

Making Sense: Review by Jenna Clake

WITCH by Rebecca Tamás, *Discipline* by Jane Yeh, *Significant Other* by Isabel Galleymore

When the world fails to make sense, when our metanarratives lose power, we turn to other, perhaps subversive, narratives to try to make meaning – this is a connecting thread between Rebecca Tamás’s *WITCH*, Jane Yeh’s *Discipline*, and Isabel Galleymore’s *Significant Other*.

Tamás writes in her article ‘The Songs Of Hecate: Poetry and the Language Of The Occult’ that both poetry and the occult provide meaning by embracing ‘the necessary irrationality that exists squashed up against rationality in the material world’. In *WITCH*, this idea is manifested as separate realms that occult figures can pass through or reveal. In ‘/penis hex/’, the sky is ripped back: ‘hand in the unowned air / peeling strips of dull bleached sky’; in ‘Interrogation (1)’, the sky is ‘a shaking plate of light peeling you back’; there are ‘Little cracks coming in, small flaws in the glass’. The titular witch has the power to reveal these two realms, to understand that the ‘real’ world isn’t the only one, nor the only way of making meaning, and so the collection strips back what we take as given, becoming a feminist interrogation of patriarchal and capitalist systems.

‘WITCH AND THE SUFFRAGETTES’ depicts scenes of silencing and control, a politics of ingestion and harm:

again somehow the witch finds it is about eating and not eating
they don’t eat and so they are made to eat
she asks a policeman ‘what is with this eating thing?’
but he doesn’t know why just that when a woman eats
she is eating for the state

The force-feeding is a patriarchal execution of power – pushing women to eat and imbuing that action with a meaningless sense of loyalty to the patriarchy, especially as the witch ‘knows it looks like a penis being forced down her throat / and she knows that they know it’. In ‘WITCH SCOLD’, the witch attempts ‘to be separate from her own body’, to ‘unwoman’, but she is silenced:

he held her arms and she kicked and someone else did
it went over her head the metal bar over her tongue
caged latches she stopped struggling could not get away

Amongst the political turmoil, the witch is able to express herself sexually, perhaps with sensitivity:

The witch would like to get some of them under her and cradle

Their heads on her breasts or fuck them against the arm of the sofa

The witch wants to act both maternally and sexually towards the men, to diffuse danger and then conquer it with her body, in direct opposition to the penetrative acts of silencing. In 'WITCH AND THE DEVIL', Tamás carefully constructs a complex and tender depiction of the devil, who has 'long eyelashes' and a body that is 'hard and soft', both 'a beautiful man and a beautiful woman', and who makes

. . . the witch a salad which had lettuce and
cucumber in it but which also had
watermelon in it the pink flesh and the black seeds
the witch began crying at this though she wasn't exactly
clear why

The devil's small gestures of care are as radical, revealing, and as transformative as acts of violence, and offer a way of making connection and meaning.

There is a sense that the witch stands in for *all* witches: the power and resilience of women through time and space. Sometimes, it seems that the witch is a character the speaker has created as a means to express her sadness and anger: the speaker drily announces: 'the saddest year of my life is every single year' ('WITCH EARTH'), and very occasionally and surprisingly presents herself as 'I'. The witch is a figure through which we might attempt, Tamás suggests, to make sense of a tumultuous world, or alternatively a route of self-preservation.

In Jane Yeh's *Discipline*, speakers attempt to rationalise their absurd lives by pulling apart structures of domesticity, suburbia, and identity. In 'A Short History of Migration', Yeh's speakers expose the ridiculousness of assimilation and appropriation:

We boarded a seashell to ride across the waves.
The mythology of our passage involved dirt, sharks, a zeppelin, and wires.
We at the same meal seventeen days in a row (pancakes).
We learned to say yes, please, in four different languages.

Yeh's collective speakers utilise 'cute', almost whimsical images, and declarative, bathetic statements to highlight the absurdity of the reverence needed to survive Western society. The speakers learn about 'washing machines, ennui, and fake tan', assimilating themselves into an American, white suburbia where children are 'hindered' by 'violins, bad haircuts, and diplomas', and their 'heritage' is 'repurposed into handy snacks'.

The collection proposes new, nightmarish, and surreal systems of meaning, centring on a sense of apocalypse. Several of the poems use the title 'A Short History of . . .', suggesting that the speakers are providing us with posited versions of a world now-passed. In 'A Short History of Violence', a boy is chased by a 'feathered / Ball of bad dreams', 'smoke at his back'; 'A Short

History of Destruction’ takes place in ‘the palace of cats’, where the speakers’ ‘peril’ is ‘molten and diabolical’, and they are ‘killed like children’. The cats’ reign is terrifying and oppressive: the ‘smell of cat wafted malevolently through the cracks / In the platinum ceiling’. Yeh’s poems accumulate and destabilise meaning over the course of the collection. In ‘Events of 1871’, we learn that ‘Long haired cats are assembling in the Crystal Palace’, and the detectives from ‘The Detectives’ reappear, defying time and space, to investigate ‘the circumstances’. By pulling together characters and events, and disordering their linearity, Yeh subverts our systems of comprehension.

In ‘A Short History of Mythology’, Yeh pushes characterisation to the point of zaniness:

To be a lady centaur
Is to be in heaven
Like a shower of spiral curls
It smells like violets and shit

Leaping across the Hedgehog Isles
and wearing a tropical lei
my tail is springy

Like poems of the Gurlisque, Yeh’s work repeatedly establishes images of feminine cuteness – colourful and flowery – and disrupts them with anticlimactic statements of reality, drawing on ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in equal measure (several of the poems are ekphrastic, drawing on sculpture, notional artworks, and drag).

This blurring of ‘high’ and ‘low’ (and thus a destabilisation of those categories) is most apparent in Yeh’s use of food imagery: night is ‘like a slab of bacon’; hair is like ‘pancetta’; a ‘slain avocado comes back to life as guacamole’; people will ‘spread out everywhere and chill like a floppy omelette’; a speaker wilts ‘like a leftover chicken wing in the crispy light of day’. In foregrounding everyday food – ‘junk’ food – Yeh pulls back the lens of aestheticised perfection to show the world as it really stands. Each time we think we have a handle of Yeh’s poems, and expectation of what they might do, she wrong-foots us; so we must begin again, and join her in interrogating patriarchal and elitist notions of what poetry is, what it can do, and what it should include.

Isabel Galleymore’s poems are compact and close. *Significant Other*’s title is taken from Donna Haraway’s *The Companion Species Manifesto*, in which she describes the relationship between humans and animals thus:

Significantly other to each other; in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love.

While Haraway’s statement perfectly summarises Galleymore’s poetics, the poems themselves have a unique precision and inventiveness, as in ‘Crab’:

Sublittoral place in which this crab sits
like the lid of a pie, its crimped edge
rests upon a mixture of pincers, legs –
two black dactyls headlines the others
dressed in the fizz and stubble of brick.

Rather than dissecting the animal to understand it, Galleymore places it in conversation with exact, surprising comparisons, until it is impossible to see the animal as being separate from us. The meticulousness of Galleymore's attention to sound, rhythm, and image transports us to a dreamlike world in which a crab is 'a soft ball of milk with milk's film skin', and a limpet is

a stray magician's cup,
moon-textured, the shape of light
pointing through frosted glass.

Galleymore's poems work on multiple, complex layers, expressing concern over our place within the world (and our negative impact on it), and simultaneously wondering about connection – both human and animal – as in 'The Scrotum Frog':

The day is unendangeredly bright
when you kiss your lover in the hope
he'll turn into a frog.

...

Somewhere you've read, like many others,
that the best love is the unattainable kind:
a dreamy stranger with a wordless mouth

sits among the reeds and crisp packets.

Behind the apparent unrequited love story, the crisp packets subtly suggest our toxic presence. Galleymore also uses the scrotum frog to explore the anxieties of being significant to one another – of having a complex relationship with the natural world, and of having a fraught relationship with a partner. Galleymore's poems interrogate what it means to be and have a significant other, and what to do when that significance is joyful, or something to endure.

Many of the poems in *Significant Other* feel like whispers, small but radical movements – like a hermit crab finding a new shell. In 'Rainforest Spelled Backwards is Lustful', Galleymore shifts pace and tone:

Among the saplings and small ferns, you
can't help but see a skirt of penises
prodding into the earth, the roots are short and
unobtrusive warts allow the tree to suck
the air is steamy and I become self-
conscious of this other body

In her elided, slippery lines (inspired by Matthea Harvey's poems), Galleymore interrogates her own practice of comparison, wondering if we should embrace the associations – however weird and wonderful – if they help us to connect. In considering our significance to one another, to the world around us, each poem seems to say (and accept): 'I am very small'.