

‘The I that can be we’: Review by Francesca Bratton

***The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here* by Vidyan Ravinthiran, *Skin Can Hold* by Vahni Capildeo, *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* by Lieke Marsman, translated by Sophie Collins**

‘It’s with your love I try to love that stranger / who walked so far to read this page’, writes Vidyan Ravinthiran in ‘Union’.

Vahni Capildeo’s *Skin Can Hold*, Ravinthiran’s sonnet sequence, *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here* and Lieke Marsman’s *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* are urgent experiments in life-writing, collaborative explorations of language that move between the lyrical I and the plural. Each finds strength in radical empathy, forging connections between the likely and unlikely, from pairs of lovers, doctor and patient, shame and pride, convention and experiment, teacher and student, friend and colleague, poet and translator.

I came back to these collections in the days leading up to the 2019 UK election, and I return to the piecemeal draft on the morning the results were announced. These works fight for the apprehension of poetry as the nervous-system of civil society; ‘language, commonly accused of failure, / thrown like rope’, writes Capildeo, pulling us into the capacious and feeling ‘snow globe’ of a world offered in *Skin Can Hold*.

‘Gramsci warns us in the *Notebooks* that a crisis is not an immediate event but a process’, writes Stuart Hall, considering Thatcher’s ‘regressive modernisation’. ‘It can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism.’ *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here*, in poems such as ‘Brexit’, works through the crisis-process with delicacy. ‘Brexit’ explores the aftermath of the 2016 referendum with prescient delicacy, an antidote to the voices that leak from the turned-down radio on this cold December morning as I write. But today ‘Brexit’ takes on new shades, the county cloaked blue south of Durham city (my old constituency), encircling the rose-red of the North East from Redcar to Berwick-upon-Tweed.

In a recent interview for the T. S. Eliot prize, Ravinthiran discussed the collection’s title, borrowed from Philip Larkin, and Larkin’s movements from ‘I’ to ‘We’. The ‘trick’ of the sonnets, which are dedicated to his wife, is that ‘the pronoun “we” was kind of referring to me and Jenny’, but ‘at certain moments’ these sonnets ‘try and enlarge it . . . so that the reader, if they wanted to, might feel included.’ As John Berryman put it: ‘A pronoun may seem a small matter, but she matters, he matters, it matters, they matter.’

‘Brexit’ works through this ‘enlargement’, part of the collection’s broader perspectival project: in ‘Hazlitt’, ‘*Happy are they, who live in the dream / of their own existence, and see all things / in the light of their own minds*’. Using the sonnet form to step through the argument, counter-argument, Ravinthiran writes of his then-home:

At Durham station we glance from face to face,
guess how each voted. Later
you see a white man square up to a brown, pass
it on and ask *should I have mentioned that?*

It seems my Facebook friends down south are mad
at finding themselves, all of a sudden, a minority
in their own country. Their conventional snobberies
concerning where I live are of a piece
with isms they'd disclaim. You work for the university
alongside women who did not go to university,
who hail from Pity Me and Killhope
and would Leave. All our talk now has this shape:
at lunch a colleague tells me of her mother
who always orders food she cannot bear.

As in *Grun-tu-molani* (2014), the sequence is scored by Ravinthiran's keen wit; in 'Brexit' this is sharply angled towards those who are 'mad' at 'all of a sudden' finding themselves 'a minority', which, with a bathetic false comparison, arrives after the reported description of racial violence in the opening lines.

Ravinthiran performs a double dance within and around the containment of the sonnet form, experimenting with the conventional stanza structure, and ironizing the necessity of undermining its expectations. In 'Brexit' the discursive nature of the sonnet exposes hypocrisies, snobberies, burrowing a new trail through current cultural and political convulsions – it works to expose the 'points of antagonism', to borrow Hall's phrase, that can be leveraged to gain and solidify power.

Elsewhere, however, these experiments are playful. In 'Frost' Ravinthiran riffs on Robert Frost's famous assertion that 'writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down', in an open form sonnet (by 'open form' I mean form is not necessarily consistent) that features the U. S. Open. If we read Frost's pithy remark against its intention, it provides a useful key to the complex forms of these poems and their relaxed, deceptively quiet style. An open form sonnet need not be an anarchic, racket-to-the-head free-for-all: the net is still a presence-in-absence, while the players approaching the court with learned conventions in mind, with drop shots, topspin and half-volleys very much in play. 'The horizon was penciled in then smudged', as Ravinthiran writes in 'Sea break', a useful metaphor for his fine use of form.

In the company of Terrance Hayes's 2018 *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* and Mimi Khalvati's *Afterwardness, The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here* shows the form's enduring ability to miniaturise and bloom in Ravinthiran's search for connection outside of the light of one's own mind.

Measures of Expatriation and *Venus as a Bear* showed the strength of Vahni Capildeo's experimentation with language and exploration of lyric convention; in *Skin Can Hold* Capildeo shifts from the 'I' of the lyric to a collection of masks and masquerades – symphonic, collaborative, regenerative voices.

Divided into six parts, encompassing poetry, prose and collaborative performance texts, *Skin Can Hold* works through extraordinary substitutions on minute and overarching scales, from letters replaced in turn, 'the unpicking of lexicons', meditations on pedagogy, to retellings and remakings of other works, with 'Three playlets after Muriel Spark', the 'transreading', as Capildeo terms it, of Martin Carter's 'I am no soldier' in 'Syntax Poem', 'Radical Shakespeare'

and the Old Norse story of Volundr. These remakings appear alongside creative-critical ‘poem-responses’ to Mark Ford’s *Enter, Fleeing* and Zaffar Kunial’s *Us*, which were commissioned by *The Compass* in 2019.

The stage notes for ‘Shame’ add that ‘The performer wears a coat of mirrors. A Venetian wire mask covers her face.’ With covered eyes and mirrors reflecting back at the observer, this refusal to transmute external humiliations into internalised shame is drawn together:

Eyes without melanin, self-righteous eyes, crystal with crying tears
of self-righteous anger; the eyes of structural racists at well-meaning
gatherings. I have a story. I am not ashamed. I am not interested.

In the opening poem, ‘The Brown Bag Service’, Capildeo wears a satirical mask. Here Capildeo adopts the bureaucratise, simultaneously vicious and mandarin, the voice of the enabling branches of the ‘hostile environment’, stark against the polyphonic forms of the texts that follow:

. . . no other sizing system
worldwide or from the origin of recorded time corresponds to the
sizing system on the brown bag service. Make your choice with
uprightness and care.

In exceptional and normal circumstances, customers may be
deemed to require a cranial refitting.
The cranial refitting facilities are currently closed.

Capildeo revels in poetic masks to explore what Spivak has called ‘strategic essentialisation’, which can be used, for a moment, to assume a strategic viewpoint or identity position – here to reject and satirise racist, misogynistic and institutional humiliations, while elsewhere in the collection these form entry-ways into different perspectives, texts and ideas.

Capildeo’s poetry explores the ambiguity and capaciousness of language, and is deeply interested in the provisionality of meaning. In *Skin Can Hold* this provisionality is fortifying, a form of resistance: ‘language, commonly accused of failure, / thrown like rope.’, Capildeo (previous a lexicographer, with a DPhil in Old Norse) writes in ‘Snowglobe’. As Maggie Nelson observes in the opening of *The Argonauts*:

Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the
expressed . . . gets less air time than his more reverential *Whereof one cannot speak
thereof one must be silent*, but it is, I think, the deeper idea. Its paradox is, quite literally,
why I write, or how I feel able to keep writing.

The ‘thrown rope’ is found trailed through Capildeo’s linguistic and syntactical transformations and lexical networks – something Donna Haraway has termed ‘metaplastm’: ‘a

generic term for almost any kind of alteration in a word, intentional or unintentional'. In Capildeo's 'Game, to Finish: Hamlet Oulipo', the poem is in the action, emerging out of a process of gradual transformation, letter by letter:

Transform one word into another, one letter at a time.
See if you can make a word into its opposite!

JEST
JUST
DUST

MOLE
MOLT
MOAT
GOAT

Familiar from Capildeo's previous collections, this type of linguistic play, laid bare here, gets at a kinship between words – a magnetic propulsion, even, to borrow a central metaphor from 'Syntax poems'. In 'Hamlet Oulipo' do we inevitably move from Yorick's infinite jest to a quintessence of dust? Is Polonius the mole? Might Hamlet be the theatrical goat (Greatest Of All Time)? Though playful, there is much at stake here (as there often is in play). In her review of *Measures of Expatriation* Sandeep Parmar wrote that, for Capildeo:

words, like individual identities, exceed definition: they are fluid and cannot be fixed. Identity, too, can be measured across the recorded and unrecorded histories of language. And any attempt to affix a "pure" identity as he or she moves across national borders, facing death or erasure, partakes in grave acts of violence on the body and in language.

In the 'Syntax Poems', meanwhile, these linguistic movements assert a meaningful, living relationship between texts, part of a wider experiment in collaboration, between Capildeo and her fellow performers and artists at the black box theatre in Cambridge, and Carter's 'I am no Soldier':

The syntax poems offer traces of a way of being *with and inside* Carter's poetry. They are not the kind of independent verbal artefacts called responses or reworkings. They are rearrangeable elements for future experiments. They require several voices. They are best realised via bodies in motion.

The scaffold of the text is mutable, a number of 'rearrangeable elements' – a scaling up of Capildeo's interest in metaplastic word-play, perhaps. Word play and provisionality work to resist the dehumanising categorical language of the 'mask' worn in opening satire, 'The Brown Bag Service'.

The satirical voice of the opening poem re-emerges in ‘The Colonial Schoolmaster and the Mimes: rules for Creating a Martin Carter Classroom from Memories of Convent Schooling in The Caribbean’, part of a broader exploration of colonial pedagogy in the collection. ‘[C]olonial texts for memorisation / autoexecuted in rolling tones’, writes Capildeo in ‘Reading for Compass: Response to Zaffar Kunial, *Us*’. In ‘Futurist Cleopatra: After *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*’ Capildeo explores Spark’s own rich satire while, to my ear, conjuring Plath: ‘Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first . . . Mussolini stood on a platform like him that loves me.’ *Skin Can Hold* advocates for its own pedagogic processes – itself a form of resistance: approaching texts through ‘feeling’, building a network of impressions, responses and associations.

The capaciousness of Capildeo’s subjects and theoretical explorations are linked through these processes of transmutation, rewriting, and remoulding. ‘Snowglobe’ seems to offer a metaphor for the collection as a whole; an object designed to be shaken, rearranging the parts inside, contained by its own round, glassy skin.

Lieke Marsman’s *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes*, translated from the Dutch by Sophie Collins, is, like *Skin Can Hold*, preoccupied by ways of being *with and inside* poetry. This is articulated in the book’s collaborative investigation of translation, and in Marsman’s writing of the body and body politic.

In Marsman’s eight ‘Scan’ poems, she lies in a MRI scanner on election day in her native Netherlands. As her body studied for signs of cancerous cells, she performs her own ‘scan’ of the political and social body of her native Netherlands, taking in the language that surrounds cancer, Dutch politics, the industry of healthcare, the gendered nature of diagnosis and female pain. Marsman’s ‘How are you feeling’ delves into ideas raised in the poems that bookend the essay. ‘[A]s your perception of your own position in relation to your birth and death becomes suddenly clearer, so too does your perception of your position in relation to the rest of society’, writes Marsman in the excoriation of the healthcare business in her fragmentary essay. Turning her attention to what we might call mindfulness capitalism, Marsman describes the difficulties female patients have in ‘being taken seriously’ by medical professionals, and blasts ‘weekend supplement after weekend supplement’ that suggests ‘products or treatments you can buy in order to reduce stress.’

The book aligns the idea of writing the body through illness, and the relationship between the poet and translator. *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* moves through a series of powerful reenactments of treatment, through which Marsman constructs the self. The poet is written in and out of the text, as articulated in the metaphor of ‘Evaporate, Condense’, emphasised by the slippage of the final slant rhyme:

Evaporate, condensate. Even disasters
are composites of events, not products of fate.
You just have to distil, then ablate:
You will heal. This will fade.

Marsman holds Audre Lorde and Susan Sontag in hand throughout. As Lorde writes:

I do not wish my anger and pain and fear about cancer to fossilise into yet another silence, not to rob me of whatever strength can lie at the core of this experience, openly acknowledged and examined.

She articulates her diagnosis and treatment in what becomes a cry for intentionality and the equation of the voice of the poem with the poet. In her 'Translator's Note: Dear Lieke', Collins writes:

there is a deep intimacy in the way *you* seek to connect with *your* audience. I perceive it in the amount of credit you give your readers when you switch quickly between a voice of dry sarcasm and a more earnest one...

Like Ravinthiran's 'enlargements', the 'you' of the poems becomes Marsman, her girlfriend, Simone, parents, the reader:

You coexist with other bodies
that piss, dribble, rant shit. All the while
a choir in a minor key softly screaming.

Ideas of the body and the body as text (and vice versa) emerge in the later sections of the book. The 'scan' poems work within a contained temporal form (determined by the number of minutes: 'The Following Scan Will Last Four Minutes', 'The Following Scan Will Last Two Minutes'). This contained, minute-measured overarching form is secured by the careful patterning which both belies the associative movements of ideas and subjects in poems such as 'The Following Scan Will Last Three Minutes' ('schnittzel . . . kebab . . . reality TV'), and provides structural tension, through circling repeated lines: 'Is always right', 'A new day' in 'The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes' and with couplets in 'The Following Scan Will Last Four Minutes': 'Before you sink away | into the morphinesweet unreality of the everyday'.

Auden wrote that 'the verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public, but they are really a private letter to the composer.' Collins's 'Dear Lieke' letters receive no reply, and the Anglophone reader without access to the original Dutch must trust an interpretation, 'the echo of the original' as Benjamin put it. But rather than a 'private letter', *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* lays bare the body of the text as a work of translation and interpretation. 'Poëzie' (Marsman's original) and 'Poetry' (Collins's translation) are, for instance, printed alongside each other. From Marsman's reflexive poem:

. . . Poetry
today seems to me like a place
I've not been given a ticket to

The poem meditates on the difficulty of writing during the bodily alienation of treatment, and finding ‘the place for the genuine’ – to borrow Marianne Moore’s phrase from a poem with the same title.

‘Poetry’ becomes equally a comment on translation and the difficulty of getting at what lies in the reaches of what has already been said. ‘[T]he work of translation is frequently inhibited by feelings of shame’, writes Collins (here I thought of Capildeo’s line: ‘Shame on behalf of others is translating’). Collins questions whether translators ‘can ever be neutral in the way they’re so often thought to be’, noting the ‘egotistical’ which is to say ‘subjective’ natural response of the translator. This is expressed almost metaphorically in Collins’s increasing nervousness as she inhabits the work: ‘To rewrite, read, revise and reread an account of the symptoms of cancer, its diagnosis and treatment is to repeat, unwittingly, a hypochondriac’s mantra’, the work required ‘avoid[ing] projecting my own selfish fears onto your narrative.’

An experiment in life-writing, *The Following Scan Will Last Five Minutes* deftly weaves together an examination of the language that surrounds cancer with careful and conceptual formal experimentation and an ambitious, important exploration of the intimate relationship between poet and translator and the poetics of translation.