

**“WHY LOOK AT A THING AGAIN AND AGAIN?
WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO GET RIGHT?” *
REVIEWS BY DOROTHY YAMAMOTO**

Lairs, **Judy Brown**, Seren, 2022. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-7817266-6-2

Escape Room, **Bryony Littlefair**, Seren, 2022. £9.99. ISBN 978-1-7817266-8-6

The Glimmer, **Shazea Quraishi**, Bloodaxe, 2022. £10.99. ISBN 978-1-7803763-3-2

Ox-Eye, **Anne Rouse**, Bloodaxe, 2022. £10.99. ISBN 978-1-7803760-8-0

Fool, **Greta Stoddart**, Bloodaxe, 2022. £10.99. ISBN 978-1-7803762-7-1

*from *A glass of water* in *Fool*, Greta Stoddart

A lair is a cave, a hideaway, but it's also a personal space where treasures can be stashed. That meaning feels very relevant to **Judy Brown's** poems, which accumulate words in dazzling combinations. You have to be on full alert to follow the twists and turns in an individual poem, and I made the mistake of reading *Lairs* for the first time when I was winding down one evening. I was thrilled by particular images, and did a lot of underlining, but I felt that the poems' identity as integral works often escaped me. Returning to the collection, I'm still often bemused, but in a good way. Kathryn Simmonds's phrase on the back-cover blurb, 'a glittering strangeness', catches what these poems excel in – for example, where the clichés of modern city life (often to do with notions of 'property', 'value') are re-viewed through the lens of the creaturely world: "Jesus was called the fish. Christ, he was dry. / In Brockwell Park the Lido is open; he dives / deep as he can, down to where he can swallow" (*The Coelacanth*).

I really enjoyed **Bryony Littlefair's** first full collection, *Escape Room*. Like *Lairs*, her poems kept me on my toes, with their quicksilver circling around their subjects. There were just so many lines that I wanted to hoard, or (frequently) laugh over, for their audacious precision: "I'm so bored I want to ... break into my old school's science lab / dissect one of those / pickled moles, leave it on the table / with all its parts labelled" (*What a way to make a living!*). Littlefair is especially good on *being young* – on uncertainties, on near-cosmic boredom (*Sertraline*), on entanglement with the peculiar codes and rituals of the grown-up world. *After graduating* memorably describes a job in a bakery ("Pains blossomed / in our wrists and hips; stinging burns / peppered our hands") but also touches on the speaker's complicity in her exploitation ("And didn't I love / the sugar thermometers? The squeezey bags of icing?") and ends with a heart-stopping image: "Isn't time / the finest sieve? Not all of you passes through."

In her exquisite *The Glimmer*, **Shazea Quraishi** speaks in the voice of a taxidermist, preserving the bodies of small creatures with painstaking skill ("At the table she waits for the mouse to thaw // Begins / taking apart / putting together", *Day 1*). This intimate work leads her outwards, to engagement with other artists in the Mexican village where she is staying, and to meditations on the nature of art. Divisions between the human and the non-human blur as a woman she has heard whistling to her cousin "2 streets over / in Mazateco" tells her that the whistle is "our first language ... learned from our elders who learned / from the birds" (*Day 19*). And the 'days' of her endeavours are interspersed with short poems about individual animals that restrict themselves to the letters in the creature's name, conjuring up a beguiling quiddity ("fair nomad / odd adroit cat", *Dwarf coatimundi*). Art – even though nominally about death – has to do with openness to the ever-changing beauty of life ("When we apply paint, / it's so live, it's / moving. When it dries, it becomes dead. // I want to experience / the life of this medium / before it becomes / part of the work", *Day 12*).

Anne Rouse's *Ox-Eye* is full of exact, acute observations that give pleasure in themselves. Colours, sounds, textures are all vividly present, and I found myself reminded of the works of various English painters – of Stanley Spencer, for instance, in *Request to a Neighbour*: "Diagonal across the gate, the father / coughs too much; the son's long-averted jade- / brown eyes are closing, set in shade." But, just

as Spencer's art puts its own spin on traditional pastoral, so Rouse's poems delve into the overlooked and undervalued – the “hidden field” whose “lustrous grass, its collared doves” hide the litter of “ravioli tins and Rich Tea packets, / the hairline-cracked, the chucked-in-rage, / the town's / miasmic secrets” (*Landfill*). Occasionally I found the poems *too* packed, their syntax becoming clunky (“To burn the idols is one thing. Annulling their gifts / lit up the machinery of your own ascent”, *Ode to a Puritan*), but there are many delights here, such as my favourite, *Man Ironing*, which succeeds in saying a great deal about masculinity in just nine elegant lines.

In *Fool*, **Greta Stoddart** explores profound ideas of presence and absence, substance and void, but in an unassuming, conversational tone. Her poems are easy to underestimate, just like her chosen persona of the Fool, whose empty-headedness is not stupidity but a different way of responding to sights and sounds, people and objects – “transfixed / by the world out there / the way it keeps happening / to them and not to them” (*Concorde*). Metaphysical questioning is grounded in the necessity of working through the everyday – “all the being / there each morning / to greet the rolling delivery of days” (*How I come to clean the windows*). Like *The little living room*'s extended conceit of a family who “came to live inside me”, these poems will burrow inside your imagination – and stay there!