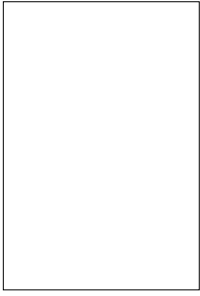


Oems



oems, Matthew Tomkinson (Guernica Editions) \$20 CAD
Reviewed by Greg Thomas

Matthew Tomkinson's *oems* is a sequence of thirty-six lipogrammatic poems that omit all 'ascending or descending elements' (hence its title, excluding the downward-thrusting *p*). In the post-free-verse universe there perhaps remains a kneejerk assumption that any such exercise must be a matter of righteous self-effacement, of abdicating authorship to algorithm, purging the written page of the interpolated and debased lyric 'I'. But Tomkinson's compositional method actually springs directly from the hinterland of that 'I,' documenting and exorcising his experiences of OCD (a more ravaging condition than the flippant social-media use of the term would imply).

As such, *oems* can be read both as a series of playful, mind-flexing exercises in constrained composition and as the displaced expression of something deeper, more emotionally compelling, and more human. Before expanding on that point, however, lets explore the terrain of Tomkinson's flatlands. Thematically speaking, his poems run a surprising gamut: there are, perhaps predictably, self-reflexive ruminations on the method ('an excisor – a remover / a voracious eraser / a manicure – a circumcision'). But there are also neat little language games touching on the psychology of art and film ('cinema / zeroes in on / essences // essences / are / recursive // recursive / means / cocoa in a mirror // a mirror / is a canvas/ as seen in meninas'). There are impossibly squeezed-out narrative and polemic sequences – 'minimise avariceness / rove oversize casinos / commence inversion' – and little anti-imperialist graffitos: 'erasure / is a / war crime // evenness / means / massacres // u.s.a vows / concussive rain / summons zeus'. Each poem, in other words, is bounded by subject matter as well as by the parameters of a particular sorting method. At times, we're treated to some homophonic feints that ask us to think using our mind's ear as well as its eye ('resume – résumé / sewers – sewers / sow – sow').

Broadly speaking, in a world where advertising and even political discourse is governed by the insights of covert data mining on a grand scale, there's something resonant about a poetics that places the obsessive trammelling and scouring of information front and centre. Tomkinson leans into the association with his twenty-seventh poem, a list of website names: 'amazon.com / news.com / xxx.com'. Then again, this is mining as performed by a single human mind, and it's really as a

covert expression of selfhood that *oems* appeals. The tortuous, rule-based prose that it sometimes put me in mind of – Perec's *La Disparition*, Beckett's *Watt* – documented the traumas and deprivations of World War Two. The terms here aren't comparable, of course, but there's something of the same maddening, exhilarating, cathartic energy to Tomkinson's collection. It's something different, and something worthwhile.

Artist and Poet



Lucy Rose Cunningham *Interval: House, Lover, Slippages* (Broken Sleep Books) 8.50£
Reviewed by Anthony Barnett

Lucy Rose Cunningham is an artist and a poet. Her studies and her degree are in art but I believe she sees herself as a poet first. *Interval* is posited as her first book, following a chapbook, *Mary, Marie, Maria: after the nectar, pyre and linden tree*, from the same publisher. As her titles might suggest, Cunningham often writes in what I like to call wide expanses. That was also evident in her uncollected debut work in *Snow lit rev*, although *Interval* is composed of semi-discrete shorter lyrics.

It is no surprise that lockdown has generated a great many poems (to say nothing of illnesses, and other writing and the arts). Lockdown, from 2020, followed by *Days are opening up*, are the occasions for *Interval* but not the be-all, and that is refreshing. There are humorous asides: 'I want to hold you / but the line's busy.' Or *En route to Morrison's*, though, knowing the author, not for the lamb chops: 'Red Sky at night. Shoppers' delight.' But in *Memories have such delicate membranes* seriousness steps in, as it does most everywhere: 'She added them to her shelf, / precariously handling preciousness.'

There is a sort of giveaway: 'When I search for words to *protect*, / our thesaurus reads *inoculate*.' Is there a rhyme there? It feels as if there is. A delicate balance. Nowhere is there any sense other than that a true word has been found, if it has not already come to mind. Art is in the weather: *Today is a Rothko painting*. In a prose passage *Lead tin yellow*. 'they paint in. In cloth, light parts of the sky, and foliage. Vermeer saw A Lady Writing and sculpted her yellow drapery in such a pastel, imbuing cool blues with warm accents. Disarming yellow. Soft subtle poison. Lead tin yellow, like truth – visible, hard to swallow.'

It is not always clear whether an italic first line is truly a poem's title or simply a first line: some are followed