

On your Marks

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Ecstasies: A Language of Birds, **Laura Drever** and **Lesley Harrison**, Brae Editions, 36pp; *The Long Woman*, **Charlotte Gann**, Pighog Press, 24pp, £6; *Invisible Ink*, **Douglas Dunn**, Mariscat Press, £6; *Largo*, **Paul Bentley**, Smith/Doorstop, £5; *The Bond*, **Maitreyabandhu**, Smith/Doorstop, £5; *Dream Endings*, **Roísín Tierney**, Rack Press, 12pp, £4

In lean economic times publishers often restrict their poetry lists to a handful of lead titles rather than encouraging a range of talents. In practice, this involves assertively promoting a small number of newer, lesser-known poets – whom the publisher passionately believes will sell – alongside safely marketable, familiar names. Over the last thirty years many larger houses have drastically cut their poetry lists, or abandoned them altogether. Yet in spite of this straitened situation in the poetry book market, the pamphlet industry is enjoying a boom. Hundreds of these slender, often exquisitely produced volumes are produced each year, and numbers are rising.

What factors lie behind this flourishing? Poetry pamphlets are not aggressively marketed. In fact, they are rarely found on the shelves of commercial bookshops. Yet they continue to be penned, printed and circulated. The form has more than held its own against the wealth of digital resources: poetry blogs, webzines, online libraries.

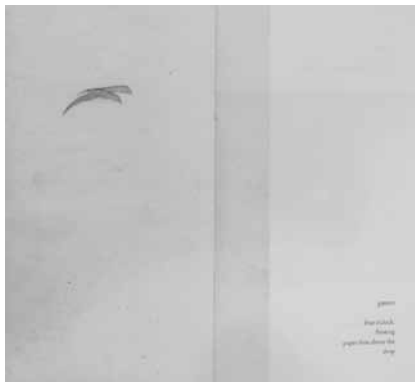
Weighing in at under forty pages, pamphlets are cheaper to produce, distribute and buy than books, whether they are made on a shoestring budget or as fine art objects. Their existence is also supported by the network of charitable bodies, small presses and cultural institutions, keenly promoting and rewarding the art of pamphlet publishing.

The two Michael Marks Prizes for Poetry Pamphlets, established in 2009,

exemplify that encouragement. Administered by the British Library and the Poetry Book Society, the prizes ‘seek to recognise the art of the pamphlet form in introducing readers to new poetry, and in fostering the vibrancy of the print pamphlet in the internet age’. The awards help ‘motivate poets and visual artists to create objects of singular beauty to delight, educate, inspire and uplift the reader’.

The Callum Macdonald Memorial Award for Scottish pamphlets is coordinated by the National Library of Scotland. It aims to ‘promote and encourage the publishing of Scottish pamphlet poetry’, taking account ‘of the quality of the poetry as well as the physical production of the pamphlet’.

Such emphasis on the *artistry* of pamphlet design is evident in the works selected for both prizes. Each of the six volumes shortlisted for the Michael Marks award and the winner of this year’s Callum Macdonald Memorial Award differently explore the look and feel of print. ‘[A] perfect union of line and land, word and flight,’ says Kathleen Jamie on the backjacket of



Ecstasies: A Language of Birds.

The pamphlet contains images by Laura Drever and poems by Lesley Harrison. It is the work that secured the Orkney publisher, Brae, the Callum Macdonald. The lines, shadings and marks of this collaborative volume unite image and text, drawing attention to the materiality of the bound page.

Take for example, ‘gannet’. Whilst Drever’s bird appears as a smudge of grey in flight, occupying the top left-hand corner of the page, Harrison’s poem rests on the page’s ground, diagonally opposite, in the white margin:

gannet

four o’clock.

floating

paper thin above the

drop

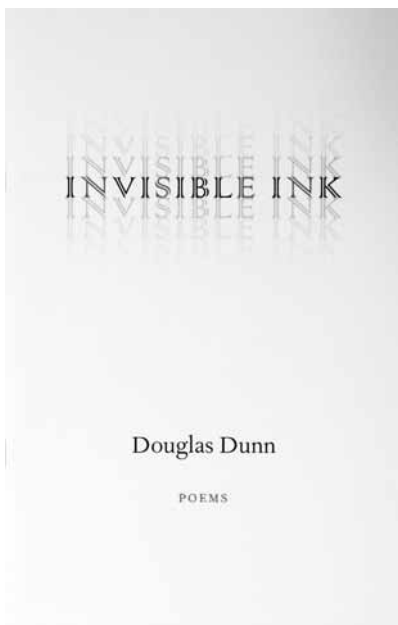
The image is air-borne. The poem remains at the pamphlet's foot, even though it writes of 'floating'. That pairing keeps our eyes attentive to motion, groundedness and shifting interaction, so that what is 'paper thin' ties together lyric and drawing; line, margin and meaning.

Across *Ecstatics's* openings, flurries of papery birds variously appear as singletons, pairs and triads. Poems may be right or left aligned. Each bird-poem orientation is mobile. Each freshly arrests the eye; each reminds us that lyric lines are arranged in, and by, space. The effect is one of print in motion, text and image together ascending and descending into the page's white space. Keeping the reading experience up in the air, lines, shadows, creatures and the ingenuity of printing move together in this beautifully produced volume from Brae.

The touch of the printed page is coupled with violence in the inky subject matter of Charlotte Gann's *The Long Woman*, from Pighog Press. In 'Love Poem' a 'murder /of plump crows hangs suspended from black /branches: charcoal thumbed into thick white fog'. A line like 'Stabs his nib deep in the ink well' puts one in mind of the aggressive birds of Ted Hughes's *Crow: From the Life and Times of the Crow*. Hughes's slender 1972 book contained drawings by Leonard Baskin that emphasised their shared fascination with the inky processes of bookmaking. Gann's pamphlet is comparably well-wrought: a labour with materials which will not keep one's hands clean. In 'Lotus' paper, skin and vellum become peculiarly akin, linking pliable foldings with coercive artistry: 'your gift of touch,/ ply your cool art, like origami...', 'women ... your invisible hands all over them ...' The association of skin and paper merges tactile skill and manipulative force. Gann's uncanny associations between ink, paper and persons are alert to disturbing aspects of our encounters with printed pages.

The perils of materiality also inform Douglas Dunn's *Invisible Ink*, from Mariscat. Emerging on the white card of Dunn's cover are three fading replications of the greyscale words 'Invisible Ink', which appear above and below the lettering of the title. The inline typeface further iterates invisibility: opening up white space inside each printed letter of the title.

Dunn's poems muse over what is nearly – but not quite – there. His



opening poem, 'Idleness', asks: 'Can you hear them? The flap of a butterfly/ ... /A poem trapped in an empty fountain pen.' In 'How To Write Verse without Anyone Knowing' the materials of writing are present to a young Dunn ('a crystal inkwell with a silver lid', 'paper') but the child's concern is to write in a way that preserves illegibility: 'inking' the pages indecipherably.

Invisible Ink probes print's relationship with the unsayable. Sometimes this appears inwardly-directed: others will 'knock yet again on the door/That no one can open but me'. However, these are

poems keeping visible the marks of creative struggle, refusing to expunge the poet's inarticulacy: 'Something is very wrong./But how to sing it? How to turn it into song?' Aware of what might be lost on the printed page – on which experience is no longer 'a blur' but a finished artefact – this pamphlet explores relationships between invisibility, legibility and acts of private and public recollection.

Both Paul Bentley's *Largo* and Maitreyabandhu's *The Bond* are out with Smith/Doorstop (the imprint that won the Malcolm Marks Publisher's Award). Both explore the matter of poetic making in different ways. 'No stiff cardboard, front and back,/binds this story ...' Maitreyabandhu writes in 'Sestina', a poem that revisits an earlier 'den/of cardboard, and powdered earth' through the restructuring devices of loss, memory and literary form.

Most of the poems in *The Bond* test out more oblique links with book-making: they detail a succession of quotidian objects, tools and implements. The poet's instruments are linked with objects that keep demanding second and third viewings. Memories resonate in old objects and in one's ways

of verbally and physically handling them. The ‘hammers’ of the poet’s father are in abundance (‘claw hammer, tack hammer’, ‘toffee hammer’, ‘hammers in a post’), as are such objects as: a ‘long handled spade’, ‘a chisel’, ‘tools from car boot sales’. If the materials of the poet’s craft structure his world, this is also the case for those he describes and recalls; for instance, the carpenters for whom everything becomes ‘wood’, ‘all the houses’, their ‘speech/ ... large and deliberate like the writing desks they build;/even their breakfast bowls are teak’. The craftsman’s and the artist’s worlds are oriented by the objects they create.

In *The Bond* generous margins surround concise poems. This roomy architecture is integral to the pamphlet’s mood of quiet recollection. By contrast, in Bentley’s *Largo* the eye is urgent and the margins narrow. Busy with footnotes and epigraphs, the three long poems of the volume intersperse historical and modern voices, allusions, football commentary and political broadcast. *Largo* itself is larger than Doorstop’s usual A5 format, and its wide-ranging, cacophonous pages are filled with a succession of interwoven printed voices, from Margaret Thatcher to Arthur Scargill, Ian McMillan to ‘the commentator on BBC local radio’, the sound of ‘Mozart’s piano Concerto No. 21/in C Major’ to that of the ‘Tannoy ... /Here they come, beautiful ones, the beautiful ones, la la la la –’.

Largo’s structure and style blur the distinction between manuscript and commentary. They yoke disparate materials through a rich, politically attentive logic. The pamphlet’s anti-hierarchical organisation of the page is attentive to margins, edges, corners. Placing weight on annotations, footnotes, epigraphs, Farley offers alternative entry points into the main body of the narrative. It is a pamphlet that brilliantly registers the disorientations of leafing through the pages of history, personal memory and civic space, as well as those of physical documents:

Gran’s fingers running over everything.

She’s found Frisby’s. Her finger runs off the page –
returns, retraces. Trying to locate something.

Back and forth, flicking through the ages
of *Dinnington Days Gone By*. In his white apron

a grocer. Note the old pram,
Trying to put her finger on something
that keeps falling out of range.

The winner of the Michael Marks Poetry Prize is Roisín Tierney's Rack Press pamphlet, *Dream Endings*. Elegant and austere, it contains twelve short, carefully arranged poems. Taut threads link the work: personal and public attempts to speak of the ageing, dying and dead, and attention to the kinds of language used to record experiences of sensual disarray. In Tierney such idioms expose the precariousness of 'customs' and 'our arcane rituals'. Repeatedly one encounters flux and uncertainty: 'nothing was solid, nothing real'; understandings are 'blurred at the edges/ ... mixed up'; attempts to clarify are vexed by imprecision: 'that *thing*, that whatever-it-is.'

In *Dream Endings* such slippages disrupt ordered, bureaucratic interpretations and accounts. Those registers of cool documentation and record-keeping are evident in 'Suicide':

My list is cruel. Their various ends –
'Hanged.' 'Fell from a height.' 'Overdose.' etc. –
make for hard reading. Some were very young.
Many received the best of care. I sigh.
We, the Suicides and I, put down
our books, pens, burdens, leave the building.

In such work, natural imagery and touch interrupt official, explanatory rhetoric: 'Softly they settle round me now,/gentle birds come home to roost'. What remains of the 'Suicides' is written names: conditions and causes of death fill 'the desk, open drawers,/heaped directories, nursing tracts'. Yet their deaths cannot be registered merely through these printed words: "'Hanged.'" "Fell from a height." "Overdose." etc. –'. Tierney not only figures the 'Suicides' as 'birds' still on the move but also as part of a present-tense 'we'. This means the poet and her readers – each of us scanning pages about 'their various ends' – is made privy to a creaturely *encounter* with uncannily animate material. The pages of Tierney's

pamphlet bring us face-to-face with the papery dead: we are close enough that ‘we might/be swapping breath’; we are ‘forehead to forehead’ with the unliving, whom it seems ‘we all have touched’.

‘Poetry pamphlets are especially important to younger poets making what may well be their first appearance outside of magazines,’ said Douglas Dunn, commenting on the 2012 pamphlet scene. ‘They are also significant from the point of view of design and typography. They allow the possibility of each publication being different rather than captured by a trade publisher’s format.’

Why is it, then, that established poets are also keen to publish in pamphlet format? (Dunn is a case in point.) Some, like Simon Armitage, return to the presses who published them much earlier in their career. His pamphlet, *The Motorway Service Station as Destination in its Own Right*, came out with Smith/Doorstop in 2009. Others may want to bring out a sequence in pamphlet form that will not fit easily – in style or subject – into the book they are assembling. There is also more scope for poets to have input into the design of the pamphlet than is possible in books by larger trade publishers.

There are clear advantages to encouraging a range of different literary talents (rather than a select few). For Tanya Kirk, one of three judges for the 2012 Michael Marks Prizes, pamphlet publication is closely associated with the benefits of range. ‘One thing that has always been clear,’ she says, ‘is that the pamphlets submitted are incredibly diverse: some produced very professionally ... some made by hand using art techniques, and some at someone’s house on their PC and printer.’ Kirk is excited about this continued diversity, and there are reasons why readers and poets should be too: ‘it means that people can get into producing pamphlets without a huge business set up, just because they are passionate about poetry.’ That is a boon in the current literary market. What is also to be hoped (and is still less certain) is that a wide range of readers will be able to gain access to the diverse range of poetry now being produced in pamphlet form.