

Review - Gillian Allnutt, J.R. Carpenter, Camilla Nelson

JEFFREY, Andrew

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essential book for anyone who is interested in how poets can make and use space and time within their poems. Seferis might use the same images of sea and light and journey, returning to them, as he says, ‘again and again’, but that’s because they’re so rich, so suggestive, and in his hands literally inexhaustible. To read these poems is to move into a world where gestures – someone running down the stairs, or holding a broken statue in their hands and turning away from the sea – are made in front of our eyes in a clear light, where they resonate with a meaning we know, but don’t know we know. Take this bit from ‘Thrush’ for instance:

It’s as though
returning home from some foreign country you
happen to open
an old trunk that’s been locked up a long time
and find the tatters of clothes you used to wear
on happy occasions, at festivals with
many-coloured lights,
mirrored, now becoming dim,
and all that remains is the perfume of the absence
of a young form.

Really, those statues are not
the fragments. You yourself are the relic ...

The interplay here between what we’ve got and what we lack is intricate. There’s the clarity of the tattered clothes, the sensation of the trunk pulled out and opened for the first time so that we can almost hear the hinges creak as its lid is pushed back, set against the ‘now’ of the poem where these things fade and dim as we look at them, where ‘all that remains is the perfume of the absence of a young form’. Look how the layers of blurring (*some* foreign country) are built up, one upon another, so that the clear-sighted images dim in front of our eyes as we look at them.

The book is a great poet’s life’s work, and I don’t have either the space or the depth of knowledge to do it justice, but I do want to register something of the sensation of reading it, the pleasure of flicking through the book and moving between the different collections.

It is like looking through a sketchbook. There are lots of poems which give you a particular light, or a gesture, or render a sound, like ‘The Jasmine’, which reads, in its entirety –

Whether it’s dusk
or dawn’s first light
the jasmine stays
always white.

– or the little wagtail in ‘Thrush’, writing light onto the sky. But that is only part of it: Seferis is not only making sketches, but also doing something extraordinary, all the time, with time. If we agree for a moment with his own self-assessment – that all he is doing is saying the same thing again and again – what is the thing that he is saying? The answer, it seems to me, is that he is talking about time. He is showing again and again how the past seeps into the present, how blurred the line is that supposedly demarcates the now from what’s gone before it. He is always trying to get to the place where he can hear the ‘rhythm of the other life, beyond the broken statues and the tragic columns’. It’s like a haunting, or a recovery. As Keeley and Sherrard say in an earlier introduction, Seferis is a modern Odysseus, trying to get back to a time and place he left behind. And like the shade of Odysseus, whom he encounters in ‘Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse’, he tells ‘of the harsh pain you feel when the ship’s sails swell with memory and your soul becomes a rudder.’

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About the author

Laura Scott’s pamphlet, *What I Saw*, won the Michael Marks Prize in 2014. In 2015 she won the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize. A selection of her work was featured in Carcanet’s *New Poetries VII* in 2018 and her first collection, *So Many Rooms*, was published by Carcanet in August this year.

ANDREW JEFFREY

Gillian Allnutt, *Wake*, 78pp, £9.95, Bloodaxe Books, Eastburn, Hexham, Northumberland, NE46 1BS

J R Carpenter, *An Ocean of Static*, 158pp, £12, Penned in the Margins, Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London, E1 6AB

Camilla Nelson, *Apples and Other Languages*, 56pp, £9, The Knives, Forks and Spoons Press, 122 Birley Street, Newton-le Willows, Merseyside, WA12 9UN

The most compelling poems in Gillian Allnutt’s *Wake* exist in a tension between silent solitude and quiet sharing which is signalled in the first poem ‘York Way’. The poem is gnomic but compelling: I think it records someone witnessing the moment of another’s death. The first two lines run, ‘It happened to her. To her alone. / It didn’t. He did it. On his own’. Allnutt’s sharp line break emphasises that it is unclear what happened, it is difficult to know whether the experience is shared or where agency lies and so when the poem concludes with ‘no platform / where she could have said goodbye to him’ this could be a goodbye of pain or of healing.

Who has a platform for saying, where they are saying it from and what cannot be said are constant pre-occupations in poems which respectfully explore shared meanings. The sharing of meaning is most expressively explored through the precise choosing of words for both their etymology and sound which enables the interaction of different languages. ‘Bookshop, London’ begins:

Man

from the Maghreb
at cbb.

Cache of the breath in the throat
in the thought of it –

Maghreb
from the verb

‘to withdraw or depart’.

Maghreb, an Arabic word that labels a geographic region and one of the appointed times for Islamic prayer, is made a half-rhyme for the Old English derived ebb. The derivation of the word Maghreb also shows a shared meaning with ebb. ‘Cache of breath in the throat’ describes the experience of learning to say the word ‘Maghreb’, melding throat and thought, sound and sense. This poem is one of many dedicated to a particular person, these dedications celebrating shared occasions and understandings.

Yet, if poems celebrate the sharing of meaning Allnutt also retains an attractively awkward need to ‘withdraw or depart’, to retain something beyond understanding, to be uncomfortable. ‘Home’ is one of many poems dedicated ‘To Tom’ and begins:

How beautiful you are when you do not
understand me.
I turn on my heel, remember, say ‘I will see’
And, in my mind’s ear, hear my old asylum-seeking
Fetle say
‘I back, I back’

The poem seems to dramatise the tensions in any long-standing relationship and the attractions of mystery but this domestic scene is invaded by a haunting auditory memory which disrupts the visual confidence of ‘I will see’. The name Fetle perhaps uncannily echoes the north-eastern dialect use of ‘fettle’ (my grandmother always used to say “he’s in a right fettle” when I was argumentative). ‘[M]y old asylum-seeking’ productively mixes up tenses. People declare themselves and are labelled asylum-seekers when they apply for refugee status. ‘Asylum-seeking’ is a more active formulation but ‘my old’ confuses; ‘my’ is a sign of responsibility but also ownership whilst ‘old’ implies Fetle is no longer ‘asylum-seeking’ but still defined by the label.

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Asylum-seeking lies at the heart of this collection; the safety and stability of home is questioned whilst the difficult need for welcome is emphasised creating a common human need for sanctuary. For example, ‘desueteude’ is another poem dedicated to ‘Tom’. A law is said to fall into desueteude when it is no longer used but has not been formally repealed. Our legal system is designed to leave asylum-seekers in a similar state of limbo, forced to wait in a state of uncertainty and dependency, where it is unclear whether their rights are enforceable or not. The poem responds to this state using unpunctuated verse where shifts in thought and feeling roll delicately over the pause between lines:

your crowd of jamjars
like asylum seekers
set aside for
cumin, say, or cardamon or coriander
as they were samovars
survivors
of war
there are bluebirds over
there you are
where we are now among all these computers waiting
for repair

Playing with the “r” sound at the line end, the poem begins by linking the crowd of jamjars to the imagined crowd of asylum seekers but twists this perhaps negative and panicked reaction. The root of the word asylum is the Latin *asylos* meaning to be inviolable, to be set aside. This makes them precious, to be preserved like spices. However, there are further shifts in feeling as the hospitality of ‘samovars’ gives way to a recognition of suffering. As the writer uses the White Cliffs of Dover – synecdoche for national island identity and the first view many migrants to the UK will see – to look back at the war experienced by her own relatives the final three lines beautifully mix up identifications over the line breaks, as meaning depends upon where the reader chooses to pause.

Either the computers are waiting to be repaired or the computers have damaged us and ‘we’ need repair. Allnutt retains a deep a suspicion of modern technology. ‘Predictive Text’ wittily rails against the editing of meaning by technology:

I want no more to do with things that are
understandable.
There there.

This is because modern technology is linked to predictive rationality and thus shields us from a more raw experience and feeling. The poem ‘prayer’ does not want to take place in:

the mind –
Le Corbusier’s machine for living in
his signed environment –

but in the tent or tabernacle of the heart
a l’abri

A *l’abri* is French for “screened from” but the notes tell us the wording is taken from the title of a novel dealing with the so called Calais ‘Jungle’ encampment. Modernity seems condemned as a self-contained, fully rational, heartless environment whilst the marginalised person seeking sanctuary is linked to sacred prayer.

Camilla Nelson’s *Apples and Other Languages* is less sceptical about technology. Indeed, the first set of poems, ‘A Musical Introduction’, are a response to Bjork’s *Biophilia* album which explores the links between nature, technology and music. The first poem ‘Miracle’ announces Nelson’s overarching concern with the body:

feel your organs announce themselves in this harp
speech interior
sense your windpipes sound themselves furiously
outside-in
tinkle-spin-bio warp yourself weird

*Our legal system is
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similar State of limbo,
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State of uncertainty
and dependency ...*

with song so thin it breaks the ice we stand on
stir this miracle into waking

The reader is encouraged to become aware of their body’s automatic activities and to experience their body as miraculous. We are the miracle but need to become aware of it by the process of ‘outside-in / tinkle-spin-bio warp’. These lines may seem to strain for effect but make sense in this context because Nelson is trying to capture the weirdness of being aware of inner space. In other poems Nelson does seem to push metaphors too far which spoils the effect of the poem by becoming melodramatic. For example, the second poem ‘A Purse of Sky’ ends, ‘and the pale desert sky went slowly mad with waiting’.

Many of my favourite poems appear in the third section, ‘Other Languages’, and use page space and repetition to capture the body’s experience of place shaped by sound. ‘Full’ begins with ‘My body vibrates with the sudden stop of bells’ but then uses this sound to locate the body within environment and amongst other creatures:

but then the bells begin and when they stop
there’s swallows song
they swallow song
they’ve swallowed song

the seagulls scream
then bells

‘Kynance’ brilliantly embodies the actions of a lighthouse through the simple spacing and repetition of the word ‘here’ whilst ‘hill snow car speak’ convincingly convinces that a hill could speak to a road through precise description:

Wind stirs snow on the hill
Hill’s white breath rolls of the hill out of the gate
on to the road
Hill’s skin speaks to the road

What might be seen as nature talking to technology is taken up by ‘The Lichenous Page’. This poem is inspired by *Graphis scripta*, a lichen which is found covering tree bark. It is commonly called handwriting lichen because its black fruit emerges from a white background:

Protrusions of black fruit text mark page with white
not white it’s not alright these tile tapping keyed
fascinator’s mark the shape between you and I plant
doubt in the vey kernel of black fruiting core this
thallus shaped page this letter

A long prose block mixes up human writing, computer technology and lichen writing as what is commonly not noticed – the act of writing emerging from the white page made from wood pulp is foregrounded. Lichen are both symbiotic and parasitic so writing, digesting and information-exchange mix, ‘digital glyphs collaborate to form X Y Z form DNA form plant meets plant meets air meets sunlight eating sugar’.

This mixing is particularly explored in the middle section of Nelson’s collection ‘Apples’ which responds to audio field recordings of the writer’s various interactions with an apple tree. She wrote words on apples from the tree and responded to the apples’ gradual decay. She took copies of poems which resonated with her experience of being with the tree out to the tree and tore out fragments on text that particularly resonated with the experience. The poems in the volume are the result of transcriptions from audio readings. ‘Through Skoulding’ is the result of one of these experiments which takes fragments of texts from the poet Zoe Skoulding’s work and concludes with an Allnutt-like fragment:

me I am
wet
text
into silence

If this all seems overly intertextual Nelson’s use of fieldwork means she retains a connection with par-

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ticularity; ‘they left with their barrow and crate’ which Nelson tells us “started out as pastiche of Wordsworth” and amusingly concludes by moving away from abstraction and acknowledging desire:

In this post-industrial age
In this post-human age

How can we? Smell rotting apples

They’ve left the gate unlocked

J R Carpenter’s *An Ocean of Static* embraces technology and celebrates an ‘ocean of noise’. The preface tells us, ‘This book is made of other books’, and to read it as a ‘script for the live performance of web-based works’. Carpenter is an accomplished digital writer but this is the first time her web-based work has been turned into a book so she keeps marks of code to give a sense of the work’s digital origin. In fact, I began to imagine myself as a computer when reading, surfing through reams of big data. There are even code-like instructions for the reader to follow:

```
// stage direction  
# [variable]  
[argument’]
```

Narrative
Voices

Are separated
By indentation

```
// a voice follows a line break
```

Many sources from an archive of texts about real or imagined voyages across the North Atlantic are combined in a variety of ways so that voices and narratives become mixed. Sometimes the reader is given choices about words to insert, for example, the first section of ‘Notes on the Voyage of an Owl and a Girl’ which is loosely inspired by Edward Lear:

The owl said, [‘Birds of a feather stick together’,
‘Loose lips sink ships’, ‘Everywhere we go there we are’]

How soon he [‘drifted’, ‘floated’, ‘sailed’, ‘veered’] off
[‘topic’, ‘course’, ‘track’, ‘radar’]!

I found myself reading all of the quoted text and swapping between them, enjoying the variations in meaning, the often funny juxtapositions, imagining a text in constant flux, like the sea.

At other times voices are combined together. ‘Instructions and Notes Very Necessary and Needful to be Observed in the Purposeful Voyage of the Discovery of Cathay’ says that it is “a collaborative essay in three voices” and edits together three accounts of voyages. To begin with they are separated out and dated but I think they sometimes combine. The effect is like reading a morphing version of one journey with similarities and differences throughout time. Particularly powerful and pointed are moments when repetition is used to describe weather or for satirical effect:

Of the strong
Wind
Very strong
And cold
Piercingly cold
impetuous
and extremely cold
sheltered
from the cold
the wind

was fair
being
not quite fair

an Englishman
born an Englishman
cultivated in England
manufactured in England
brought up by Englishmen
two Englishmen

Carpenter is an accomplished digital writer but this is the first time her web-based work has been turned into a book ...

... and so on. It is difficult to quote from this text and give the full effect as the reader needs to be overwhelmed. There are other poems which fill the page completely with instructions or repeating words and use minor variations which are particularly effective.

Sometimes, I wasn’t convinced that the effect worked as well on the page as it would in the digital original. ‘Ten Short Talks about Islands ... And by Islands I mean Paragraphs’ is another text which includes word choices. However, the texts chosen in each paragraph often come from one source. For instance, ‘Crusoe in the Galapagos’ consists of texts from a single Elizabeth Bishop poem so when reading on the page I began to miss the original and wonder why it has been edited. This concern doesn’t happen often though and most texts are threaded throughout the volume so that the whole collection has a coherence as voices emerge, merge and re-emerge throughout.

THEOPHILUS KWEK

Jay Bernard, *Surge*, 80pp, £10.00, Chatto & Windus, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Vahni Capildeo, *Skin Can Hold*, 120pp, £9.99, Carcanet Press, Alliance House, Cross Street, Manchester M2 7AQ

In the debate on race and immigration that has risen in pitch since the European migrant crisis – heightened further by the Brexit campaign and Windrush scandal – we have been hard-pressed for saner or more reflective voices; even among writers (dare I say!), nuanced and hard-won perspectives are few and far between. All the more precious, then, are these collections from two acclaimed poets which, in their distinctive ways, not only add generously to a fraught discourse, but also challenge our expectations of the forms and languages in which we might conduct these, and other, conversations.

‘An Ocean of Static’ ends with:

At dawn an ancient tractor trawls along the briny beach, harvesting the tide’s leaves. The world’s plastic. The sea’s weeds.

This is typical of the volume’s wit and gestures to outside the archive. The ancient tractor is poetry. One of Camilla Nelson’s most striking images harvested from fieldwork is ‘a tree grows from a tractor’ which shows the way she allows the more-than-human into her work whilst Allnutt is more likely to prefer a pre-mechanised mode of transport; she will enter ‘Jerusalem, London, as if on a donkey’. But what all three collections considered here show is that when dealing with pressing contemporary issues like migration, environmental collapse or data harvesting, reading poetry is a good way to trawl.

Inspired by a residency at the George Padmore Institute, an archive of radical black history in Britain, **Jay Bernard’s** *Surge* is less a collection of individual poems, than a narrative and performative palimpsest that shifts between multiple viewpoints on the New Cross Fire of 1981. At times, we hear the rhythms and routines of individuals resurrected from the records; at others, it is Bernard speaking, of the frustration and impossibility of reversing the silence of the archive. For instance, the two opening poems (‘Arrival’ and ‘Ark’) strike the reader as two layers of a single image, each adding to its depth of field. ‘Arrival’ recalls the historical backdrop of empire, not as a distant fact but from within the living past: ‘remember’ – it starts, an imperative – ‘we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams’. ‘Ark’, gesturing to the biblical narrative, shifts focus to consider the poet’s own role in the work of contemporary myth-making: where does one begin, to ‘consult the life of a stranger’? Are we merely ‘[taking] this morning from its box’, or giving new life to ‘damp smoke and young bones’?

About the author

Andrew Jeffrey lives in Sheffield and teaches creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University and Leeds Art University. He also works for City of Sanctuary, Sheffield a charity working to create a culture of welcome, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers. His blog is: cowyidentity.wordpress.com

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