

In the Family Way: A Round-Up of Some Recent Debut Poetry Collections in English

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The world of contemporary poetry in English is exhilaratingly diverse, but at times this diversity can seem daunting. Who should we read? In what direction is modern poetry heading? What are the traditions that help us to make sense of what gets lauded and why it matters? The debut collections under review self-evidently cannot stand for the whole of Anglophone poetry, but they benefit from being read alongside each other for what this reveals about some of the preoccupations currently animating “mainstream” Anglophone poetry—if the word in scare quotes is thought to designate poetry published by well-established houses such as Cape, Faber, Chatto & Windus, and Penguin. Each of these five books—three of which were awarded the highly prestigious T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize—draws on linguistic and formal resources from poetry’s recent past but does so in the service of a powerfully variegated voice that commands authority for what it seems to know about a present cultural moment in which new types of identity are coming into being.

Although the full combination of these resources varies greatly from volume to volume, Sarah Howe, Zaffar Kunial, André Naffis-Sahely, Hannah Sullivan, and Ocean Vuong have all produced first collections that point to the continuing influence of the personal mode set in motion by Robert Lowell’s alternately memorial and zesty way of documenting often traumatic family and other personal life from his groundbreaking 1959 work *Life Studies* onwards. At the same time, these recent debutants show us how far that personal mode has developed as a result of the centrality now given to forms of gendered and, especially, globalized or culturally hybrid experience that would have seemed bizarrely unfamiliar to most of Lowell’s readers shortly after the end of the “tranquillized *Fifties*” (Lowell 187; emphasis in original). In four out of the five books, the cultural hybridity on display consists most obviously in an attempt to balance out or explore different sides of a personal identity brought about by having parents or grandparents from highly contrasting cultural, linguistic, and

ethnic backgrounds. In the case of the other volume, Sullivan’s *Three Poems*, the hybridity is less pronounced but connected to other collections, since it arises from some of the formal and rhetorical choices facing contemporary Anglophone poets.

Howe’s *Loop of Jade*, which was published in 2015 and won the T. S. Eliot Prize of that year, is the least recent of these recent collections. The back cover announces the book’s fitness to be discussed through the prism of emergent cultural identities by describing its poems as “build[ing] into a meditation on hybridity, intermarriage and love.” Lower down, a bio reliably hints that the marriage in question will be that between the author’s English father and her Chinese mother. As it turns out, the book has rather more to say in explicit terms about the latter parent than the former—thereby confirming expectations that will have been aroused by an epigraph quoting Jorge Luis Borges’s famous fictive reporting of a Chinese encyclopedia’s categorization of animals (“(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed,” etc.) and by a contents page that includes all of those parodic categorizations as titles, along with the further title “Chinoiserie.” The first poem in the collection, “Mother’s Jewellery Box,” establishes a link between the figure of the Chinese mother and a self-consciously orientalist notion of miniaturist ornamentation that is also reflected in the volume’s title:

the twin lids
 of the black lacquer box
 open away—

a moonlit lake
 ghostly lotus leaves
 unfurl in tiers

silver chains
 careful *o*’s and *a*’s
 in copperplate (Howe 1; emphases in original)

Amid the barely sublimated eroticism of this unfurling of a miniature elsewhere (in which the “*o*’s and *a*’s” are surely as much vowels of pleasure as they are occidental inscriptions on the fantasized scenery), the fingers of the poet-speaker are revealed gauging the weight of her mother’s amber ring. Perhaps there is a faint reminder of another career-opening poem—Seamus Heaney’s “Digging,” in which the Irish poet pictures himself eschewing his farmer-father’s spade and taking instead

a pen between finger and thumb with which to “dig” old and new cultural ground (Heaney 1). What Howe’s poem and *Loop of Jade* as a whole seem to be weighing up is how much of what the jade ring and its container embody—marriage, “femininity,” intergenerational cultural transmission, but also an aesthetics of intimate exactness with suggestions of an exoticizing and even self-exoticizing fetishism (*vide* those “twin lids”)—should be preserved in the light of a wider cultural history of turning people into more disposable sorts of possessions.

The global scale of this dehumanization appears in the prose poem “(j) Innumerable,” subtitled “Poem on the eve of May 35th,” which jump-cuts provocatively from a childhood trip in 1989 to the Hong Kong Jockey Club’s Happy Valley, with its “black-trousered labourers” and “toy-box people chanting” (34), to the “crabwise” refusal of the “man with two white shopping bags” in Tiananmen Square. But Howe’s historical theme comes into focus in a more personal manner in the book’s title-poem—one of its most satisfying individual works. “Loop of Jade” starts out in third-person prose recounting of Howe’s mother’s belated reminiscences of her cockroach-infested childhood in Canton: “when the men are asleep, I think she believes it’s someone else’s turn to listen”; “things scuttling from some dank, subterranean chamber of the head” (13). As the first of these quotations shows, the experience of gendered subordination is baked into this narrative. Later we learn, through a moving formal recreation of the mother’s hesitant form of English speech, that as a child she had been given an appreciation of the Chinese poem *Butterfly Lovers* during an all-too-brief spell of literary education that ended when Howe’s maternal grandmother had her daughter “sent back to her” (17). The grandmother had discovered the nature of the teacher’s curriculum:

The legends like Shakespeare
had a lot of girls who dress up as boys
so they will be allowed to go to school
or to war. (17; spacing in original)

But what gives the poem emotional depth is a vague but queasy sense of Howe’s complicity with the process of abjection. This emerges when Howe as narrator recalls her agonized embarrassment as a child in Britain hearing her mother’s conspicuously Cantonese-inflected voice “stick mid-note” (15). In an imagery that confines her mother to the era of childhood—and with hints of a human disposability that will be made much more explicit in a later poem’s testimony by a Chinese “foundling daughter” saved “from the refuse scrap, from / being eaten by dogs” (58)—Howe

remembers “a wound-down marionette I willed and willed to start up its song again” (15).

Howe is a poet who makes a great deal of the potential for intertextual meaning in the “contexture” of the slim-volume. The aura of hybridized legend and female abjection ties “Loop of Jade” to the poem directly preceding it, “(c) Tame,” which makes a brutally Ovidian dream song of transformation and sorrow out of the tale of a Chinese huntsman’s abandonment of an unwanted daughter. Both this metamorphosis—the unwanted daughter becomes a goose who is anonymously killed by her father—and the butterfly motif in the title-poem create an arc between this part of the volume and an earlier poem in the sequence whose title is the first to be taken from Borges’s parodic list of animal categories. “(a) Belonging to the emperor” contains a rather Lowellesque glimpse of Howe’s father—Lowellesque because the snapshot of Howe *père* in lachrymose thralldom to Puccini’s orientalist masterpiece *Madame Butterfly* summons some of those moments in *Life Studies* when an older family member such as Lowell’s “Commander” father or his dummy-piano-playing Great Aunt Sarah is seen in the shrunken condition of their eccentric and culturally compromised vulnerability:

The emperor was a fickle god.
 He preferred to be thrilled by an automatic bird.

 I see my father bathed in the blare of that same
 aria, prodding the remote

 to loop. *Chiamerà, chiamerà*—
 His face is red. Beneath his glasses, it is wet. (Howe 7)

In defiance of the volume’s occasional and not particularly successful forays into Ashberyian surrealism, the presence of this sort of poetic character-sketch roots Howe’s poetics in a broadly humanist mode of psychological realism. But it is a mode that is also reflexively open to the seductive power of its own symbols. *Loop of Jade*, as its title suggests, promotes a luxurious fascination with recurrence—or, at least, the appearance of recurrence. For the reader cannot finally know the precise nature of the relationship between, for example, Madame Butterfly singing *Chiamerà, chiamerà* (“He will call, he will call”) and the abandoned or helplessly sing-song daughter-mother, or that between the tearful emperor-father and the murdering woodsman-father, or that between all of these figures and the deftly and sometimes

emotively aestheticizing daughter-poet, who at the end of the title-poem puts aside her mother's story and contemplates breaking a ring of jade traditionally intended to shatter so that a baby will not, asking, "will I be saved?" (19). In the first of what will surely be her many publications, Howe appears content to allow her poetics to reside in a piquant space between vicariously inhabiting and accusing the orientalized—and so doubly patriarchal—Chinese culture that inflects her British voice.

Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* hovers around a similar "Me, too?" question in relation to the traumatic familial past. In fact, this book, which was awarded the 2017 T. S. Eliot Prize, cleaves quite a lot more closely than the other collections under review to the line of performative emotional rawness that followed in the wake of *Life Studies*. The so-called "confessional" poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—though also Robert Duncan in his oceanic self-mythologizing mode—are among the precursors for a poetry that assembles its own Queerly autobiographical, symbolic response to intergenerational trauma. As told by Vuong to interviewers, including Claire Armistead of *The Guardian*, the story of this trauma begins in Vietnam, where he was born in 1988 to an eighteen-year-old half-American mother who had grown up in an orphanage in that country. His mother was separated even from her two sisters, who were in different orphanages, because Vuong's Vietnamese grandmother feared the girls' heritage would make them the target of dissidents in need of a "passport" to the United States after the fall of Saigon. Vuong and his reunited family reached America when he was aged 2, after a year spent in a refugee camp in the Philippines.

In fact, the south-east Asian scenery of this early back story hardly registers in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, but Vuong's Vietnamese father, who disappeared shortly after their arrival in Hartford, is manifested as a vividly, even viscerally, present absence. Though Vuong artfully and perhaps self-protectively denies his reader any straightforward detail of his father's disappearance, the volume's obsessive circling around guns, bullets, and pointedly metaphorical *and* non-metaphorical "entry" and "exit" wounds tells of a violent departure. In the second poem in the sequence, the dream-like "Telemachus," the poet imagines himself as Odysseus's son attempting to force a show of recognition from his long-absent father; Homer's ending, in which the everyday is finally regained, has suffered a dreadful sea-change:

Like any good son, I pull my father out
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees. I kneel beside him to see how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*
Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
with seawater. . . . (Vuong 7; emphasis in original)

Vuong is a poet of abundant lyric talents. This is clear from the way, in the opening just quoted, the successive retrenching of hope conjured in the imagery of the misplaced city and the unresponsive paternal body is given a pulsing, phenomenological basis through the softly devastating detonation of phonological effects (trees/erase, trail/waves/erase, far/*Ba*, *Ba*/bullet/back/brimming, longer/answer/seawater). He is also occasionally capable of producing writing that strikes me as being too suited to the tastes of arts endowment bodies and the wrong sort of creative writing committees—as happens, I think, at the end of “Telemachus,” where he speaks of “the way I seal my father’s lips / with my own & begin / the faithful work of drowning” (7-8). This post-Freudian piece of phrasing certainly recalls the autobiographical figure in W. H. Auden’s “It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens” who belatedly “Begins the difficult work of mourning” his lost narcissistic familial attachments (Auden 39). But, much less interestingly, it also evokes a thousand punning academic presentation titles, and the impression it leaves is of a virtuously fashioned paraphrase rather than of grief and guilt as they erupt.

Fortunately, Vuong is anything but virtuous most of the time. From early on in *Night Sky*, he establishes a psychologically intense elision between his father’s absence and male sexuality—a thematic pairing that reaches its necessarily over-determined climax in some efficiently abject enjambment near the beginning of the final poem of the volume, “Devotion”:

Instead, the year begins

with my knees
 scraping the hardwood,
 another man leaving
 into my throat. (Vuong 80)

The kneeling image, which connects with various types of eroticized ritual and memorialization in the book, specifically returns us to the first poem of the collection, “Threshold.” This remembers an act of voyeurism on the surreal border between home and the outside: “On my knees, // I watched, through the keyhole, not / the man showering, but the rain // falling through him” (3). We could be in the hyperventilated symbolic world of Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*: “guitar strings” are “snapping over the globed shoulders” of the rain-entered man, whose singing voice “filled me to the core / like a skeleton. Even my name / knelt down inside me, asking / to be spared” (3). Whoever the man was, his role in the associative narrative soon merges with an elemental-sounding father, whose shocking ejection from the future poet’s life and whose apparently enduring power to condemn and foster desire are evoked in the statement, “That one morning my father would stop / —a dark colt paused in downpour— // & listen for my clutched breath / behind the closed door” (3).

Later in *Night Sky*, the opening poem’s declaration of a wounded vulnerable attraction to the penetrating “song” of the fatherly body will continue through a prose poem offered in the voice of Vuong’s mother, her testimony hovering somewhere between fatalism and resistance: “Maybe the body is the only question an answer can’t extinguish. . . . If you must know, the best way to understand a man is with your teeth” (15). There is a sense across the volume as a whole of the poet pushing hard at the ethical limits of his identification with both halves of his parents’ troubled coupling, as in the fragrantly-titled “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous,” where this time the father is ultimately the prostate figure: “after backhanding mother, then taking a chain saw to the kitchen table, my father went to kneel in the bathroom until we heard his muffled cries through the walls. & so I learned—that a man in climax was the closest thing to surrender” (41). This helps to make sense of why even Vuong’s name would be asking to be spared: violence and the attraction to violence appear to be part of what his inherited identity could impose upon him.

At one point, the scene of this intimately violent (or violently intimate) family romance switches to the prison from which Vuong’s father is imagined writing a hybrid Vietnamese-becoming-English prose-poem letter, its pent-up punctuation legible as both a tribute to and a protection against the rapaciousness of its real yet fictionalized author:

Lan oi! Lan oi! Lan oi! / I'm so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you /
 a single drop / my clock-worn girl . . . with wings scraping the piss-slick
 floor for fragments of a / phantom woman I push my face / against a
 window the size of your palm where / beyond the shore / a gray dawn
 lifts the hem of your purple dress / & I ignite. (18; punctuation in
 original)

Anglophone poetry isn't usually as naked as this. And sometimes Vuong's candor gets the better of him. *Night Sky* provides some infelicitous moments of syrupy, sub-Rilkean therapeutic self-address: "some call this / being human but you / already know / it's the briefest form of forever yes / even the saints / remember this" (61); "Ocean. Ocean— / get up. The most beautiful part of your body / is where it's headed" (78). So, Vuong isn't the finished article, but then nor were Lowell or Plath when they began publishing poems (though, admittedly, they were rarely syrupy). 2019 will see the publication of an autobiographical novel by Vuong called, familiarly enough, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. It will be interesting to see whether more poetry can be wrung from his traumatic store of memories. Will his gift for dream-like lyrical symbolism be redirected to take in a little more of the variously inhabited world on the other side of the keyhole? I hope so, but if that is the case, it will not detract from what is lucid and compelling in this highly distinctive debut.

If Vuong's radiantly psychodramatic diary-lyrics sometimes suffer from being divorced from any larger historical situation, André Naffis-Sahely's debut collection, *The Promised Land: Poems from Itinerant Life*, is drenched in history—and geography, too, for that matter. In the volume's title poem, the "promised land" refers initially to Abu Dhabi—that place of "land and honey," "that cursed desert" where Naffis-Sahely's father, "the old industrious Iranian lion," "thought his fortunes would ignite," only to hear after "Thirty years of sweat and toil / . . . / a German shout at him: 'Work, nigger, work!'" (Naffis-Sahely 28). By the poem's end, this state of disillusionment has spread to the exceptionally and helplessly cosmopolitan poet-son, who "went / as far west as I could" (29) and declares of his current northern location, rather in the manner of Lowell's "Eye and Tooth" ("I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil" [Lowell 335]): "It's cold here; / I hate my life; sometimes I also hate my wife; // but mostly I hate this sad, deluded, friendly country: / the USA, with all its lies and all the kids / it shoots in parks (29). But an even larger context for both men's travel in vain is established from the very beginning of the volume in a powerfully panoramic prose piece called "Disposable Cities." This offers an almost cosmic

perspective of the many “El Dorados” of the earth—“Greenland, Siberia, the Amazon, the Yukon, or the Empty Quarter” (6) (“They begin as blips on the horizon of prospects” [5])—where the discovery of oil or some other valuable commodity sets in motion an eternal recurrence of migration, settlement, survival, and decline until “chickens roam loose in the opera houses, power lines sag, and rot seeps in, tarring all in sight” (6). That final punning participle (bringing together oil and all sorts of moral ruination) announces a nimble but also rather despairing poetic intelligence.

Naffis-Sahely’s Italian mother is certainly among the tarred. She receives a close-up in “Sehnsucht,” which addresses her at a point in her life when she is no longer living with her carpet-selling, prospect-chasing husband but is instead languishing in a little town / outside Florence” like a “kindly downhearted minister who / is equally fearful of past, present and future” in a family that has “become a government-in-exile” (19). This way of pointing out the metonymic cultural significance of the poet’s family under the guise of serio-comic self-deprecation is straight out of *Life Studies*. Although nobody in *The Promised Land* ends up in a “house for the ‘mentally ill’” (Lowell 183), there are indications of trauma in the family that clearly demand to be read as symptomatic of a new follow-the-money cosmopolitanism in the way that the Lowell family madness and sadness was meant to be representative of an entire supposedly endangered WASP upper class. The explicitly Lowell-titled “Home After Five Years” pictures his mother sweeping “gypsum and rubble” (22) beside “the quicksilver illness we call cement” (22) as their son wonders “if my parents / will survive their mistakes” (22); more traumatically, his father is recalled limping home after being falsely imprisoned by Abu Dhabi’s police for forty days, “your clothes / three sizes too big” (18).

But in these family-oriented parts of the collection, the writer whom Naffis-Sahely most sounds like is Michael Hofmann—albeit the highly Lowellian Hofmann of *Acrimony*, his *agon* with his German novelist father Gert Hofmann. This is not exactly surprising, since Naffis-Sahely co-edited *The Palm Beach Effect*, a collection of essays about Hofmann the younger, and in fact the latter makes an appearance in the second half of *The Promised Land* in a poem called “The Translator,” which is so brazenly full of self-humbling love for its subject that you almost don’t want to look; until, that is, you are forced to acknowledge that its recreation of a certain sort of literary day quite movingly transcends its specific occasion:

he likes to stay home,

where the coffee’s better and there’s no small-talk.

He seems scattered, has lost a book somewhere:
a translation. All his life he has hidden a language;

now he eats, breathes and interprets it. Later,
our awkwardness spills over Hampstead Heath,
where we walk, mostly in silence. We have soup

and beer around the corner, then take a short-cut
to the bus stop, and he's gone; brought by the wind,
taken back by it: the soft-spoken wunderkind of despair. (Naffis-Sahely
37)

Hofmann has described his poetry as something that gets written when he is “away” (Thomas 102), and Naffis-Sahely the protégé duly takes us along on trips to Venice, Tamil Nadu, Kolkata, Fez, as well as small-town North America. But the book’s best poems in the Lowell/Hofmann style are about his younger life in Abu Dhabi. “Escaping East” memorably remembers being the neighbors of the city’s Russian embassy, “a model of the Yeltsin era: / that nauseating smell of rot and booze” (Naffis-Sahely 9) and therefore symptomatic of Abu Dhabi’s own excessive consumption, its sticky “globesity” (10). With echoes of Frederick Seidel—for you can’t really *not* admire the latter’s joyously cynical post-Lowellian aphoristic style when you admire Hofmann—Naffis-Sahely goes out of his way to shock us with the hallucinatory particularity of what we think we already know about plutocratic decadence, writing of the Emirate King’s eighteen sons: “One by one, they die in car crashes / Days of heatstrokes, kif and bloodthirsty Ferraris” (13).

Like Seidel and Hofmann, Naffis-Sahely is not only amusing but actually tells jokes, albeit of an acrid sort: “Only two out of ten people die in Abu Dhabi; the rest simply fail to have their visa renewed” (Naffis-Sahely 14). The traumatic point of this punchline is that the UAE is built on the “screened” blood of migrant workers, “these almost-nothings” who can be instantly “bagged, tagged and placed on the next available flight to wherever they first came from” (14). In this way, the workers do and most certainly do not resemble the pampered boys alongside whom the poet was raised in Abu Dhabi—the “misfit mutts, at home everywhere / and nowhere,” who “sucked Butane, smoked, / saved up for whores, waited for their parole in the summer. / Each back to his own country” (12) before returning to the UAE, dissatisfied, every September. If these sorts of condensations of “the bastardy of being human” (the phrase is A. Alvarez’s [Alvarez and Davie 165]) under barrel-per-dollar capitalism

necessarily make for a mordant first half of the collection, a new mood emerges in the final section of *The Promised Land*. In “The Other Achilles”—one of several poems in the volume that draw on classical world stories (somewhat in the manner of Lowell’s *History* [1973] [Lowell 419-604] and the first poem of Hofmann’s “Lament for Crassus” [*Corona, Corona* 3]) in order to suggest the deep roots of globalized history—Naffis-Sahely adumbrates a subtly eco-poetic form of anti-heroism, while simultaneously redeeming some of the book’s earlier, more negative associations with unfixed identity:

Let Troy and Greece
fight on without me; no doubt they will. I,
on the other hand, once buried, will fertilize
the green that grows around their ruins, and
like ivy choke their stones, until they crumble:

crumbling, turn to sand. (Naffis-Sahely 59)

Any poet who is capable of this sort of change of gear in their debut collection is likely to be capable of greater acts of transformation in future volumes.

Zaffar Kunial is another poet with a contagious fascination with ambiguous identity, beginning with his own. The hybrid familial facts this time are these: Kunial’s father was born in Kashmir and lives there now, having separated from the poet’s British mother, who is deceased. Like Howe and Vuong, Kunial, who grew up in Britain, lingers over the linguistic otherness of the (ex-)immigrant parent’s language. But to a greater extent than is the case with these other poets, Kunial discovers, in the culturally inflected linguistic encounter, a core resistance within himself to certainty which paradoxically strengthens the sense of an affinity between parent and offspring.

Near the beginning of Kunial’s debut collection *Us*, “Hill Speak” moves from a jaunty consideration of the difficulty of naming his father’s dialect (“Even this taxi driver, who talks it, lacks the knowledge. / . . . / too earthy and scriptless to find a home in books” [Kunial 6]) to an admission of existential helplessness in the face of the much more widely documented English language: “it’s the close-by-things I’m lost to say”; “I can’t put into words / where I’ve arrived” (6). A few pages earlier, in “The Word,” he remembers himself hearing “wrongness” in the expression his father had once used to advise him against staying indoors during the summer—“Whatever is matter // must *enjoy the life*” (4; emphasis in original)—before deciding that the

slightly non-idiomatic insertion of the definite article was in the same “halfway house” as his own ambivalent promptings in relation to the outside world: “In two minds. Ashamed. Aware. / That I knew better, though was stuck inside / while the sun was out” (4). Seemingly by dint of its being “half right, half / wrong,” the language of his father’s advice “keeps coming back” (4) as an available form of identity.

As may be clear by now, there is a linguistically self-reflexive seam in Kunial’s writing. This is something he has in common with all the poets under review, especially Howe, who, begins one poem, “I think about the meaning of *blood*, which is (simply) a metaphor / and *race*, which has been a terrible pun” (Howe 46; emphasis in original). In fact, there are probably slightly too many poems about words in *Us*, though some readers may enjoy the vaguely Paul Muldoonesque macaronic exuberance of a poem like “Tall Kahani” (“As bucket is to balti / so batty are the mad Bauls” [Kunial 37]) more than I did. For my money, Kunial’s talent lies most of all in a thoughtful and totally non-precious updating of the Wordsworthian “spots of time” mode, which Lowell had already updated through his sadly, boastfully pastoral chronicles of terminal days on family land in *Life Studies*. One of the most powerful examples from Kunial’s less materially privileged but more culturally variegated familial history is “Jute,” which recreates a disorientating experience when the twelve-year-old future poet was visiting his father’s house in Kashmir and found the home occupied by two Afghan men who felt entitled to do so by the border-crossing custom of extending hospitality to men “on the road” (Kunial 10). The poem is utterly absorbing for the way it amasses a psychologically and culturally thick sense of the almost-teenager’s exposure to different dimensions of “us” and “them,” belonging and non-belonging:

“They are telling me: This is our house.” *But it’s not, Dad,*
It’s yours, I said. Tell them. . . .

They’d been on the road since the Russians
 a while ago. They stayed. I remember the vowels of their Pashto.
 Mostly their long silences. . . .

.....
 The tall Afghans helped cut
 that wheat I could see when I woke, in the field between
 the mountains and the house, squatting till evening, in sandals
 the same way my half-brothers did, with a new-moon shaped knife. (10;
 emphases in original)

Although the threat of historically specific violence hangs heavily over this poem, it also merges with a hovering sense that the memory of the two intruder-guests relates to a deeper fear inside the boy (and the grown-up poet?) who sees his father at “home” with those *other* sons, his half-brothers.

An even more devastating memory poem is one called “Six.” Once again, various forms of substitution or metonymy are in play, the poet registering something of the loss of his mother through the indirect but independently moving means of an elegy in passing for a neighbor from his childhood, a woman from Barbados originally. She had apparently enlarged the sense of *us*—despite the fact that “her husband from Jamaica” (46) and Kunial’s father “fist-fought” (47)—by coming round to the young Kunial’s home in the small hours because she “was the only one who could get me / to sleep” (46). The poem’s title refers to the runs (i.e., points) scored in cricket when the struck ball is lifted over the boundary of the playing field, and the blissfully recalled experience of playing a successful cricketing shot (“stick-thin arms / to the sweet spot in the rootless willow” [46]) provides a near-cosmic image of “A perfect still point” (46) before and beyond the space-time of parental divorce and the doubled death of mothers—“until it’s all / gone sharp. Loud as the pitch of a pole star / And the sky falls in” [46]). At the same time, the very English and very West Indian and very Kashmiri cricket epiphany reminds us of this sport’s specific potential to harmonize the post-colonial tensions that implicitly connect the poem’s four culturally emergent and in some ways existentially tenuous parental figures. Elsewhere in the volume, in the very fine (and punning) poem “And Farther Again,” Kunial retrieves some of the “tricky” (31) yet hopefully transcultural provenance of a “Three Hairs” motif (“It’s on Mongol metalwork / and a coin from Iran” [31]) on a tile which was offered to but not fully received by “the mother of my son” at some point before or after the “split hairs” of an abortive marriage guidance counselling (31). In an age obsessed with its own self-fulfilling prophecies of anger and division, Kunial is a pleasingly anachronistic looker-out for the pole-star of what might have united us (and might unite us still).

For all his cosmopolitan yearning, Kunial often *sounds* more British than some of the other young British poets, many of whom look to the United States of Frank O’Hara. Kunial’s regular use of hedges, conditionals, and other strategies of self-deprecation places him in the noble minor line of Edward Thomas (via the poet-editors Andrew Motion and Matthew Hollis, perhaps?). And there is a trace in the quoted ending of “Six” of Philip Larkin’s manner, in poems such as “The Whitsun Weddings” and “High Windows,” of reaching suddenly from the cultural-particular to the transcendent. Larkin is also among the literary presences in the British poet

Hannah Sullivan's *Three Poems*, which has recently won the 2019 T. S. Eliot Prize, though, as we shall see, her head has also been turned by O'Hara's sassier steps. In a section of "Repeat until Time: The Heraclitus Poem"—the second of the three sequences that constitute her debut collection—Larkin's uncharacteristically hopeful assertion in "An Arundel Tomb," "What will survive of us is love" (Larkin 72), is found wanting, though not irrelevant, beside more "practical" (Sullivan 34) evidence of phenomenological continuance and non-continuance alike:

Old laptops, pacemakers, leg pins.
DNA fibres revealing death's cause.
Emails we sent and drafts we didn't send.
The things we said and those we should've.
.....
No one remembers everything about someone.

A quick armpit wash at 6, a fluster of perfume,
Dancing into tights, two daubs of blood.
A finger pulls vagrant hairs, snags the elastic.
Snow in the second week of December.

But how was it you smelled afterwards,
On my hands? (Sullivan 35)

This determinedly visceral and deflationary lyricism might be thought to link Sullivan to other lauded contemporary British women poets such as Emily Berry, though in some ways it also points back to an older generation of Faber poets, including Larkin in his more dispirited moments ("Love again: wanking at ten past three" [Larkin 320]), and Craig Raine. The latter is the editor of *Areté*, where "Repeat until Time" and the book's opening sequence, "You, Very Young in New York," first appeared. If the first of these poems confirms the impression gained from Howe's and Kunial's books that new-generation poets are required to pore over the provenance of their own linguistic resources—along with the interrogation of Larkin we encounter skeptical reports on Shelley and on Hugh Kenner's theory of "reasonable rhymes" (33)—then "You, Very Young in New York" is where Sullivan comes closest to offering the sort of culturally hybridized experience available in the other volumes under review. Here, though, the poetic intermarriage is not between

Western/Northern and Eastern/Southern cultures, but instead between the competing provinces of British and American modern poetry.

Weighing in at twelve pages of often long-lined poetry, “You, Very Young in New York” is a formally various memoir of life lived in urgent pursuit of a “huge lost innocence” (Sullivan 3) amid a welter of hipsters, cocktails, violently effective sex, vogueish food, cabs, and moody urban pastoral weathers (example: “All summer the Park smelled of cloves and it was dying” [4]). There are conspiratorial allusions to temporary dependencies: Sullivan adds her “two Advil” (5) and “Ritalin” (8) to Lowell’s “*Miltown*” (Lowell 189). Despite being written toward a “you,” it is clearly an autobiographical—or autofictional, as we now say—work, with a Wordsworthian emphasis on the impaired and implicitly restored quality of the poet’s younger imagination and taste. The second-person address emphasizes the dizzying pastness of the young future poet’s days and nights—an era that proves approximately datable through arch yet credible statements such as “You are slightly disappointed in Obama’s domestic policy, / You think the great American novelist is David Foster Wallace” (9).

The poem’s culturally hybrid character comes into focus when we think about the different forms it employs. On the one hand, Sullivan evokes the sublime scale of America and, in particular, New York City through her use of the Whitmanesque long line sometimes adopted by the so-called “New York School” poets James Schuyler, Frank O’Hara, and Bernadette Mayer in their voluble enactments of bohemian everyday life:

Now it is Labor Day and you have been sleeping through a rainstorm,
 Half aware of the sewage and frying peanut oil and the ozone
 Rising in the morning heat, and the sound of your roommate hooking
 the chain,

 He has been beating a man he met on Craigslist, he has been dreaming . . .
 (Sullivan 4)

This immersion in the affective life and celebrated poetry of New York is checked when, later in the poem, we encounter such austere satirical couplets as these: “While elderly men dance to a band in blue embroidered hose, / Holding their elbows rigidly, like waxed Pinocchio” (Sullivan 9). The rhymes of this later section are utterly *reasonable* and bring out the civilized world-weariness that the Anglocentric T. S. Eliot was remembering from Byron and Præd when he wrote,

over in the Old World, about women and Michelangelos. There is a highly distinctive pleasure to be had in this sort of tonal and formal cultural juxtaposition. But the long “American” line also exposes one to the realization that “You, Very Young in New York” lacks the intense psychological complexities and beautiful tempi of bona fide late modernist colloquial masterpieces—O’Hara’s “Joe’s Jacket” and Schuyler’s “The Crystal Lithium” and “Hymn to Life,” for instance—even if its reconstruction of the lingering rhythms of being “sated / By self-abjection” (13) sometimes impresses by being so unflinching in the modern autofictional (prose) mode of Rachel Cusk, Tao Lin, et al.

There is nothing missing to my mind, however, from the third and final work in *Three Poems*, “The Sandpit after Rain.” This gathers together the author’s experience of the before, during, and after of giving birth, and the death of her father. I wouldn’t hesitate in calling it one of the most impressive long poems written in English in the last half-decade. To some extent we are in the terrain of a *Life Studies* poem such as “Home After Three Months Away,” in which youngish adulthood captures itself in the condition of not measuring up to the status of the Good Parent, of feeling “frizzled, stale and small” (Lowell 186), as Lowell puts it in that poem. But Sullivan goes much further than Lowell into the visceral existential process of becoming a parent. Death is part of the “unmotherly and queer” (48) addition of stuff which Sullivan, googling, tells herself she “shouldn’t do” (48) but in some sense continues to “do,” as she looks back across her pregnancy and her recent life more generally during the encumbered build-up to a delayed labor that eventually turns into a non-emergency surgery. It is all a world away from being slammed “hard / Into the bedstead” in NYC (13). Though some of that first poem’s self-accusing documentation of Western bourgeois lifestyle is retained in the reporting of the poet’s preparations for ameliorating the trauma of childbirth:

Om Sahana

Om Shantih.

What faith did I have in the wisdom of the east?
In hypnobirthing?

I remembered the itchy feeling of lying on a futon,
Masked, while a man who had eaten garlic prawns
Wafted tuning forks, occasionally checking his phone,
Unblocking each stagnant meridian of my soul. (Sullivan 49)

The leisurely phrase “I remembered” is soon shorn down to forceful anaphoric imperatives—“Remember” and “Think of”—which Sullivan uses to galvanize herself (and anyone else) in the lingering condition of her bodily-mental need for confirmations of a larger life beyond the disorganizing terror of the biological moment. The variation within repetition underlines the possibility that Sullivan is consciously hesitating, in terms of tone, between the exuberant New York School nostalgia of Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* (1975) and the more tersely and achingly moving “I Remember My Mother Dying” by Craig Raine of New College, Oxford (Raine 2-23). Later, more liturgical-sounding anaphoric phrases recalling Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday* structure the uneasy reminiscence. There is a stomach-tightening tension as the accumulating memories drain of humor and carry us closer and closer to the denouement with a life described in its foetal state as “unmoveable, indifferent” (57). “The Sandpit after Rain” is very moving both for the way the father’s death comes in and out of focus in the midst of the poet’s pregnancy and afterwards—since “birth and death happen on adjacent wards” (54), as she memorably puts it—and for its understated ambivalence about the whole experience of making a human being: “The baby did not look like my father at all, / But there was a resemblance: / Our slight awkwardness with each other” (64); “Think of your back at twenty: a map of nothing, a Pacific / . . . / Think of the reality of breastfeeding: / Your fingers gleaming like crab-claws under the tap” (60). Sullivan’s title-image of a “children’s sandpit after rain” (61) sums up the elegiac and even postlapsarian mood of a poem which she ends by announcing, in inscrutably serio-comic, second-hand Blakean visionary language, presumably to herself as well as to her child, “You have fallen in the lurid air” (71).

All of the poetry debuts under review make me eager to read whatever their authors come up with next. They all attest to the exciting and totally unsurprising fact that today’s young and youngish poets can be healthily connected to a variety of traditions and unencumbered by the narrow sort of “identity politics” that older people sometimes accuse them of having. Above all, they show us that, sixty years after Lowell published *Life Studies*, memorable individual poems and larger-scale sequences can still be made from the essentially personal lyric mode that takes intimate familial relations as its starting point for an exploration of their authors’ being in the world, this variously globalized world. I am looking forward to finding out whether these talented poets—Howe, Vuong, Naffis-Sahely, Kunial, and Sullivan—will go even further in interrogating the linguistically rich relationship between their own perceptions and the histories they are living through.

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