

POETRY SALZBURG REVIEW

NATALIE CRICK

locked-down voices

Lisa Samuels. *Breach*. Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2021. 80 pp. ISBN: 978-1-913861-32-2, £10.00 pb.

Stephanie Conn. *off-kilter*. Inverin: Doire Press, 2022. 103 pp. ISBN: 978-1-907682-88-9, €13.00/£11.00 pb.

Like *Breach*, *off-kilter* by Stephanie Conn inhabits a landscape of disruption and infringement. An incantatory song of the challenges that life can bring, Conn writes of the personal impact of illness and change. Mirroring the five-part structure of *Breach*, *off-kilter* is an intimate depiction of the complexities of living with chronic illness; Conn herself was diagnosed with the debilitating and often invisible condition, Fibromyalgia, after a period of medical investigation.

In an emotional poem, “Trace”, Conn suggests in unearthly verse, early sensations and affect of Fibromyalgia:

When I disappeared, Easter had passed.
My right side vanished first, lost form
And feeling early on; less phantom limb,
More absent hand, foot, arm, leg. (41)

In writing *off-kilter*, a dual-focus on the body and the environment speaks of pain and the preface to a physical crisis in poems like “What I Learned in Winter”; the dialect is muted and cold, as Conn writes: “my chest hurts” (47). The wrath and spread of escalating illness is ever-present in this collection, even in one of the final poems, “The Staircase”, when Conn’s “shadow has grown cruel, misshapen / leaks large like an ink blot onto the first step” (98). Despite this, the darkness of the narrative in *off-kilter* is diluted with poems of hope and light. Vulnerability and a constant yearning for re-growth is heart-warming and a welcome reminder to always be open to possibility.

In a later poem in the fifth chapter of the volume, “A Tonal Shift in Edge”, Conn encourages us to find strength when encountered with disaster, stirring powerful emotions of positivity, when she writes:

Become a bird. Let your elongated wings
find the air's current, lift you high above
wood and walls, crashing waves; carry you
from landlocked salt lakes to the open sea. (95)

Imagery of birds and the sea is evocative of the spirit of freedom, and Conn embraces the joy and extravagance of wildness throughout the book, often through the guise of wild and exotic animals. Reminding us of what we can, and are losing, Conn describes the tiger in “Tasmanian Tiger”, a beautiful elegy:

When you balanced on hind legs,
Stood up to face their barrelled guns, presented

A gaping yawn, did a low growl slip
From your throat? (26)

In *off-kilter* the brutal nature of death contrasts deftly with the fragility of life in a landscape of ecological ruin through a rich tapestry of metaphor. There is a strong catharsis to Conn's poetry. As a reader, I feel that Conn is liberating herself from thoughts and memories that could not be voiced before. My mind turning, I read deep into the



night. A unique, colourful personal history is spilled onto the page in rich tactility in a world where humankind and animals struggle to survive.

A strong, cutting poem, “Mob” details the death of “small and stocky” wallabies, with “a clean shot to the skull”, before humans consume the meat and “use their forks to push the steaks around their patterned plates” (27). Perspicacious poems like this one make us recognise the characters in the lines in ourselves.

Like the animals in her poems, Conn found that she too had to adapt to the harsh pathways of life when she began to suffer from chronic illness. The poems in the book transport the reader from the heat of Tasmania to the chill of Canada. Perusing introductory pages of the book I became aware that Conn had been inspired by the life and work of

Frida Kahlo when writing *off-kilter*. Not only this, the fifth section of the text is interspersed with a series of ekphrastic poems. I soon began to make comparisons between Conn's unflinching poems of the natural world and Pascale Petit's mesmerising eco poems in her recent collection, *Tiger Girl* (Bloodaxe Books, 2020). The extravagance and "vibrant" pigment of the peacock in the verse "In the Pleasure Garden" conjured images in my mind of the density of colour in Petit's viscous work. Conn's depictions of the "iridescent brilliance" of the peacock are mesmerising and lulled me in. They seem to be doused in some heavy magic, whilst soothing both writer and reader by the sheer art of language. Conn writes:

Don't leave, I'll shake my glorious wings, rattle my tail. Stay!
I'll sing for you, bring you fruit from the forest, deliver it straight
from my beak to your open hand. Stroke my cheek. (20)

I found myself re-reading Conn's poems, most drawn to the poet's moving struggle to find balance in the turbulence of life. This sense of imbalance and vulnerability is perhaps most present in the final poem of the collection, "Hinterland". Set in a "snowy woodland", the image of a "white-tailed deer" addresses this sense of fragility directly, as the delicate limbs of the animal "slip and skid" on the ice. Brave and resilient, Conn imparts:

I brave a sleigh on a small hill, laugh mid-flight,
Tumble into a drift without a whimper. (101)

Since reading *off-kilter*, Stephanie Conn's colourful verses have stayed with me in their nightmares, their truth. Her wild landscapes form a setting for contemplation about the diversity of life as a tapestry. A beautiful, saddening and captivating book.

ms lost.