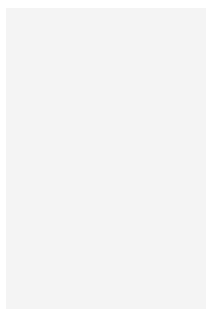


Title



The Attitudes, Katie Griffiths (Nine Arches Press) £9.99
Reviewed by Jazmine Linklater

In Katie Griffiths' ambitious debut *The Attitudes* individual poems take on the weird, commonplace mixture of faith, flesh, life, doubt and death, while a number of longer sequences interweave throughout the collection. Griffiths' speakers assume various attitudes – physical and psychological – trying them on like outfits to compare in the dressing room mirror. It's a book made of things side-by-side, grappling with binaries to tease out their broader complexities. Under pressure are the mind and body; the tangible and metaphysical; real and illusive.

Many poems are written in two sections or short couplets. The title poem, for example, rewrites the biblical Beatitudes. Emulating those familiar couplets, Griffiths' version feels *more* mythical, populated by seemingly ancient and mysterious characters including 'earthmonsters', 'soulschemers' and 'waterstabbers'. None here are blessed, and their various states are often the consequences of their own actions: 'Torrid are those who amass / for their trinkets will devour'. The poem operates as a sort of contents list, introducing characters who reappear later in the collection across a scattered sequence of expanded portraits. These poems oscillate through complex relationships. 'Moonbather', for example, 'wants to feel sorry for / you feeling sorry for her // and all the light you fail to exchange', but later, when she 'becomes moonlogged' grows 'innermost and full of retraction'. Griffiths' strangely emphatic symbology is most arrestingly developed in 'Scargazer', where 'Scar' is 'suave as a flick, / clean as a plunge', evoking disturbing images of self-harm. But her rhythm and syntax beguile: 'see how easily / my arms went Scar / my back got Scar / my legs turned Scar'. This troubling mixture creates a conflicted kind of self-care or love, which stands in defiance against death:

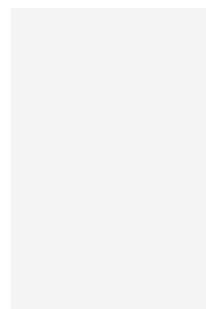
Can't you see
the grace of Scar?
Running a crack
through the urn
that wants your name.

The Attitudes scrutinises the messy doubts and desires that arise from an understanding of the body as the basis of Christian faith. Speakers often describe their experiences of detachment or distancing from their own bodies through the church, most explicitly in 'Dough must not enter the body', a sequence in six parts that

portrays living with eating disorders. Here, 'the toilet bowl' is 'her white confessor' and the most 'holy work' is 'to dissolve. Disappear', as the body of Christ, as communion wafer, dissolves on the tongue. The ongoing incongruity of salvation and self-destruction is inescapable: 'Food is / life. / Food is / death'. The sequence is a stark presentation of how body dysmorphia keeps the mind and body apart, held in contention by a warped kind of faith: 'She holds her body to ransom. / Surely the negotiators will come'. This strained relationship between faith and agency permeates the collection, returning in poems on marriage, motherhood, and the deaths of loved ones, where incompatibilities deftly infer doubts and regrets.

Yet there is hope – most tangibly found in collective possibility. In 'Prayer Workshop', the group gives buoyancy to 'a prayer / shaped like a zeppelin that lurched uncertainly / until, willed upwards only by our gaze, / it bobbed and nudged the rafters'. A sense of human connectedness tempers the weight of more sombre subject matter, allowing a glimpse of the unfathomable magnitude that together we comprise. A number of poems attempt similar tempering through humorous word play, but it is sometimes unclear what these pieces achieve in the larger context of the collection, and jokes too often fall flat. 'Mes saints sans cafetières', for example, seems to have no bearing whatsoever on its title's sonic origins, Médecins sans Frontières (it really is a poem about saints not drinking coffee), and in 'Door, my tribe' the speaker's punning edges dangerously into dad joke territory: 'Did you know that / in the vestibule of door-makers / competition is unhinged?'. These, and a handful of occasional poems, interrupt the collection's more complicated interrogations.

His Vorpall Blade



Decade of Cu ts, Nicky Melville (Blue Diode) £12
Reviewed by Greg Thomas.

Nicky Melville's *Decade of Cu ts* is a collection of new and selected poems showcasing ten years of practice at the fringes of experimental poetics and agit-prop performance: a decade, too, of austerity-era conservative government (albeit recently mutated into a populist nostalgia cult) when cuts were the order of the day. The potty-mouthed pun – also published as a poem-badge – in Melville's title gets across something of both his animus and working method.

An obvious point of analogy for some of Melville's poetry is that of his erstwhile mentor Tom Leonard,

which found space on the page for forms of everyday language previously excluded from literature – indeed, whose quality of artistic and political legitimacy seemed somehow rooted in its defiant (and only apparent) non-literariness. Melville’s ‘heavy debate,’ culled from conversations with a young offender during the poet’s time working at HMYOI Polmont, even gestures towards the jazzily aestheticised demotics of Leonard’s early verse: ‘ma language is fucked up.’ But it’s notable that across this collection that form of phonetic exuberance is in relatively short supply.

Here’s the distinction, perhaps: Leonard, at least in his early poetry, was known for committing to paper an approximation of language originating in an oral/aural domain: ‘in the beginning was the sound.’ Melville is more likely to start with the visual rather than sonic substance of language. His schooling in the concrete poetry movement of the 1960s is evident in a selection of ‘thought experiments’ – one or two-word poems with footnoted title – which adopt (and upturn) the visual logic of poster or billboard. ‘WOR’, reads one piece (and, further down the page, ‘in progress’). Another consists of the word ‘scarcity’ with two diagonal cut lines running through it; the appended title: ‘austerity measures’. (This is poetry about poverty and despair, amongst other things.)

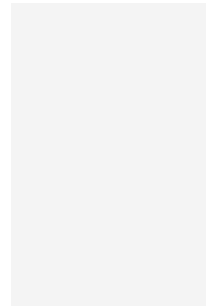
Another distinction, perhaps – staying on the question of cuts – is that Melville’s is primarily a poetry of found and borrowed language, particularly that which assails us in an economy powered by the exchange of capital: in the beginning was the slogan. Sculpting an inert mass of advertising and propagandist babble, the poet unearths flashes of formal intrigue – ‘Catch a great/cash ISA rate’ (‘bank poem’) or bathos: ‘Innocent / for kids // Reduced to clear’ (‘TESCO’).

A set of long collage poems created by extracting sentences and phrases containing the word ‘cut’ from the major party manifestos for 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 gets close to the nub of what Melville’s practice is all about: ‘...We need / to cut /cuts and reorganisations / will be able to cut the cost / get a grip and cut / that leads to violence. We will cu t/ police teams to cut crime...’ (‘2010 cu ts: Conservative.’ This is not a collage poetry of pure chance or surrealist flight of fancy, but neither is language rewired in the service of explicit polemic. The arrangement rather updates the aims of the cut-up method as formulated by Brion Gysin: to expose through rearrangement and repetition – a form of *ostranenie* – linguistic structures used insistently to mollify, confuse, and distract in the interests of power.

In spite of the moments of liberatory glee such a process can afford, Melville’s is a poetic realm without much hope: ‘life rips us to/pieces’, he concludes in ‘Sean-ecdoche,’ dedicated to two recently deceased friends, including the poet Sean Bonney. If succour is to be found, it is in a number of more anecdotal, first-person sequences in which the lilt of lines down the page – very much in the Williams-Leonard trajectory – traces the rhythm of thought and speech in all its interpolated banality, paranoia, affection and intimacy. Here is the airport-lounge love poem ‘Diversion Ends’: ‘in your text / you said / hey you / you didn’t cry this time // I’m getting

stronger / tho I already cried for you / when I was drunk / when I annoyed you.’ Kitsch soap-opera cliché – ‘I’m getting stronger’ – here becomes a marker of genuine affection in a world where the means of expressing such sentiments has been lost in a fug of pop-culture sloganeering. Wordless bonds of friendship and love nonetheless subsist, we sense, beneath the surface of a compromised language. To paraphrase another ‘thought experiment’, our sentences still contain sentence.

I Say Heart



Naush Sabah, *Litanies* (Guillemot Press) £8

Suzannah V. Evans, *Brightwork* (Guillemot Press) £6

Diana Hendry, *Where I Was* (Mariscat Press, 2020) £6

Reviewed by Rory Waterman

I focus here on themed pamphlets. Each is very different but contains around twenty-five to thirty pages of poems: these are fairly sizeable publications, examples almost of a mid-length form between the book and what once would have been the ‘standard’ pamphlet, though of an increasingly common length for the medium. I do not favour absolutes, but too often, what might have been a successful themed pamphlet appears to have been bloated into a full-length collection with patently less successful poems, and increasingly I am convinced that around thirty pages is often the perfect length for such a volume. Here are three well-proportioned recent examples by way of testimony.

In ‘Litany of Dissolution’, on the first page of Naush Sabah’s debut full-length pamphlet (following a ‘double micro-pamphlet’ published by Legitimate Snack in 2020), we read:

time has folded up into me
I’ve been thrown by it
like a child down a hill
standing up and brushing off grass
to find herself a woman

The poem is a slaloming stream of consciousness, one of several here but at four pages the longest of them, and displays many of Sabah’s strengths: crystalline images and muscly enjambments, enriched by a mind at once subtle and forthright. At this point, though, you might be forgiven for thinking you’ve read it all before in a thousand self-indulgent poems. You haven’t: ‘now there’s day after day after day / disappearing’, she continues, ‘and no god in them / to hook the carcass of any hope from’, and the poem doesn’t compromise in its

depiction of what that means. ‘Fiqh makes the munafiq’ (glosses inform the uninitiated that this translates as ‘Islamic law makes the hypocrite’), she writes in ‘On Shahaḍa’ (translation: ‘testimony (of faith)’):

I’m the hooded illusionist

and you a spectator watching me
fight against my own restraints.
Look. by this sleight of hand
I will make you believe I believe.

This gives a flavour of what the pamphlet puts at stake, and the certainty of its convictions. Certainty often makes poetry stale, but in this case it is the certainty of loss breeding passionately felt tensions. And passionately felt tensions can, in turn, breed self-indulgent sentimentality, but Sabah tempers them with impressive control, complexified through intertextual engagement with (or in some cases against) hadiths and Sufi songs. These poems marry their sometimes anguished conviction to an unusual panache for formal and linguistic dexterity. ‘Of Monuments’, a tiny poem of column-like single and double-line stanzas, comprises depictions of things presumed eternal, and ends: ‘The deities have died but these columns endure.’ ‘Of Mercy’, a two-stanza poem about an infant who might die, is one of the most affecting yet unaffected mirror poems I have read: ‘if she lives / they’ll praise God’s mercy’ and ‘they’ll praise God for his mercy / if she dies’, each stanza either begins or ends, as ‘my womb poor incubator still contracts’. The sonnet ‘Of Myths and Messengers’ turns every traditional element of the form – not least the expectation of unrequited love – on itself: ‘The gods have needs and their messengers have pulpits: / someone must bleed, something must burn and smoke.’ Who else is writing like this, now, and with at once such immediacy and breadth of reference? Sabah has a tendency sometimes to dilute by telling us what she has shown, but this is a stunning debut, that cliché for once fit for what it describes.

The pamphlet is sumptuously produced, as are all things from Guillemot Press. That includes Suzannah V. Evans’s *Brightwork*, which is also obsessional, this time over the items clogging a boatyard. Evans wrote these poems while writer in residence at Underfall Yard in Bristol. (I had to venture to the Guillemot Press website to learn that: despite the press’s attention to production values, it doesn’t print pamphlets with blurbs – or page numbers, or contents pages – which is cute but also sometimes annoying.) Often, the poems are named for what they home in on: ‘The Dredger Paddle’, for instance, which – surprisingly, I’m sure you’ll agree – is the subject of no other poem I can think of, and which ‘is gently rusting, is gently resting by the powerhouse tower.’ Or ‘Buoy’, a concrete poem shaped like its subject but with a revivifying metaphor worth waiting for (and not spoiling) at the end. The poems are often at first apparently wide-eyed in their middle-classness: these are things other people must use for often hard work, or so it seems from the poems, which can instead meditate on the items under examination. This is from ‘Slipway’, one of several prose poems:

I’ve seen you slide into the water, lowering yourself with an easy song, a sweet whining, a slow clanking; I’ve seen your wooden posts sink deeper like fins. There are other lovely things about you: your timber cradle, how you hold the hulls of boats so closely, how you keep your chocking stable, and whistle at the sight of a wooden deck. They call you a Heave-Up Slip, but the only heaving is done by the men around you, who lower poles, wind winches, puff and glance up at the sky.

‘Lovely’ it is, yes, but Evans often zooms out momentarily on the wider environment like this, so romanticisation is tempered by snatched insights into the lives of others, the lives that keep things here ‘lovely’ for the observer. As she writes in another poem,

I say *elbow*, and they think of the curved piece
of frame at the turn of the bilge, I say *heart*,
and they picture the centre of a section of timber.

Diana Hendry’s new pamphlet is also obsessed with the finer details of a setting, in this case the house in which she grew up six and seven decades ago. The opening poem, ‘Before Us’, speaks of ‘the grief that exuded from the walls like damp / which we couldn’t get rid’, the ‘source’ of which is ‘the man who’d sold us the house’, father to three boys ‘All killed in the war. All.’ That rather gives the sense that the home is doomed from the start, and the rest of the pamphlet goes about demonstrating ways in which it was. This is an extremely moving, unsentimental pamphlet tersely unfolding its unresolvable story, in which the past also belongs to the present, but only as something relived and unalterable. ‘Mother! mother! / Let’s get out of here’, she writes, looking back, after a vivid depiction of ‘woman’s work’ in a stifling mid-century, upper-middle-class household where the father hides ‘behind his newspaper’ dreaming of the sons he hasn’t had and all is now over anyway.

Hendry does a superb job of throwing the most of us who haven’t experienced it into the environment she describes. It’s a bit like reading *Just William*, only with the japes and boys replaced by stoical sadness and girls, and possibility replaced by its vanquishment. In ‘The Greenhouse’, we learn that ‘Before my father gave her away’, the speaker’s sister ‘shut herself in there’ with books and apples, as – in a perfect symbol of her predicament – ‘terracotta pots of tomatoes’ turned ‘from green to red.’ This isn’t a pamphlet of lively experiments in form, but it is a meaningful tale of restriction, beautiful and pellucid in its unveiling.