

Kinds of Pleasure

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Jackie Kay, *Life Mask*, Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 185224691X
Carole Satyamurti, *Stitching the Dark: New & Selected Poems*,
Bloodaxe, £10.95, ISBN 1852246928
Moniza Alvi, *How the Stone Found Its Voice*,
Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 1852246944

It's hard to say much about three such accomplished and established poets in a thousand words. So, to practise brevity (and in case you're in a hurry), I've selected one word to characterise each poet. The word suggests something about their approach or preoccupations, and something about how it feels to read these collections. Jackie Kay's word is seduction. Moniza Alvi's is distance. And I've chosen consolation for Carole Satyamurti.

If you've got a little longer, I'll explain why. The majority of the poems in Jackie Kay's *Life Mask*, her fourth collection, are concerned with the end of a relationship. Inevitably, it's intimate territory; the book is peopled with "you", "she" and "I". The blurb announces "Kay's most revealing love poems" – a dodgy appeal to the reader as voyeur, but perhaps appropriate: Kay is a performer, adept at transforming her life into art. For the reader, these poems offer the sweet, sad sorrow of (other people's) parting.

Much of the seductive power comes from Kay's ability to make words sing. In 'Spoons' the lovers' sleeping position is turned into a haunting elegy:

Rusted, the sleeping spoons,
under the empty moon
scrap soon, scrap soon
quine and loon.

This delicious lyricism is tempered by her persona's engagingly forceful personality. The poems draw their power from subtle repetitions and echoes, from cadence and contrast. They are immaculately crafted, poignant, wry and feisty: this is Kay on top form. The use of masks as a unifying theme is inspired, since it complicates an all-too-familiar subject, as well as foregrounding some fine poems about her elusive, theatrical, African father and the experience of sitting as a model for visual artists. Exuberant Maw Broon returns, she too with reason to suspect adultery when her husband's behaviour changes:

He stapped drinking spilt tea
Frae his saucer; he didnae belch and say
Guid fuir me! He didnae tut at the TV.

But like her creator, Maw Broon hymns betrayal like a resilient and charismatic Midas, making it easy to forget just how much it hurts.

Reading Carole Satyamurti's *Stitching the Dark: New and Selected Poems* provides a different kind of pleasure. Her canvas is broad and busy: full of people, chance encounters, journeys, paintings, friends. You feel she is always alert, pen poised, finding subjects in unexpected and unexceptional places: the girl who asks for money to call home, a lizard falling into the rainwater butt. Satyamurti would make a great laureate: prolific, respectful of ordinary people and unafraid to tackle public events like the US soldiers' atrocities at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, or the sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in 1987. She makes poetry the vehicle for crucial questions about individual and collective responsibility, but she is too warm and involved ever to seem preachy. Formally adept, Satyamurti thinks in and through her poems, rewarding the reader with resonant images, like the peacock's cry described as "broken glass / tearing the heart out of the afternoon", or overblown tulips, "tattered queens with so much death in them".

Death is her greatest theme, and she celebrates the bravery with which people face the discomforts of ageing:

In old age, when the land begins to tilt, they roll
like marbles, gently, towards the coast, coming to rest
in condominiums with impatient gardens, and rules.

[...] They can dance, can swing an iron, and are doing it

for all of us – up ahead, acting impervious
to tides and weather, to show how one can smile
beside that slippery remembrancer, the sea.

The "senior" poet of these three, Satyamurti marries thought and emotion in her work. She is prolific but always interesting: quite an achievement in a collection of 225 pages! The longer poems, and the sequences, show her talents best. Although it records so many deaths, *Stitching the Dark* is paradoxically full of life, insight and wisdom.

Moniza Alvi's poetic landscape could not be more different: a vast wilderness dominated by stone and rock, mountains and stars. The title poem is one of a series of brief allegories recording the stalemate of endless global conflict. In one, children are born with guns imprinted in their palms:

Babies had always raged – but
could any child be born knowing,
and prepared for war?

Alvi includes several versions of poems by the French poet Jules Supervielle. Here is one, 'Castaway':

A table quite near to us and a faraway lamp
can't be linked up again in the hostile air.
And right up to the skyline – an empty beach.
A man in the sea is waving, screaming Help!
and his echo replies *What do you mean by that?*

This is poetry at the service of ideas and philosophical inquiry; *How the Stone Found its Voice* expects its readers to work. Alvi is unusual in being utterly uninterested in self-expression or sentiment. Her style is pared and laconic. There are several excellent poems that depict immigrants amidst a blandly uniform English landscape. Plain and economical, they are tremendously evocative:

The luminous Norfolk skies,
the tractors, the gunshots,
the still ponds, the darting rabbits,
cow parsley by the field gates –

all are re-imagining themselves
because Tariq walks in his village,
part of the scene, yet conspicuous,
as if he is walking a tiger.

Alvi is drawn to incongruity, and her distorted, oblique perspectives are grimly humorous. Women waiting for biopsies are depicted as being on a surreal picnic, while a marmalade jar symbolises the process of growing old:

With his stick he pushes coarse amber shreds
To the side, tries to force a path through
The glowing jelly – to my mother, who's faintly
Busy at the base of the jar.

Alvi's poems are like the subject of her 'My Wife' series: elusive, serious, preoccupied and indifferent to audience. Kay offers a seductive dive into the lap and tickle of words dancing. Satyamurti is open to the world around her

in all its dazzling variety. Generous and humane, she offers you words as consolation: something, at least, to hold in the face of loss and death.

Vicki Bertram's *Gendering Poetry: Contemporary women and men poets* is recently published by Pandora Press.

