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Shortlist for the Ledbury Forte Second Collection Prize 2017

Personal Overview:

The standard of all 62 books entered into the Ledbury Forte Second Collection Prize has been remarkably high. Though this made my job of choosing six short-listed titles much more difficult, it has been extremely exciting and uplifting to see that the poetry being written and published today is of such good quality. I kept thinking, ‘this is the company I’m working in, and it’s fantastic!’ I was particularly impressed and encouraged because I was reading all of these second collections at a time when I was trying to finish my own, and was acutely aware, therefore, of the huge amount of work, and doubt, and hope that such a task involves.

Vahni and I did eventually agree on six shortlisted titles, and I am confident that each one of the books chosen is representative of the talent, skill and energy which repeatedly made itself evident during the reading process. Every one of the writers shortlisted here strikes me as a ‘serious writer’ in the sense that the American poet John Berryman defined that term: ‘something of an inquisitor’, who encourages the reader to put to themselves the same questions about life that the author has put to him or herself. In addition, every one of the writers shortlisted here strikes me as a poet who writes poetry as Ezra Pound defined it: ‘the most concentrated form of verbal expression’. Finally, every one of the writers shortlisted here seems to be doing what Robert Frost suggested when *he* defined poetry, which was he said, ‘a way of taking life by the throat.’

Below are my comments on the six shortlisted titles, listed in alphabetical order.

**1. Judy Brown, *Crowd Sensations* (Seren)**

As a title, ‘Crowd Sensations’ fits Judy Brown’s thrilling and exciting second collection perfectly. This is a book bursting with experience and perception. The poems are quick-paced and vivid, and convey a highly alert consciousness, using a wide range of subject matter (the death of a rat; smokeless coal; a changing room in Oxfam), as well as a powerful sense of spoken rhythm and structure. I love, for example, the energy and craziness of a line such as ‘Christ, there is so much gorgeous air explaining itself in the back of your painting!’ that we get in the very first poem, as well as the cool, clipped, simple lines that we get elsewhere, such as in the start of ‘The Corner Shop’: ‘Neighbours thought it was/ gunfire, but inside the boys/ were throwing bottles around.’ The sound of these poems is notable; sharp and often hypnotic, sometimes alarming. The third poem, ‘This Is Not a Garden’, for example, uses an unreliable refrain to create a mood of want, and need, and uncertainty, each verse moving a little bit forwards, and a little bit back, like the broken remains of a villanelle. In many of the poems, the ordinary and the dramatic combine in a musical and mesmeric way, though it is often an abrupt music, suited to the fragmented sensations we receive in our day-to-day lives. In these poems, Judy Brown does what Yeats longed to do when writing about ‘wise and simple’ men – to be as cold and passionate as the dawn. *Crowd Sensations* casts a sharp and insightful eye – and ear – on life, and in so doing makes compelling, pitch-perfect, and well-crafted poems that reflect our multitudinous existence.

**2. John Clegg, *Holy Toledo!* (Carcanet)**

John Clegg’s *Holy Toledo!* is a witty, sophisticated, highly energetic collection, which demonstrates a remarkable linguistic fluency and a refusal to accept received truths without looking at them from several sides. Combining playfulness and seriousness in equal measure it is clearly the work of a poet who reads and thinks deeply. Many of the poems constitute a kind of response or reply to great poets and critics, such as Rilke, or F.R. Leavis; others examine the natural world, such as in ‘Two Birds’, which is a really stunning and shocking poem about an artist’s careful observation of dying creatures. Contemporary, fast-paced, and often gloriously complicated, the poems make use of lists and enjambments as well as literary and popular references. But there is also present here a very skilled use of repetition, and clarity of sound. One example is the poem ‘Lacklight’ which has a gentle melodic quality, moving through alliterative, multi-syllabic phrases towards plain, monosyllabic, but rhymed conclusions:

At first we didn’t call the dark ‘the dark’;

we saw it as a kind of ersatz light,

a soupy substitute which shucked the hems

and wrinkles from our objects. That was nice.

The title poem ‘Holy Toledo’ is another excellent example of what this poet can do, collaging together images and making beautiful poetry out of the sad, the desperate, and the unlikely. These are poems full of what you might call ‘harmonious contrasts’, and this second collection – happily a first from Carcanet – signals a young poet of real talent.

**3. Emma Hammond, *The Story of No* (Penned in the Margins)**

You don’t often see the phrase ‘UNPUTDOWNABLE!’ plastered across the cover of poetry books, but this is how I would describe Emma Hammond’s second collection, *The Story of No*. I read it straight through, poem after poem, and didn’t want to stop. It uses language in a very fast-paced way, listing, gathering, jumping around; it’s very alert to, and wary of, a surrounding world of Western consumerism, and its overcrowded, inane search for a ‘lifestyle’. The poems are written in a language and form which are quite close to speech and to prose, but they are crafted in such a way as to contain many half-rhymes and they have rhythm, so that there is a music contained within the apparently free forms. Emma Hammond’s poems are often funny because they use and play with very recognizable images – in the poem ‘Death’ for example, ‘Laura Ashley is a type of Death. Death by Thank You notes, Death by balled socks. Cath Kidson is a type of illness…’ etc. But this is a poet who can also take your breath away, writing exceptionally well about nature, as well as complex emotions. For example, I found the poem ‘Utility’ (a prose poem about a mother dying of cancer), quietly, but totally devastating: ‘Your sister has earmarked the Chinese paintings. What do you want? I close her fragile body in a hug. We are boisterous in talk of corpse preparation.’ *The Story of No* is proof of the enviably astute poetic eye and linguistic verve that characterises Emma Hammond’s poetry.

**4. John McCullough, Space Craft**

John McCullough’s *Spacecraft* is a brilliantly, beautifully, expertly written book, whose recurring theme and atmosphere is an almost physical, almost erotic desire for language, and an ability to use it to an admirably obsessive degree. This collection celebrates words in all their etymological glory, and descriptions of language and of relationships become at times interchangeable, when an exclamation mark, for example, is like a hand on the spine; while a hand is remembered for resting on the spine on Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary. There are also stunning and precise descriptions of nature here, with a really beautiful poem about Lichen, arriving as a ‘boon…its small impossible fires,’ and glimpses of life as it is lived in basement flats and cafés. The poem, ‘In the Angelfish Café’ for example, ends with a superb final image, when the waiter ‘grabs the corners of the ocean’. There is also an excellent, monologue-style middle section in his poem ‘The Wilful Eye’, a stunning piece which uses repetition with dramatic effect:

And the burnt out West Pier, decaying

And the West Pier standing, tenacious

And the dusk – like dabbed rouge on the Channel

And the dusk spreading out like a virus

This is a remarkable second collection by a poet whose use of language is not only extremely imaginative, but also highly developed, and who uses words, as well as the spaces between them, with rare and admirable skill. These are extraordinarily well made poems, and to quote from McCullough’s poem ‘Stirious’: ‘the difference is audible.’

**5. Sam Riviere, *Kim Kardashian’s Marriage***

This remarkable, radical, and far-reaching second collection from Sam Riviere represents true poetic energy and innovation, both in its conception and its realization. Inspired by the publicised life of British celebrity Kim Kardashian and her marriage that lasted only 72 days, *Kim Kardashian’s Marriage* takes the idea of observation and social commentary to a whole new level. What in the art world might be described as a ‘blending of materials and methods,’ this book makes for a fascinating reading experience: disconcerting, hypnotic, frightening, and exciting. Drawing on the unreal ‘reality’ conveyed by all forms of social media, it is both strange and familiar; a collection of broken pieces, part found, part improvised; a kind of thesis containing only the footnotes, or a kind of mirror. As with all great works of collage, it is the gathering together which constitutes the creative practice, and the proximity of the material that makes the point. One reason why this book is so successful as a second collection is because it demonstrates a discerning creative vision. Another is that it makes extremely effective use of form and structure, in particular its use of short fragments (one for every day of Kim Kardashian’s marriage), and repetitions. The recurring words in the titles are particularly striking: ‘girlfriend sincerity’, ‘girlfriend sunsets’, ‘girlfriend pool’, ‘beautiful pool’, ‘the new pool’, ‘grave pool’ and so on. The recurrences start to resemble refrains, and because of this we start to seek in them wisdoms and warnings. This collection is ‘bold’ in both the Irish and English sense of that word (bold in Ireland means naughty; badly behaved) and both are qualities to celebrate. This is a clever, strange, and highly original second collection from a very talented young poet.

**6. Sandeep Parmar, *Eidolon* (Shearsman)**

Sandeep Parmar’s *Eidolon* is an example of an extremely good idea that has been pushed very far indeed, so that the final product – the poems – fully and thrillingly live up to the initial plan. This is not an easy thing to achieve. As Parmar herself writes in her Afterword, ‘ideas in poems are doomed to fail without the necessary structure around them.’ There is a very pleasing structure in Sandeep Parmar’s book, which means it doesn’t fail. Partly a modern revision of the Helen Myth, these poems show us Helen in today’s world: talking on the phone; standing in a queue in a DIY shop; looking inside hotel drawers; watching TV. Who is Helen? As Parmar points out, quoting Bettany Hughes, she is ‘Goddess, Princess, Whore’. She is also, here, a brilliant poetic device, and a compelling alter ego. These poems are about society and power and communication, and their language is highly charged, quite pared back and modern, in the sense that the lines are short and end abruptly, but also poetic, in the sense that it can be rich and extremely condensed. See, for example, poem xvi (the poems don’t have individual titles), in which a woman returns home: ‘why are you so late? / I went to the Fair. I tried to call/ but it rang and rang. / The warm air on her like a poisoned memory / he blinks and sips’. Dramatic, sad, complex, and intelligent, this is a hugely impressive book, not only as a gathering of individual poems, but as a collection as a whole; as an *entire narrative*. These are poems, to quote Parmar again, ‘made of words and voices’, a combination which is at first quiet, then very interesting, then electric.