

that you can expect to be lulled or comforted in cotton-wool, read a few lines or a few poems and then forget. In their own separate ways each is quite a gruelling experience but each rewards the reading.

Why? Because each poet is in fine control of their medium, “pitch-perfect” in tone, able to create a bleak beauty from grief, “a pretty crummy childhood” and loneliness — confronting “the self as a ghost we might both fear and try to embrace”.

And, surprisingly, all three voice their own individual and hard-won optimism:

Sometimes you step out for that missing stair  
and find it's there

as Roddy Lumsden says in his opening ‘Stockholm Syndrome’.

For Karen McCarthy Woolf the “missing stair” has to be painstakingly crafted from the void of loss and grief following the stillbirth of her son Otto, to whom the book is dedicated. Her poems are a testament to her courage and art in balancing such a subject. The prose poem ‘I Remember Your Mother Dying’ is the core of the book for me, holding the two great interwoven themes of birth and death up to unflinching and compassionate scrutiny — how memory plays its part in grief and how the everyday continues in spite of everything. Living, in its ordinary, naturally connected way, exerts its power and the poet finds some redemption in the cycles of the seasons and growing things:

Maybe every plant is like a child  
  
who can't imagine death,  
as blossom is innocent  
of the sacrifice it makes for fruit.

(‘After August’)

It would be over-simplifying to say there is a resolution: there is, rather, a more profound and satisfying sense of a difficult, emerging openness to life which makes room for harm and damage and all the rages of grief, an ongoing process which can also include hope, as the final poem ‘The Wish’ asserts: “...The wish. Always the wish”, which is “monumentally unfinished”.

The collection's title poem is a breathtaking tour-de-force in which a stern unflinching control balances somehow with the light, ethereal “letting go” of the loved one, and of grief, as in a beating of wings. These poems are mordant and staunch and do not allow the reader easy options. They required huge courage to write and expect some answering courage from the reader. I saw some of these poems in the 2010 Ten New Poets from Bloodaxe, edited by Bernadine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra: now seeing them in their collected form they are even more powerful. I'm looking forward to discovering where this very gifted poet takes her work in her next full collection.

Dan O'Brien's *Scarsdale* has a quite different feel. The child is the poet's own earlier self, a boy growing up in a troubled family with an overbearing, predatory father, a once-privileged mother whose unhappy marriage “beneath her” has led to her depressive absence as a parent and to her sons' unease at occupying no solid position in the social class structure: they live in one of the smartest New York neighbourhoods, only in poverty and emotional squalor.

O'Brien, in an interview online with *Ambit* magazine, explains that while “Scarsdale has a distinct connotation in the US as perhaps the quintessentially wealthy suburb of Manhattan...my family didn't fit in: we were Irish-American, culturally working-class with six kids...my parents were depressive, isolated and borderline agoraphobic”. Apparently his parents have subsequently disowned him, without explaining why.

So this is the context for O'Brien's direct, muscular take on his experience: unafraid of confronting his very private demons, he writes with great power and clarity, rather as Sharon Olds might if she were a son and not a daughter. O'Brien's voice remains with you long after you have put his poems down. The shortest poem, ‘My Mother’, quoted here in its entirety, is devastating:

Water in the bowl after  
the flowers have been lifted out.

How far a child can ever “escape” disturbing origins and construct a self that lives as it needs to and is creative as an adult, would seem to be the main narrative arc of this collection. Again, learning to live with damage becomes the corollary. As with Raymond Carver's and Sharon Olds' work there is a sense that these poems HAD to be written, that the beautiful emerges from the ugliness.