

Sasha Dugdale, *The Estate*, 70pp, Oxford Poets, £8.95

Paul Summers, *Big Bella's Dirty Cafe*, 72pp, Dogeater, £8.00

Elizabeth Whyman, *Touchpiece*, 43pp, Poetry Can, £8.00

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By Paul Batchelor

Sasha Dugdale is a poet of great subtlety and rare formal resource. She is also able to use personae from myth and history convincingly, and one of the highlights of her excellent second collection, *The Estate* is 'Lot's Wife'. In Dugdale's rendering, the woman looks back not in curiosity, but in order to turn away from her fellow survivors (a righteous, sanctimonious bunch). By doing so, she is granted a vision unavailable to them, but prevented from expressing it. In a single moment, she comes into existence as a subject and is annihilated:

As I climb
All alone and into the wilderness
With a Lord and a box of matches

And the universe expanding
Speckled with stars racing apart
Lighting me with their ancient destruction

Your mineral words dissolve
Into the ground from whence they came
And the small voice is gone.

Look at your people.
I speak for the first time.

Dugdale's poem seems to emerge from the pressures of the original story, possessing its ironies without trying to qualify or escape from them. The ending is inevitable, but the poem makes this inevitability its own.

This respect for the individual, and the motif of turning away from the crowd, recurs throughout *The Estate*. The collection begins with a series of poems about Pushkin who, travelling to St Petersburg in 1825, sees a hare cross his path. Interpreting this as a bad omen, he turns back, and in doing so saves his life: the friends he was going to see are later executed in the Decembrist uprising. Such withholding and questioning of solidarity applies to Dugdale's own practice as a poet: she has coolly and quietly insisted on developing her own style, mastering a distinct range of tones that belong entirely to her. Here, a mother addresses her newborn baby:

We are separate and alive, you and I,
Picking out tunes quietly resistant
To sleep and dream.

Despite its rambunctious title, *Big Bella's Dirty Cafe* is also a 'quietly resistant' collection. **Paul Summers** is probably best known for the high-octane rants of his debut, *The Last Bus*; but here he allows his political views to inform his observations without overpowering them. The collection is haunted by a sense of life's precariousness, and the speaker is often found reflecting on dangers that were not apparent at the time. 'school photo' reads in full:

we were deranged looking,
ragged kids in badly fitting blazers,
all skinhead & broken nose,
segged brogues & Jam badges.
ours will be different:
not one of them called after a saint –
they will dip their rhubarb into brown sugar.

The tone of rueful, muted determination is characteristic of the collection.

Having said that, when Summers does let rip, the results are as hilarious and disturbing as ever. 'the dinner party' begins:

one more mention of the william morris biography, verity
& i'll stick this steak-knife through your fucking heart!

The cause of the fury is the hapless Verity's membership of New Labour, and *Big Bella's Dirty Cafe* powerfully conveys the disappointment and disenfranchisement that was the defining characteristic of Blair's Britain. Individual poems often consist of little more than a sidelong observation or a stolen moment, but they work to considerable cumulative effect: these are reports written in the aftermath of a disaster. By a strange reversal, it is Summers's commitment to the excluded, the overlooked and the swept-aside, that enables his work to speak for its historical moment.

Touchpiece, by **Elizabeth Whyman**, is an impressively assured debut. Whyman's observations are exact, and the way she pieces perceptions together is highly original. These qualities are especially apparent when Whyman considers commonplace subject matter. For example, 'Psychometry' begins:

When a woman, in the midst of falling, happened
to press her hand through suddenly solid air,
she broke a window into an unknown world.

Pulling back the hand in fear she fled,
leaving a negative: light, a shape cut from November
dark is what filled that space.

This is not the severed hand of a completely cashmere woman
but a glove...

The poem's imagery and associations displace its occasion so effectively, the reader is shocked to realise that the poem is actually about a lost glove.

When she tackles more conventionally 'poetic' subject matter, Whyman's touch is less certain. 'Among Her Losses' consists, almost entirely, of a description of a spade owned by the poet's mother: 'a brace, thrice-riveted, / double-strap-socketed, forges a tight fit / between the wood and metalwork'. This is imitation-Heaney, and knows it, though at least it is a *good* imitation. Much better is '1995' which shows the strange authority of Whyman's vision. I'll leave you with the final stanza:

Everyone practised the last word, smirking
was the fashion. It was the year in history when
everyone could dance. Back then she was drunk
with the thought of what the future held.