

## Eating Pamphlets: Review by Rachel Chanter

*Handling* by Jack Thacker, *Assembly Instructions* by Katie Hale, *The Unquiet* by L. Kiew, *The Last Verses of Beccán* by Rowan Evans, *Kismet* by Jennifer Lee Tsai, *Nobody Represents Me* by Zeyar Lynn, *The Neighbourhood* by Hannah Lowe, *Our Available Magic* by Livia Franchini, *Truffle Hound* by Luke Kennard, *Daddy Poem* by Helen Charman

Like Mark Strand, I have been eating poetry. In reviewing ten pamphlets, one hopes that each will be, at the least, a palatable snack. Most pamphlets, however, turn out to be an entire meal, their components often combining on the palate to form flavours and textures greater than a sum of their parts.

Abandoning this rather heavy-handed metaphor, I found, in exploring these pamphlets, that small British presses continue to put out some of the most curious and engaging contemporary poetry to be found. Voices speak from genuinely variegated experiences; through translators and in different languages; through experimental and traditional forms; from the distant past and the immediate present.

*Handling*, a debut gathering of poems by Jack Thacker, brings an extraordinary quietude and grace to the subject of British farming life. Contemplating the harshness of rural life with an unflinching yet philosophical eye, Thacker is an inheritor of Hughes's ability to reveal the mystical in the quotidian life of the land (though fortunately not of Hughes's tone of self-satisfaction).

The collection is split into two parts: the former a meditation on the poet's own experience on the family farm and the latter written during his time spent as poet in residence at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading. Interspersed with images from the museum's collections, *Handling*, as the title suggests, is a remarkably tactile collection. It connects a current generation of rural workers with their forbears, through the tools they use and the actions they perform; through a shared experience of the cycle of life and death that is never far away from the day-to-day of agricultural life. The balance and dialogue between the two sections is self-evident but handled lightly. In 'Exchange', from Part I, a sick calf is scooped up and deposited in a barn to die 'in the warm'. In 'Galleries', the closing poem in Part II, we are reminded that 'all farms are graveyards'. This line refers not only to the proximity of death and decay to the life of the working farmer, but also to the function of museums as mausoleums to house objects that have essentially lost their use.

Thacker's poems are very recognisably poetry on the page – formal stanzas employing carefully thought-out structures of rhyme and metre that are nevertheless applied with a barely-there touch, as in the title poem 'Handling':

A low, slow burn, early summer sun  
dyes the evening orange, through barn slats  
casts lines on broom-swept stone.

The central poem of the collection is 'Put Your Hands Together', a biography of farm labourer-turned Primitive Methodist preacher Joseph Arch, the first Member of Parliament from a rural

labouring-class background. Uniting agricultural workers against ‘the dead hand of the church, / the farmer’s arbitrary fist’, to establish the first successful trade union, Arch is ‘At the centre . . . holding it all together.’ And indeed, in choosing his means of being remembered to the world, it was a cast of his hands, rather than the traditional death mask that Arch chose, an image of which graces the cover of this collection.

Similarly embedded in the landscape of rural England is Katie Hale’s *Assembly Instructions*. This is Hale’s second pamphlet, published almost simultaneously with her debut novel *My Name is Monster*. The collection opens with two poems which introduce us to the speaker. ‘Offcomer’ situates us within the ruins of a folkloric landscape, juxtaposing mystical imagery – ‘blood’, ‘heather’, and ‘the bones of clans’ – with the more prosaic – ‘disinfectant’, ‘4x4s’, and ‘a rainbow of diesel and mud’ – in a way that feels familiar from this brand of new nature poetry. The second poem also feels a little tick-box-y, this time dealing with the speaker’s blood-bond with the mother through the act of birth, with attendant gore: ‘slithered out of the cut in my mother’. There is not much that is startling or off-kilter in this collection, though there is much to please. Some of the more convincing poems deal with the subject of teaching poetry to students: in ‘In the Yellow Library Where in 2004 I Had my First Kiss’ a student has written a poem about birds which ‘always make a poem purple’. The poet as teacher advises her students to use abstract imagery in their poems. ‘*But Miss, they say, / that could be anything. / And I say, Yes. Exactly*’. This approach of introducing unexpected images is one the poet herself subscribes to and is evident in the rest of the collection. This makes for some interesting moments, such as when the embracing bodies in ‘Thaw’ are described as being ‘still as the Taiga’, but there is the lingering impression that these attractive images could indeed ‘be anything’, mean anything.

Meaning is something which both multiplies and eludes in L. Kiew’s *The Unquiet*. This Chinese-Malaysian poet provides a representation of the experience of mixed cultural heritage that is, fittingly, both elegant and awkward. The opening poem ‘Swallow’ sets the linguistic scene, telling us that ‘Grammars gather on powerlines’ like birds. We become aware that, for the bilingual poet, every word has a shadowy sister-word, a double which lurks in the background, subtly changing and questioning meaning and expression. The first stanza of ‘Speech’ blends languages in a way that both delights and disorients:

Ah Ba speak red: liddat tone  
of voice sure salah wan.  
Rojak-say okay wan. She learn  
From school proper taupau can.  
At home no need to paiseh.

This disorientation is deliberate, inviting the monolingual Western reader into the poet’s experience of merging cultures, while simultaneously foregrounding their ignorance. The reader can choose either to peruse the collection with constant reference to Google translate (which more often than not appears as confounded by the idiosyncrasies of languages and dialects as I was) or to embrace the confusion. An awareness of the colonial project, which invades both the internal and the external spaces by privileging English as the language of expression, is constantly present. In ‘Learning to be mixi’ we are told of the speaker’s experience of attending an English boarding school and Cambridge University: ‘the backs and the hate, / supressing the suffix-lah’ / being proper and nice’. One function of ‘-lah’ in Malay

is to indicate an imperative, and it is interesting that the poet notes specifically this pressure to make her statements less commanding and authoritative in the English language.

This ‘unquiet’ cacophony of language is mirrored in the pamphlet by the presence of the dead: ancestors and antecedents who transmit their heritage. In ‘Haunts’, an inherited dress is ‘red shantung; / its last occupant is / heartbroken and tugging / on my hem.’ The poet’s own place in this line of succession is also present, particularly in the poem ‘Immersion Learning’, in which the poet teaches her daughter that she has the power to reject the authoritative teachings of another culture: ‘Daughter, you don’t have to / imbibe. Truth puts mud in / water. You have riparian rights’. This poem is the gem of the collection, demonstrating the poet’s skill in wielding a conceit. Kiew draws a thread of metaphor through the stanzas in a way both beautiful and subtle.

You’ve learnt some men believe  
they have the voice of storms,  
downdraughts of revelation.

...

Bouyancy is also your birthright  
by the moon’s wet slap.  
Kicking was your first conversation.  
You are a strong swimmer.

Seek it out. It deserves to be enjoyed in full.

Focusing on the shifting nature of language has proved fertile ground in recent pamphlet publications. *The Last Verses of Beccán* from the ever-interesting Guillemot Press is an unusual addition to this area, blending Latin, Gaelic, and Old Norse on the page in wilfully disorienting ways. A modest work in terms of length, this pamphlet is richly layered. The poet Rowan Evans undertakes a loose engagement with (rather than translation of) the verses of the 7<sup>th</sup> century monk-poet Beccán mac Luigdech, which themselves are written in praise of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Saint Colm Cille (or Columba). Beccán was part of the religious community at the monastery on Iona, founded by Columba and, it is thought, can also be identified with a hermit who lived for many years in a sea cave on the coast of Rum.

Fluidity and a sense of exposure – to the natural world and to the buffeting and conflicting currents of language – are the central themes of this collection. Opening with two pages near-indecipherable to the English reader (the second of these just a scattering of word-fragments – Gaelic suffixes and prefixes), the intention to expose the reader to a clamour of sounds is evident. Throughout, phrases, words, and partial-words appear in Latin and Gaelic:

Beccán Ruimm, sea-vision  
*herimum in oceano*  
his wasteland panegyrics

...

if fictive currach

cross longhaired  
                                  *cechaing tríchait*  
cross whale's shrine

The name of Columba itself appears in both the Latinised and Gaelic form, and with several different spellings, as do near-English words which appear to be a hybrid of languages. Meaning is perpetually close but usually just out of reach, leaving the reader feeling as though they are constantly on the cusp of breathless revelation.

Adding another layer to this carefully orchestrated study in sound and meaning, *The Last Verses of Beccán* is also available as a recording, a sound-composition which blends the voice of the poet with field recordings made in the Hebrides. The poet's voices slides in and out of audibility, at times almost drowned out by the sound of waves, of birds, a drone of echoing notes. As a project, it is stark and compelling.

Jennifer Lee Tsai's *Kismet* seeks a line of continuity down the shipping lanes between Liverpool and East Asia, the route travelled by her grandparents when they emigrated to the UK. 'Mersey River' blends emblems of nationality, referencing the 'operatic language' of Liverpool Bay seagulls, the poet's grandfather's Chinese passport, the Blue Funnel Line shipping company, her grandmother's jade necklace. The poem is split in two on the page, each half corresponding with the other, two separate strands of a rope twisted together. In 'Another Language' the poet returns to the image of her grandparents disembarking for the first time at Liverpool: 'two gold koi / swimming into the Mersey'.

The project of *Kismet* is, like other pamphlets reviewed here, an investigation into identity. Personal experiences and traumas are linked with inheritance, drawn into a larger family saga. The pamphlet has the rough form of a bildungsroman, moving from formative childhood reflections to coming-of-age experiences of love and loss. 'Self-Portrait at Four Years Old' reflects on being the outsider at school; the daily instances of rejection and othering that children are so particularly adept at inflicting on their peers:

    . . . / In the playground, I hear  
something I don't understand / an occasional refrain  
Chinese, Japanese, don't forget to wash your knees / First  
school photo / mother reminds me to smile for the  
camera / I don't tell her that I never feel like smiling  
at school / I am learning to be silent / I am learning  
how to keep secrets / I am learning how to be alone

Interestingly, Lee Tsai echoes Kiew's observation that language profoundly effects self-expression: 'When I speak Cantonese, / I'm a different person. / Louder, brighter'. The insidious and seemingly inevitable side of enforced naturalisation is a dulling-down, a suppression of the brightness and vitality that accompanies multiplicity.

Lee Tsai has the particular skill of blending cultures and geographies to form something completely original; a new, third thing, beautiful in its strangeness and potentiality. In 'The Age of Innocence', the poet and her cousin are in the family restaurant in Liverpool, where

‘koi and angelfish / in a bright aquarium’ are ‘placed for feng-shui’ and outside the window, in ‘a hinterland on the coastline / of the Dee estuary’, ‘Hen harriers dive as merlins pursue’. *Kismet* seems to make the vital and relevant point that nationality and identity cannot be reduced to geography, cannot be simplified in the way that (to take a political view) the policies of contemporary western nationalism would like them to be.

The key poem of the pamphlet, for me, was ‘Swallows’, in which a meditation on the migration patterns of birds makes a mockery of the idea of borders: ‘British swallows spend winter in South Africa, / soar through Western France, the Pyrenees, / down Eastern Spain in to Morocco, across the Sahara.’ There has always been space in the natural world, of which we are a part, for emigration and free movement.

*Nobody Represents Me* is the first UK publication of celebrated Burmese poet Zeyar Lynn. Published by Clinic, the pamphlet is a work of collaborative translation between Lynn, Ko Ko Thett, and Vicky Bowman. This collaborative approach is an interesting decision as Lynn is himself a seasoned translator, though working largely on translations of Western poetry into Burmese. The title of the work clearly plays with this concept – highlighting the extent to which translation plays a part in representation. Notes in the front matter tell us that the eponymous poem of the collection was, however, translated solely by Lynn. With strong flavours of Prufrock, the poem seems to question the place and function of the individual, and the individual as a poet, within a clamorous, monetised society:

what shall I do? is it inappropriate to express my feelings  
family well sinks lower & lower but not to worry keep my chin up  
yo bro, we both live in a brand-new satellite town  
you got bus fare? Let’s go occupy the city for a few hours  
we must be poetry because we have no utilitarian values

‘A Postcard from afar’ also indicts contemporary society, taking a pleasingly caustic (if now fairly familiar) crack at Insta-culture’s ability to turn the world into a mere backdrop for human experience:

you can ride sea-turtles in the Galapagos Islands  
throw ancient iguanas by the tail  
if you want to have fun with them.  
The mountain ranges will kneel for you like a camel.  
...  
The earth repays you for every step with flowers  
...  
Have you forgotten to say something?  
Just edit, cut & paste as necessary

Lynn’s imagery is oftentimes discordant, disjointed, and meaning seeps away from each poem the more one tries to grasp after it, as in ‘Sundays Luxuriant Sundays’, where ‘new-age yellow flowers sprout out of / history’s nameless pure white skull’. The apparent arbitrariness of imagery, however, serves to remind the reader of the process of translation; that poetic form

and meaning can be radically altered by language, idiom, and cultural experience. Lynn's pamphlet, like Kiew's, seeks to destabilise the reading experience of the anglo-centric audience.

Hannah Lowe's *The Neighbourhood*, more than any other pamphlet here reviewed perhaps, fulfils a traditional function of poetry in being both personally and publicly engaged. The pamphlet focusses on Lowe's experiences as a new mother but, as the epigraph from Blake's 'Infant Sorrow' would suggest, this work is one that is socially focussed. Lowe's love and concern for her son – his future and his safety – is echoed in her concern for neighbours, acquaintances, for children she has never met.

In 'The Garden is Not for Everyone', two poems merge on the page, to be read separately or as one: the story of a London community garden being closed off to the residents of a council block mirrored by a poem about the misery of mass migration.

All summer the children have been running **in the global refugee crisis**  
in the communal garden **Ammar is searching for his brother on a train**

The confluence of the two stories shows us how the innocuous-seeming erosion of the rights of some can escalate; why we must resist even small instances of social othering, resist walls and fences, resist narratives in everyday life which tell communities 'this is for some but not for others'.

*The Neighbourhood* is very much a love letter to the London most Londoners know - fewer Neo-Gothic facades, more chicken shops and uneasy communal spaces. In 'Wood Green Stories', Lowe describes the scruffy minutiae of a London residential borough:

A feud between  
one Evangelical church  
and another

Tropical fish  
in the storeroom  
of Matalan

Homeless man  
with BHS boxed  
dinner-set at his feet

Lowe captures vividly the way in which a part of the city, once known intimately, can seem like a lost world when considered from a new address only a few miles away. In 'Total Body Conditioning', Lowe paints an evocative, almost erotic, picture of a Brixton aerobics instructor, who becomes the totem of a former life:

. . . a thick chain around  
your thick strong neck. You shouted our names  
like you owned us – *Latisha, Angela, Hannah!*

Finding out years later that Mark the aerobics instructor still struts and shouts at the Brixton studio, she remarks on how it feels as though her old life there ‘still runs in time with this gentler one’. For Lowe, the continuity of the lives of the people who touched her enable a virtual continuity of unlived lives, roads not taken.

Lowe is a poet with a genuinely compassionate and humanitarian voice, her poetry more unselfconsciously accomplished with every new offering. Refusing to seal herself off and lead a life divorced from the people around her – as many city-dwellers find themselves unwittingly pushed into doing – the poet insists on observing the functions of community.

Tracking rituals, spells, and evocations through the everyday, Livia Franchini’s collection *Our Available Magic* takes place in a world both commonplace and strange. Many poems from this Italian poet, translator, and novelist have a strong narrative element, and have the slightly uncanny flavour of short stories translated from another language and culture transposed into poetry on the page. A longish poem, ‘Swimmer’s Ear’, is the standout narrative poem of the collection, exploring themes of femininity, sexuality, and dominance. The character of the speaker is much more fully fleshed out than one usually finds in poetry, the voice of a bright, smart receptionist who starts out by detailing her fashion choices – ‘I like those silky two-piece suits . . . / Pink looks loveliest in winter, orange in / summer with a light tan’. As with the collection as a whole, a darker subtext of troubling power dynamics and exploitation comes to the fore, undermining the flippant, sunny tone, and the last few lines deliver a significant punch:

. . . there is  
sand in my earshells when he pushes me under, salt  
water sluicing down my earhole and the black pain  
strikes me into a deep sleep.

‘Bark’, the title poem, opens with a quotation from a disgraced Italian teleshopping personality, Wanna Marchi (trust me, it’s a worthy Wikipedia hole to fall down). In 2006 Marchi was convicted of aggravated fraud for peddling ‘amulets’ that would ward off the ‘evil eye’ through a televised lotto game. Among the talismans sold for extortionate sums were sachets of table salt and ivy clipped from a vine growing on her office building. Exploitation of the superstitions people hold onto foregrounds the poem, giving a sinister weight to the details of the little occult rituals which children build their lives around: ‘say each other’s name / three times in the mirror’; ‘fingertips dipped in the / soft wax of candles at dinner’. As this collection reminds us, though, these mundane observances are what we have to hold onto in a world both violent and often numbingly mundane: are ‘our available magic’.

Luke Kennard’s *Truffle Hound* is an experimental pamphlet by a poet determined to question what has the right to be called poetry. Kennard’s work hums with morose humour, his deadpan cynicism stabbed through with occasional flashes of sincerity, all the more effective for their fleeting quality. Abandoning rhyme and metre, this collection hovers somewhere between lyrical short stories and prosaic poetry.

*Truffle Hound* plays a very specific game with readers, burying complex and well-expressed thoughts within what sometimes feel like rambling blocks of text. When the kernel of the idea

which drives the poem is revealed, the effect is almost one of irritation that what seemed like pointless waffle was actually the perfect preamble. In ‘Ghost Story’, a longish tale of child’s aversion to horror movies and scary stories morphs into an adult’s fear of death, at the centre of which is the bleak conception of afterlife: ‘You will be the victim / and the perpetrator of every single act ever committed. And then / God will say, “Hey, you.” And the trick is if you remember who you / were’. In ‘Filter’, what begins as a story about smoking – the poet’s relationship with cigarettes at various points in his life – passes, by way of swift history lesson on the invention of cork tobacco filters, into a meditation on the things we absorb through human experience. What do we try to filter out and what can we not expel once we have been exposed? How does life sully us? ‘I would like to offer those I have hurt, those I have damaged, a / Better self. A filtered self. But this is only vanity . . .’

Abstract and absurd poems, such as ‘Accountability’, in which the poet wakes up to find ‘every- / one is Luke Kennard and they have re-elected Luke Kennard’ sit alongside the sketch of an idea for a sci-fi novel that reads like a writer’s internal monologue. It’s all very knowing and meta.

*Truffle Hound* is a collection I want to like more than I actually do – though I have a strange suspicion that this might be the poet’s intention. It’s just a hunch.

With a title like *Daddy Poem*, the spectre of Plath cannot help but hover over Helen Charman’s recent pamphlet from SPAM Press. Haunted as it is by the figure of a poet whose misery in life was – and continues to be – exploited by men in death (one need only consider the way the violence of her life is picked over by tabloid newspapers every time a new volume of her private letters is published), *Daddy Poem* probes the issue of misogyny, abuse of power, and patriarchal pedagogy in the academy. In this fragmentary dialogue, Charman exposes, often with a bitter edge of humour, the systematic exploitation of power perpetrated by the men who are meant to protect and educate women in their care. The opening two pages lay out the problem: the way in which female poets are often simultaneously objectified and dismissed.

The esteemed editor sits down at the manuscript meeting, shuffles papers, begins,  
*So which one is your Daddy poem, then?*

...

The tenured professor sits down in the tutorial, unzips his flies, begins,  
*So which one is her Daddy poem, then?*

Charman notes how, for women, exploitation and threat merge with everyday experiences, and how much of the didactic experience of the world hinges on their own vulnerability.

sometimes remembering  
to buy yourself flowers  
always thinking about  
getting a fringe

learning about violence  
learning about violence

In a strikingly succinct summation of the contemporary feminist experience, Charman identifies the source of the anger that many women currently feel towards men: 'You have taken up all of my space / and for that I can never forgive you'.

*Daddy Poem* is quite a difficult work to really get your teeth into and is more the articulation of a thought-exercise than a fully fleshed-out selection of poetry. It is, however, important that publishers like SPAM are carving out space for work which challenges the notion of traditional poetry. Pamphlets are, as this selection shows, a versatile form, and often constitute some of the most vibrant offerings in to contemporary poetics.