would *you* attempt to step in front of, the thief or the shop assistant pursuing him? Or perhaps like the 'We' of the poem you would let them both pass? I expect your answer suggests something about the kind of person you are; and of course you can't expect a poet to tell you

what to do in such situations, certainly not a poet like Bean, who always tends to 'step back' from the issue, remaining as non-judgemental as the 'nan' of the previous poem. As you'll see from these examples, her style is plain and ostensibly simple—she seldom employs elaborate imagery or figurative language—but her skill is in her eye for appropriate characters in appropriate contexts. Bean's is the poetry of the apposite moment, and like all of the poets in this batch, she has the good sense to let enigmas speak for themselves.