

Mythical Frequencies

Dominic Leonard on three collections rich with layered histories and music

Lorna Goodison

Mother Muse

Carcamet £10.99

Penelope Shuttle

Lyonesse

Bloodaxe £12.99

Fiona Sze-Lorrain

Rain in Plural

Princeton University Press £35

The title figure of Lorna Goodison's *Mother Muse* (her first collection since her *Collected Poems* of 2017) is that of maternal Jamaica who, in the eponymous opening poem, does 'the island's housekeeping' with wet hair down her back. But as well as being symbolic, she is configured as an actual, long-remembered mother; Goodison echoes Keats's living hand: 'deaths after death [...] I'd clung to your capable hand losing warmth / as we travelled to the Western shore'. The speaker plays the part of child in relation to her home country, but one who must develop her own personal history as well as learn from and inherit what Jamaica has offered: 'I'll be muse, you be yourself.' Her 'mother' is still her divine whisperer, but this is not the end of her identity. This poem establishes the book's tenor, a collection that approaches the limits of myth by intertwining personal and historical stories.

The poems are, with a few exceptions, one story told through two characters, who appear throughout: Sister Mary Ignatius, a schoolmaster and trainer of musicians, among them the trombonist Don Drummond and Anita 'Margarita' Mahfood, a Lebanese dancer and Drummond's lover. There is a conscious effort to cast storytelling as a mantra in opposition to colonial narratives: 'a tall underground church hewn / from rock by skilled Ethiopians, / in the same era that Europeans raised up cathedrals' ('Lalibela'). The story can occasionally be difficult to follow, especially as it is constructed around multiple fables and vignettes. The trouble with a project like this is that, to keep the plot cohesive to some degree, not every poem is going to carry the same weight of non-narrative meaning. Some of the work – mostly the prose vignettes – doesn't transcend recounted narrative to become poetry with the strong, powerful, metaphysical reach beyond the confines of the narrative situation that characterises the rest of the book. Other passages, particularly towards the end, fall into sincere platitudes: 'the world makes me weep. // Specifically, the pandemic makes me weep. / In general, the state of the world' ('All Saints').

In 'Sugar', which recollects the history of plantation and imperial extraction, Goodison sets up a contrast between

the mouths which imbibe sugar and those of the exploited workers: 'weed and cut and juice and boil, blood and / toil required for brute cane to achieve sweet mouth'. This is, in fact, one of multiple poems in the collection which end on the word 'music', and while there are prose poems, usually akin to short stories or anecdotes, the collection's strongest material emerges in passages where the musical qualities of the verse – resonances, reverberations and refrains – form actual songs, like rhyming psalms imbued with Biblical rhetoric about how the individual relates to the community. This being the very basis of song- and story-making, Goodison appeals to music's qualities, both textural and narrative, as a structural device. Her skill in the collection's dominant form – the unrhymed tercet – makes for a loose, malleable prosody that helps to build this historical saga. She invokes fables of womanhood and failed manhood, symbols and totems of family chronicles, to show the impossibility of constructing a viable, accurate account of identity. Despite these narrative and epistemic obstacles, however, Goodison's poetry testifies to her ongoing project of forming and singing the self.

Penelope Shuttle's *Lyonesse* is named for a mythical, now-sunken area of Cornwall. In the section titled 'Lyonesse' climate change is an inescapable subject. As noted in the (mostly superfluous) author introduction: it was a Bronze Age inundation that flooded Lyonesse, and the area (referred to throughout with its variant French, Breton and Cornish names) is cast as a fallen Atlantis or sunken Alexandria which Shuttle uses as a mythological touchstone to prepare for future inundations facing low-lying countries in the next century.

'Lyonesse' is an underwater pilgrimage, in which Shuttle inhabits many different oceanic voices to take the form of a Proteus-cum-Virgil, taking us down into a forgotten place. Lyonesse itself speaks as a character in the drama, one who encourages remembrance but warns against dangerous romanticisation of the past and 'lost civilisations'. Shuttle's finest skill in this section is her subtle town-building; like Ilya Kaminsky in *Deaf Republic* or Vénus Khoury-Ghata in *Here There Was Once A Country*, she allows space for ghostly characters and wisps of personality, but nothing as firm as extended personalities or full conversation. The whole environment is in a state of flux, slipping in and out of tangibility. As she says, 'I'm paying a flying visit that's all [...] I constantly cool my heels / in the lovely past' ('My own volition'). Lyonesse is a place to visit in dreams, and the sea is the past. 'Palm Sunday' imagines whole planetary systems responding to localised catastrophes: 'fjords a thousand miles away sloshed in seismic sympathy.' This poem ends with the statement that 'All this is true', yet what Shuttle demands from truth is less archaeological

and more metaphysical. The relationship between the local and the global is something Shuttle doesn't lose sight of; she knows she is writing about a very small area of the world, but Lyonesse *did* exist, so what mythical frequencies does it have for our present situation?

There are some odd formal decisions, such as that of aligning poems with the right margin, for reasons I couldn't discern, and while the lack of punctuation implies a spoken life, it doesn't add much to the experience of reading on the page due to the relatively regular syntax. Occasionally I wish the poems had more edge; the quality of floating through the ghost town of Lyonesse carries many of them, but it is a long way down, and occasionally the poet struggles to find new ways of looking at her subject. There are some very arresting and carefully chosen images, which show the past and present, physical and metaphorical, above-sea and below-sea worlds interacting and switching at will: 'nights learning their place / in rockpool after rockpool' ('Make a Wish'), 'that blood-boltered world / above the shiver / and pound / of the waves' ('Inscribed on a Stela found on the seabed').

In the second half of the book, written in memory of her late husband Peter Redgrove – consistently stronger, in my view, though with far less to talk about – Shuttle has something of the directness of Gillian Allnutt in lines of simple power: 'Learn to eat alone / in the kitchen' ('new lamps for old'); 'getting you home / all in one piece / is a work in progress' ('home'). The poems in this section *are* that work in progress, its elegiac effort. Its domestic location – the home – is a heartbreakingly effective environment in which to set these still poems: an enclosed, lonely place where some vital element once lived and now is absent, and that absence is felt as keenly as presence. 'my house' is a beautiful poem, and its form – short lines, no punctuation – enacts the slow, lonely drip of time as the poet observes the 'quiet rain / on the window' while 'listening hard / to nothing and no one'. The final poem, 'In the mirror', is a great one too, acting as a mirror to the book in its invocation of rivers, quiet towns and ruined places. Although the book is distinctly bifurcated – one half away and undersea, the other *here* and by the hearth – this finale brings the two halves together; halves which were, after all, connected.

Rain in Plural is Fiona Sze-Lorrain's fourth collection of poems, and its thematic ambition is wide-ranging. The collection's mission statement, of a kind, is spelled out in 'The Problem with Music'; the book is concerned with the trouble of artistic creation, in music and visual art as well as the written word. She confronts the political conundrum of what it means to 'do something', platitudinous as it sounds: simply put, does the act of writing distract or replace more useful forms of action? Or is writing itself an apt enough way of 'doing something' in the world? 'Suddenly / clean,' she postulates at one point, 'the idea / of acting / versus its ideology.' Sze-Lorrain dwells on the word 'act' and extrapolates from it: the action, the doing and what makes it worthwhile, is levelled uncomfortably against the artist's *act*, their

performance; a simultaneous veiling and unveiling of the artist alongside their statement.

Some of the book's best moments are like this: an artist uncomfortable with the very action of their working, not out of sentimentality or self-aggrandisement, but in such a way that the formal techniques of the poet actually enact the discomfort inherent in the vocation. 'Far From Description' is that rarest of delights: a poem about poetry that is good. The work is treated like a runaway horse or id, something which controls its speaker strapped to its saddle, who would rather the poem behaved differently: 'I was the speaker who couldn't agree with its mood' – a word that ramifies both grammatically and tonally – 'as if reason / or the sound of it mattered.'

There are many highlights, such as 'From A Winter That Isn't A Rehearsal...' which tackles a variety of sufferings and worldwide injustices while questioning how pain from afar travels to us, and through what mediums. She contrasts apocalyptic headlines ('terror, more pressing pollution') with her lampooning of vague culture war shtick articulated in the same empty, cold language of resignation: 'Voltaire is dropped / from a school curriculum'. Again, her focus is on the limits of art and expression: what is to be done with our stories when they become unsayable? As she writes in the fantastic sequence of prose poems "Nine Solitudes", 'Out in the fields, a myth grew past its radius.'

Sze-Lorrain's visuals are gorgeous. She uses simple language in sharp, surprising turns: 'all mountains / are ways of rain' ('To the Tune of One Valley'). The poems themselves are spare, with a variety of line-lengths, and many stanzas of just a single line. Moreover, her lines are not at all governed by the rules of the sentence; her syntax winds and twists over multiple stanzas, giving the poems air and space on the page, or visualising the synaptic process of their logic. Single-sentence maxims found throughout the volume are absolutely compelling and vertigo-inducing: 'Proper silence, that which is anti-point', or 'Without a window, the space has no weather' ('Not Meant As Poems'). Her interests are parallax and perspective, the movement of objects in space and time, and regeneration, as in the excellent 'Sea Ballads', which explores the connection between the moon's turning 'the clock of its humour' in and out of 'a prehistoric // here' and the menstrual cycle's 'rush of blood, a waste // of prayers'. But Sze-Lorrain is never satisfied with a two-dimensional curiosity, and finds a relationship between this lunar cyclicity and the nebulous reaches of Hegelian historical cycles of repetition and inevitability: 'Steadying itself // against grandeur and dissent [...] according to laws of this generic ritual.' The poems in this very good collection, even those that are slight on the page, have an epic, Yeatsian sweep to them, a grandeur of statement found in a lightness of touch.

Dominic Leonard was born in West Yorkshire. He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2019, and his pamphlet, *Dirt* (2021), is published with *Broken Sleep*.