

## Orcas and Grandmothers: Review by Anna Cathenka

*I Want! I Want!* by Vicki Feaver, *Flèche* by Mary Jean Chan, *Lies* by Dhoireann Ní Ghríofa

Reading *I Want! I Want!* by Vicki Feaver, my mind wanders to menopausal orca. Wouldn't yours? Perhaps not, but I'm reminded of a conversation I had with my mother in which she told me how humans and orca are the only species to undergo a menopause, and she reflected on the possible reasons and benefits of this. As she understood it, the reasons orca are such skilled hunters is because they have older, female orca who, unhindered by the insistent hunger of reproduction, are able to pass on their knowledge to younger members of their pod. Feaver contemplates and portrays the experience of women of her generation with an authenticity which I at first found difficult to sit with. *I Want! I Want!* begins with a nostalgia so acute you can smell the 'Jeyes toilet paper', feel your fingers pushing 'through the holes / of cigarette burns' in the old curtains patterned with blue daffodils. It's uncomfortable, told from the perspective of a little girl whose naivety, joy, and occasional precociousness is constrained by the era in which she exists. As the girl passes into adolescence, I find my discomfort shifting with the new-found power that the speaker discovers, such as in the poem '1958' where she 'walked round Venice / in bright yellow hot pants / and a black strapless top'. This is where I begin to understand the collection, and the unusual situation that post-menopausal women find themselves in these days, where they can lay out their life experience in all its ugliness and grace, and find that it's actually listened to. These women are our orca grandmothers, passing on their knowledge to the young.

And in *Flèche* by Mary Jean Chan, the experiences of this older generation are contemplated by the young. As Feaver envisages a maternal perfection in her poem 'Blueprint for a Mother' ('smelling of plums and sweat / like my pen-friend's mother // and brave and clever') so Chan places herself in the shoes of her own mother, learning a slippery acceptance and forgiveness in poetic empathy, 'my mother / is raging / the way the waves do'. Chan, too, imagines a maternal perfection in her poem 'Conversation with Fantasy Mother', in which the Fantasy Mother is thanked for taking the speaker's coming out 'as calmly / as a pond accepts a stone / flung into its depths'.

In *Flèche*, the relationship between mother and daughter is meditated upon within a book which takes its name from a fencing technique. This complex *corps-à-corps* veins its way through both collections, struggling with its desire to blame while still finding love and compassion against the odds of the patriarchy in which one author declares 'Three times, I ran through the fire / to become the woman / of a man's desire. // Three times, I tried and failed / to tame my fierce nature.' A patriarchy against which the author of the other collection wriggles to find a 'Safe Space' in which to love another woman, a place in which 'the logic of hips isn't a stranglehold to the heart'.

While Feaver and Chan consider the mother/child relationship from a distance, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, in her collection *Lies*, considers the same relationship from a place so deeply embedded within that the speakers 'swollen middle' is 'suddenly punctuated by the nudge / of knee or ankle', a relationship so close that the 'freckles on the bridge of your nose / sing loud'. There is a sort of madness in this place, which Ní Ghríofa tackles with both humour and sincerity, finding a manic

joy in the weirdness of suburbia, dishwashers, and tin foil. The latter of these ('o aluminium roll, / o silver scroll') is the basis for a poem which dances with the madness that motherhood, a domestic life coupled with the company of little minds, can sometimes engender. The speaker imagines herself unspooling it around the home to become a great, silvery river, 'swirling under doors to the city- / kitchen'. The same intensity of feeling that motherhood creates is also found in the sexual desire and relationships of the collection: the lover's name becomes embedded in the body of the speaker who attempts to have it removed from a tattoo, the memory of a boy whose 'tongue tastes / of smoke and chewing gum'.

But it is not just in motherhood, or female desire, that these three collections speak to each other, but in the cracks between worlds, through which the women almost seem to speak to each other. In her poem 'Suburbia', Ní Ghríofa writes of 'a gap as slender as a baby's finger / between our neighbour's gable ends', through which she can 'nearly see the cows out in that mountain.' When reading it I was reminded of the mountainous landscape that Feaver describes as her poem 'Ascension': 'I've ended up in a bungalow, / in a valley hemmed in by hills, / often cut off by snow'. I could imagine Feaver, sitting up there among the hills, looking back to Ní Ghríofa as Ní Ghríofa glanced out to her own future mountains through the crack in her neighbour's gable walls. The cracks in Chan's poems, meanwhile, manifest themselves as physical gaps on the page, such as in the poem 'Splitting', which speaks of the relationship between her mother and her lover, maybe imagined, in which there is a 'night she could / no longer bear / their collective grief.' Chan could almost be speaking of Ní Ghríofa or Feaver when the speaker wonders 'if any / of the joy / would become apparent / in a future / poem of hers'.

Swimming expectantly alongside any writing about women who are writing about women is the patriarchy. Like an orca's shadow far below the body of a seal, the idea of it is an eternal possibility beneath the tight meter and the well-honed eloquence of much women's poetry. It is sometimes suggested by what's not said, the lines which have been redacted or removed, the joy which has been constrained into a philosophy. Chan plays beautifully with the idea of unheard words, of miscommunication, with the Chinese symbols that assert themselves among these English-language poems. In her poem 'Written in an Historically White Space (I)', Chan confronts her audience's lack of knowledge about her speaker's own mother tongue, and the English language she writes in to produce this collection. It encourages me to consider the Irish-language poems in *Lies*, and the author-translated English equivalents that lie beside them. The ignorant paranoia of my own lack of understanding of Irish, Mandarin, or Cantonese could be seen to mimic, in some ways, the frustration of the patriarchy: how annoying for the privileged to be unable to understand something.

Before writing this review I briefly Google *menopausal orca*. The first result, a *Guardian* article, is titled 'Killer Whales Explain the Mystery of the Menopause' (I consider, wryly, the real reason why the menopause remains a mystery). My mother's assumption, that menopause enables a species to become more refined communicators and hunters, is quashed by several male academics, who explain that the reason females undergo the menopause is 'because they lose out in reproductive competition with their daughters'. While this may be true to a male perspective, I also like the possibility that women (human and whale) undergo the menopause so that we have

some female wisdom and experience in our society, no longer skewed by the madness of desire or motherhood, to guide us through the cracks.