

MARTIN MALONE: REVIEW

‘Hemlock for Socrates’: Faber New Poets

13 by Elaine Beckett, Faber & Faber. 17pp; £5, ISBN 978-0-571-33039-3

14 by Crispin Best, Faber & Faber. 18pp; £5, ISBN 978-0-571-33040-9

15 by Sam Buchan-Watts, Faber & Faber. 17pp; £5, ISBN 978-0-571-33041-6

16 by Rachel Curzon, Faber & Faber. 17pp; £5, ISBN 978-0-571-33042-3

For an early career writer, is there a poisoned chalice more flavoursome than that handed to the ‘Faber New Poets’? The sheer status of the Faber *imprimatur*, coupled with the canonical drift of such generational marketing initiatives, ratchets up qualitative expectation and suspicion in equal measure. Yet there is surely not an up-and-coming poet alive who would not, either frankly or secretly, exchange places with one of the chosen here represented. Faber and Faber is the home of Eliot, Larkin, Plath, Hughes, Heaney, Armitage and Duffy, among others. Canonically at least, and whether we like it or not, it represents a gold standard for English poetry. In the face of such great expectations, one must pause, then, to remember that these are debut pamphlets and, therefore, prone to the fallibilities and special pleadings of all such, regardless of publisher and catalogue. There is a reasonable assumption, however, that four manuscripts chosen from the mountainous slush pile at Bloomsbury House will reveal themselves to be *something* of a cut above. And fortunately – whilst I cringe slightly at the *ersatz* rock n’roll tour bus aesthetic which sometimes accompanies the FNP promotion – each of the pamphlets discussed here shoulder their burdens impressively. The chosen ones have been picked for a reason. Trust me. In no particular order of merit, then...

Sam Buchan-Watts’s pamphlet puts on something of a bravura display of style, control and range. The four prose poems within it make good use of the form’s dynamic tension between concision and its potential for expansiveness. I particularly like the excellent meditation, in ‘Moon’, upon how mankind has failed to learn from its own quantum leap into space, remaining flag-bound and lazily earthed in dumb concepts that the lunar landings ought to have rendered obsolete. Each of these, too, display an unerring skill, apparent in all four poets here, for extracting full value from their titles, which either open up metaphorical space for the themes or cast an agreeably skewed light upon what follows. The sequence kicks off with the verve and suburban chutzpah of *Zoom*-era Armitage in ‘Matters Concerning God’ and ‘Narrow Contact Zone’ with its ‘buttressed leisure centre, its bashed signage, and the bonk / of a car’s underside over a turfed-up speed bump’. However, as with Rachel Curzon’s Plath influence, Buchan-Watts takes a peck of his precursor’s DNA and concocts something convincingly new and his own. These poems have the very clear sense of a distinctive human voice and feel scored impeccably for reading aloud. Impressive too, is the range and control displayed over so short a collection. ‘Nose to Tail’ dextrously manages to sketch out its allegorical comparison between a livestock lorry crammed with pigs and the school bus alongside it in a traffic queue, whilst simultaneously offering ironic comment upon animal welfare and human cruelty. ‘Car Game Logic’ is hugely impressive and ‘The Plastic Sacks’ artfully communicates its vague sense of threat hidden in the open view of daily ephemera and fuelled by society’s neurotic over-sensitivity to its own dirt and self-generated waste. A mirrored pair of before-and-after poems, ‘The Days Go Just Like That’/ ‘The Days Just Go Like That’ again suggest Armitage’s quirky eye but – not unnaturally – refuse his humour in favour of a Larkinesque poignancy, in which English history is so often mediated through something a bit tacky and daft as ‘a medieval re-enactment’. Only rarely does the verse over-balance. ‘Cowcium’, for example, veers a bit too close to the emptier end of the Me-Thinking-Cleverly school for my taste. But, overall, this is a tub-thumping debut from a young poet so good I want to kill him.

Another impressive technician, Rachel Curzon harmonises her predilection for existential antsiness with a remarkable demonstration of how someone like Plath can be a *poetically* useful, rather than merely totemic, influence on the way to finding one’s own voice. There is a sense of unforced though careful self-curation of the poet’s craft in this pamphlet, evident from the outset with ‘Hydra’s’ artful use of

the nine-headed title subject to construct a multi-faceted poem of resonant fragments that cumulatively articulate Curzon's recurrent fascination with conflicting senses of control and externally imposed constraint. What makes this and other poems convincing is the clever choice of metaphorical signifiers that ring with contemporary recognition. There is something familiarly elusive, for example, in:

Water here comes in paper cups like paper cones.
What seems plentiful soon diminishes.
I am still able to think like this.

This transfer of oblique lyric energy via commonplace objects opens up the poetry and is evident throughout. Curzon's work is not dark as such, more edgy in a way which keeps the reader on his or her toes but allows access enough to invite their own speculation. Poems like 'Master' and 'The Catch' hint at the brooding atmospheres of 'The Bell Jar' or 'Ariel' but, as often as not, the dream-sequence anxieties are reminiscent of someone like Kundera, and in 'Threats' the Daddy figure is located more in the speaker's sense of oppression by other women's approved or perfected status:

imagining my world laid out exactly
in some grey official room
as capable women gather around it
with perfectly straight lines
down the backs of their calves
trailing the ends of their lovely hair
across each sacred place of it.

All of which makes for a hugely entertaining read in the company of a poet of no little wit and skill. Again, there is variety here: compare the beautifully handled break-up poem, 'The Worst Winter' (a lesson in telling detail and oblique suggestion) with the expansive free-form of 'Ultrasound'. In the latter, Curzon brilliantly uses the cross-purposes of inner/outer dialogue in a form of *extremis* – the downright odd situation of a hospital scan – to yield another exploration of existential angst and control offset by powerlessness. This might seem merely worthy were it not so entertainingly rendered by a poet in full control of form and voice.

Elaine Beckett's pamphlet is, perhaps, the most straightforward proposition on offer here. That is not to damn with faint praise, for she shares with the other Faber New Poets a fine sense of technical discrimination and lexical restraint when it comes to articulating her theme. She does a very good line in relationship poems, such as the excellent period piece 'Norfolk Winter '72', which archly cuts back an early relationship to its *ad hoc* source:

I'd said fuck a couple of times too many at a party
when everyone else was saying bloody

and that was it – he wanted me

I love that. I love the way it lands precisely and unsentimentally upon the sort of random visceral spot from which rides out many a relationship, to subsequently consume itself amid the retro-fitted clutter of idealised expectation. This is where Beckett is at her strongest: with an adroit grasp of human affairs precisely where they stand at any given moment, such as the failing relationship portrayed in the near-*ekphrasis* of 'The Woman Who Cries'. Here, a faltering love is almost renewed by the man's matching of a postcard to an underlying mood he's been shrewd enough to recognise in his soon-to-be-ex partner:

I kept her close to me for days
until I began to feel grateful,

grateful for knowing such a man,
a man who could match me to a painting

that summarized the trouble we were in.

Curiously, I was again reminded of Milan Kundera's magical realism in the half-nightmare of 'Dreaming of the Professor Who Gave Me the Sack' (the dream is a trope linking all four NFP pamphlets this year). There is a psycho-sexual truth-telling here that I like. And uncomfortable contemporary truths are again skilfully rendered in 'How on Earth Would We Have Managed', which has the quality of a found piece that utilises the authenticating elements of its voices to evoke the chilling thisness of the refugee crisis. It doesn't always land on the spot, however: the latter poem doesn't need its second half and the near industry standard dislocation that ends 'Killer Whale' feels a trifle clunky. Also the subject matter sometimes feels a bit, well, *bourgeois* for my tastes but that's just me and this is, anyway redeemed by wonderful poems like 'Rehearsal for a Night-time Scene with Thunder' where Beckett is back on home turf, and 'For Roy' which poignantly captures the demise of a benign estate character. Ultimately, I suspect that, of the four, this sequence might ring most bells in the poetry parishes of the nation and that is greatly to its credit.

If one is tempted to view these four collections as something of a symphonic statement of Faber intent, then Crispin Best's pamphlet was the movement I was finally anxious to hear. Sometimes you are drawn most to the type of poet *least* like yourself and I suspect it may well be the case here, for I found this the most immediately exciting sequence to read. Certainly, within the context of the four pamphlets, this one provides an interesting contrapuntal music, more related than the others to the complex interlinking of free-form jazz. Whilst the influence of American postmodernists like Robert Creeley – even someone like Berryman – are evident here, at his most amusing Best reminds me of a populist like Billy Collins in the way he takes the thought for a walk:

you have no idea
of the distances I would travel
just to disappoint you

i will even wear a fashionable shoe
my god
just watch me

another? i ask
go ahead you say

and another?

no that's too many shoes

It is relatively easy to bluff an adequate poetry in this vein but it involves more than mere bravado and a love of the 'Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry' to write it as well as Best. His secret appears to lie in the phenomenological choices he makes: the details picked out for our attention amid the free-wheeling retro-tardigrade progress through the posited mindscape of the poems; these have a genuine and grounding human resonance. Examples of this function like the main theme bringing us reassuringly back to a centre before flying off again and they are cleverly stitched into each poem: 'how it feels to steady a lover when the train lurches', for example, from 'allow me to change your life', 'six minutes wild texting in a toilet cubicle' from 'i am a wildman in a white sweater at work for you' or try this from 'fao: barrack obama':

i admit I often want to tell a sunrise 'whoa'
like it is drunk and trying to fight

Crazy marvellous stuff, best summed up by what might be a statement of young Mr. Superlative's poetics from 'allow me to change your life':

and what is the highest floor of a building
you can imagine a horse being on
now imagine a horse on a level above that

you're welcome

I don't want to give the impression that all of this is just virtuoso thought-jazz. At its most exciting, Best's poetry – like Rachel Curzon in 'Postcard' and Buchan-Watts in 'The Word Pavilion' – engages with a genuine interrogation of language's adequacy and function. The sequence opens with 'poem in which i mention at the last moment an orrery' within which are also knowingly articulated adjustments of language's function to encapsulate the human condition:

consider the thing my body is
for example there is a part of it
which is an ankle
another part which I can only describe as
the distance between distance
and distance
a part of which makes a muffled
hopeful noise and another part which is
an ankle

This shares Curzon's ability to look at how meaning is innately subject to language's codifying power and how human understanding is contingent upon some access to those codes on offer. And, again, this might sound a bit arcane and worthy were it not so entertainingly realised in such vibrant poetry as is on offer here from Crispin Best.

So that's it then: The New Faber Poets, numbers 13-16. All four pamphlets are debuts worthy of our considered attention. Clearly, it will be interesting to watch what's in store for each. Certainly, I got no sense of an early peak that will blaze but the comet of a season; rather, I felt privy to the opening shots of four very fine poets. May they sup hemlock from Faber's golden chalice secure in the knowledge that each of them have earned their right to it, even at poetry's over-crowded bar. May their readers enjoy the work at least as much as I did. And let time sort out the rest. Meantime, at £5 a pop the New Faber Poets pamphlets represent the second-best value around, after some magazine called *The Interpreter's House*.