

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

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reviewing Younger British Poets who all appeared originally in *Agenda's* online Broadsheets or as chosen young Broadsheet poets in the journal:

Part 2: Social Anatomists

Kathryn Gray: *The Never-Never* (Seren, 2004)

Helen Mort: *A Pint for the Ghost* (Tall Lighthouse, 2009)

Paul Bentley: *Largo* (Smith Doorstop, 2011)

Will Stone: *Drawing in Ash* (Salt)

Omar Sabbagh: *Waxed Mahogany* (Agenda Editions, 2012)

Rebecca Goss: *The Anatomy of Structures* (Flambard 2010)

In the last issue of *Agenda*, I started reviewing some of Britain's neglected younger poets (on the proviso that it is not only the 'young' who are 'breaking into' poetry or producing ground-breaking work). I should add that the term 'neglected' is not meant to undermine the achievements or recognition that these poets have already, but is simply a way of saying that their books and pamphlets deserve more than a 200 word summary in a round-up review.

The first set of poets discussed was made up of 'mythmakers,' poets who engage with cultural or traditional mythologies in order to enhance or subvert them. The second set of poets considered in this, part 2, scrutinize both human and social bodies. These 'social anatomists' are more concerned with examining human motivations and deflating social strictures and the didacticism of our institutions. It is worth reiterating, however, that this category is not meant to reduce the writers' unique personalities. This is not an act of canon-making. The categories are simply a way of organizing a group of diverse voices, and it is perhaps the differences between the writers in each category that are most intriguing.

Kathryn Gray's *The Never-Never* was nominated in 2004 for the T.S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Though *The Never-Never* was published some years ago, we include it because when it comes to Gray, the focus is often on her excellent work as an editor (formerly at *The New Welsh Review*, now at Parthian Books). Gray, however, is also an extremely talented poet, who finds inspiration in the South Wales Valleys.

Many of Gray's poems draw on the peculiarities of Welsh working-class

culture, but it is also significant that she studied Medievalism at university. Like *Piers Plowman* or *The Canterbury Tales*, Gray's collection focuses on communities of individuals who are presented as pilgrims or wanderers seeking meaning. This might be the significance of the title, which quotes the idiom, to pay something off 'on the never-never'. There is a sense of futility in the phrase, of striving to reach some goal that is unattainable, yet it also might suggest the idea of *carpe diem*, how individuals and communities live for the moment through sex, booze and escapism. In the epigraph, Gray quotes Gothic nineteenth-century poet Ann of Swansea, and throughout *The Never-Never*, Gray conjures a Gothic British neverland of pubs, estates, rainy streets, bedrooms, garages, cafés, and chapels.

These are not empty spaces, however, but places where human beings rub along with one another creating frictions or attractions. The opening poem, 'Joyrider,' compares the 'due disregard' of car thieves with the reactions of those listening to the stolen vehicle roaring through the night. The joyriders impose their presence on middle-class neighbourhoods shattering their cosy existence. Gray teases out the folly of human beings with a wry, knowing sense of humour. So in 'The Italians in the Rain,' Gray describes an unfaithful husband and, turning to his supposedly ignorant wife, she comments, 'it's just possible that she always knew / what he'd done with her best friend and sister'. In this poem and others, the folly depicted often relates to sex. 'A Voyeur's Volume' describes the kitsch sexiness of reading Jackie Collins on holidays, while 'Assigination' sees the narrator and her partner listening to other lovers on the opposite side of a wall.

The romantic encounters, however, are always imagined in the context of a wider world or community. So in 'Meteorology,' a personal, physical act of opening up makes way for the vision of an entire community. Whole vistas open from 'terraced gardens hung with the swings of pegged lines' to 'tarpaulins drawn across a court in Wimbledon'; from 'a lopped half of sun dropped upon an arable land' to 'a yard, tilted right hip, a woman with basket.' The personal act described is inextricable from and constructed by the society and land that acts as a backcloth for the encounter. This link is made explicit in 'The Muse, an Estate,' where the surprise of a romantic encounter is compared to the unexpected turn of 'rundown, loping alleys or the stairwell descents / of some housing estate (their mapped miscellany of food, piss, sex scent).' Nostalgia for past relationships chimes with the reminiscences about spaces and places that are not conventionally beautiful but vital and alive.

The characters and places in *The Never-Never* imbibe what Gray describes in 'Mount Lee' as 'a sense somehow of being late or lost.' This sense of lateness or lostness might apply to the Welsh poet writing in English, a status

that Gray interrogates in ‘The Pocket Anglo-Welsh Canon.’ There is some hope, however, for a race of writers lost to their own tongue because:

though these words were never ours,
they will have happened like a history, share the taste
of copper on the tongue, have a certain easiness
with human heat

The Never-Never breathes life and warmth into British stereotypes all too easily used in the media. Gray’s collection successfully manages to relate personal stories full of the folly and laughter of human pride and endeavour, whilst also conjuring a sense of place and community that is complex, vivid and beautiful.

Like Gray, Helen Mort in *A Pint for the Ghost* seeks to uncover vivid moments of everyday life. Focussing on working-class folk, Mort traverses Northern towns like Bradwell, Chesterfield, Castleton, Derby and Sheffield. Mort refers to Frost, Mackay and Burnside in the collection, all poets who conjure the unspoken histories that haunt places. Her approach is probably best summed up, however, in her poem ‘a dram for all the men I’ve never drunk with,’ which sees the narrator drinking with the ghosts of Freud, Byron, Marx and Larkin. These four ghosts do indeed represent different aspects of Mort’s poetics which explore Freudian projections of desires, a Byronic Gothic sense of place, a Marxist sense of repressed histories, and a very Larkinesque emphasis on mundaneness and everyday life.

Throughout the collection, Mort uses the space of the public house: ‘pubs / where the front door shuts behind you like a coffin lid’ (‘are you being served?’). Mort developed the poems in *A Pint for the Ghost* as a theatrical show which was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, and the poem certainly works here as a storytelling vehicle recounting legends, ghostly tales and humorous anecdotes. Often the tales are told with a touch of wry, working-class realism. Take for example ‘a pint for true shepherds’ when a ‘well-fed vicar’ brings his sermonizing to the pub, rhapsodising on the role of man as shepherd. A sheep farmer listening to the lecture tells the vicar laconically ‘tha know nowt about sheep.’

Disenfranchised workers – pastoral and industrial – are written out of the history books, but they haunt the post-industrial landscapes in Mort’s poems. Analepsis allows these ghosts to intrude on the present, so in ‘a vodka for the working ghosts,’ Mort notes that there are ‘shops built where furnaces once breathed’ and she conjures the ghosts of ‘long-dead steelworkers’. Similarly, in ‘a mild for stainless Stephen’, there are ghosts ‘still sweating from the braziers that vanished years ago’. Particularly eerie is the story in

‘full measure for neil moss’, which tells of ‘the Oxford caver who they lost / in ’59.’ This ghost story, however, develops beyond being a creepy legend, and becomes instead summoning of the repressed and silenced histories of working people:

they call to us, from reservoirs
and mine shafts, long since shut,
from bricked up wells and tunnel mouth.

Mort presents the repressed workers as figures in limbo unable to free themselves from their oppressed state. When in ‘short measure for gabriel hound,’ the ‘huge shape of a hound’ appears to the Bradwell miners, it signals their impending deaths in a mining accident. The workers, however, are heroic and stoic in the face of death, going down ‘grim faced, down to the mine / to meet their certain fate’. Altogether, *A Pint for the Ghost* is refreshing in its unabashed focus on working class people, rituals and histories. Mort’s characters are vivid and vital, and the haunting images linger, reminding us of the North’s rich industrial history.

Like Mort, Paul Bentley is interested in a disenfranchised class of workers in the North of England, but his new pamphlet, *Largo*, focuses specifically on the 1980s miners’ strikes. *Largo* uses deeply complex intertextuality to present a personal history and the story of a particular moment and community. The pamphlet is mainly dominated by the long poem, ‘The Two Magicians’, the title of which refers to the old folk ballad. The ballad tells the story of a blacksmith who pursues an unwilling lady; she escapes by turning herself into different creatures. Finally, she turns herself into a man, and the blacksmith conquers her by turning himself into a woman. It is difficult to tell quite how the symbolism of the ballad tallies with the poem which describes the 1980s miners strikes in Yorkshire. Does the blacksmith chasing the lady represent the Tory pursuit and defeat of the rights of workers? Is the chase bound up with a personal story or is it a tale that sheds light on British society as a whole?

More light is shed by the sequence’s two epigraphs, both of which are bound up with a critique of imperialism and conquest. The first is taken from an interview with Margaret Thatcher in which she espouses Victorian values and seems to ignore the interviewer’s suggestion that such values create a division of wealth and an unequal society. The second (from Dee Brown’s *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*) describes Native American chief Sitting Bull’s desire to take his people to Canada to the land of his ‘grandmother,’ Queen Victoria, a plan which, in the light of Victorian imperialist values, is bound to end badly. In addition to these epigraphs, there also appears the alchemical motto, VITRIOL: *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies*

Occultum Lapidem ('Visit the Interior Parts of the Earth; by Rectification Thou Shalt Find the Hidden Stone'). 'The Two Magicians' is then set up as a pursuit of wisdom and the subject to be investigated is British imperialism and the desire for conquest.

Rather than looking at British imperialism abroad, however, Bentley focuses on the Yorkshire miners' strikes of the 1980s and tells the story of how the Northern working-class was conquered by the Thatcher government. The telling of this story is not straightforward, however, and the use of intertextuality is immense. Take for example how each poem is dedicated to a creature: the dove, pike, spider, rabbit, eel, mallard, and fly. We are only given the Latin name and a brief description of every creature from field guides which works as an epigraph for every poem. The use of creatures refers back to the ballad 'The Two Magicians,' where the lady transforms herself into different shapes to escape the blacksmith, but it also has significance in relation to the poems' content. For example, the first poem dedicated to the dove, a romantic symbol, tells a story of unrequited love for a friend's older sister, while the next poem is dedicated to the pike, a creature that resembles the dubious character described: Ripley who is a 'smackhead' and poacher. 'The Two Magicians' is full of authentic characters and voices and even the passages spoken by the chorus ring true, taken as they are from an oral history of the miner's strike.

On the one hand, there are references to cultural texts and figures of the 1980s: Morissey, New Order, Culture Club, the Smiths, Echo and the Bunnymen, the Cure, the magician Paul Daniels, and Arthur Scargill. On the other, the personal stories of growing up in 1980s Yorkshire are elevated by references to Shakespeare, Tennyson, George Herbert and Keats. The use of octets too with inset lines is reminiscent of nineteenth century narrative poetry, though the story told is far less easy to decipher. Keats in particular seems to hold a particular significance with the 'ring-dove frayed and fled' from 'The Eve of Saint Agnes' appearing again and again to signal love unrequited, hopes lost. Near the end of the sequence, the dove is hopeful, however, as its 'Fallen bird seed' offers the possibility of sustenance to the weary miners. Paraphrasing Tennyson's 'The Lotos Eaters,' Bentley imagines the defeated workers like Tennyson's sailors, seeking comfort in oblivion: the 'Waves gushing on an alien shore.' These overpowering waves appear again in the final poem where they are 'Gushing over the pit.' The pieces of Northern culture that remain are explored in the title poem, 'Largo,' and 'Barnsley Abu (a postcard to Paul Muldoon)' which mingle football culture, the popular song and the sublimity of high art to bathetic effect. Altogether, Bentley's *Largo* is uncompromising in its use of intertextuality, which may be a source of irritation for some. This reviewer, however, enjoyed unravelling some of the allusions and layers of

the poems, and the result is a far more complex vision of the North.

While the collections reviewed so far have been very much embedded in British culture, Will Stone's second collection, *Drawing in Ash*, has a more European sense of place and community. Like Gray's *The Never-Never*, *Drawing in Ash* evokes a sense of lateness – of living in an age too late, of discovering an epiphany just before the moment of death, of finding beauty and sublimity in death. Many of the subjects of Stone's poems are historical figures who have some significant role as prophets or philosophers trying to make meaning out of meaninglessness. 'Christ on the Cross – Delacroix' questions Jesus's sacrifice describing the 'Human labour' of the crucifixion:

... two wedges hammered down
no Mary, no mourners, no soldiers
only bare brown blood-soiled ground

The half-rhyme between 'down' and 'ground' emphasises the act of hammering the two wedges; it is final, desolate and without hope of resurrection. Similarly bleak is 'Nietzsche at the End', which pictures the philosopher after his mental breakdown when he 'wave[s] the world I gnawed white away,' and 'Walser's Last Walk' describes the death of the Swiss writer Robert Walser who, like Nietzsche, suffered a mental breakdown, ending his days in an asylum. 'Chopin in Scotland' describes the composer's final journey before dying in Paris in 1849; Stone describes him as 'an almost leafless branch / bending over the Broadwood.' 'The Clearing' in memory of Walter Benjamin invokes the end of the philosopher's life trying to escape the Nazis, a journey which eventually led to his suicide. In all of these poems, Stone laments the waste and decline of such great men, but also seems to celebrate the intensity of the moment before death, when the world appears with such immense beauty and clarity.

Stone's role as poet is outlined in 'Note Scribbled to the Unsaved' where he addresses those dead before their time, mapping 'every one snuffed out,' 'every fresh heart,' each 'slumped pilot and flak-shredded wings,' and 'suitcases showing through the snow, / un-recovered on a platform.' Stone is a witness to brutality, war and death:

I have timed my breathing to your
still rising forms, and have placed
each of your names in cold churches
where no one comes.

Many of the poems are memorials and many more are set in burial grounds

or cemeteries. In the ‘Secret of Picpus Cemetery, Paris,’ Stone describes how many victims of Paris’s revolutionary Terror were buried there. Imagining the moment before their deaths, Stone invokes ‘the cool preamble’ of ‘the jailer barber’s eager shears’. ‘In the Ancient Cemetery of Ukkel’ uses the overgrown cemetery in Brussels to philosophise about the impermanence of monuments and concludes that ‘somewhere two skeletal hands / are waiting for the moment / to release the stilled dove.’

The title poem of the collection ‘Drawing in Ash’ is based on the testimony of SS officer, Karl Wolff, who was surprised to see Himmler react with revulsion after witnessing the execution of prisoners. Stone cleverly transforms Wolff’s act of drawing in ashes to an image that resonates with the outrage of the Holocaust: breathing the ashes of those who died in the gas chambers – drawing in ash. The Holocaust is the subject again in ‘The Extinction Plan,’ where Stone frames the desire to kill as the inevitable companion of romantic or sexual desire:

No one wants to be dust.
No one wants their love left out,
but nearly every wheel finds the rail
and follows the tramline to lust.

Selfishness is at the root of modern society in Stone’s vision. Everyone wants their own existence and loves to be validated, but that does not stop them from lust or bloodlust, with the image of the rail and tramline presenting eerie echoes of the Jews deported to death camps in World War Two. Violence and lust are twinned again in ‘The Antwerp Mannequins,’ which explores to the fullest the inevitable comparison between butchery and prostitution:

[...] all they want is meat, to gnaw the bone
to tear the haunch and fill
the emptying barn of their hearts

The prostitutes are meat in a butcher’s window to the customers, a familiar metaphor. Yet Stone turns the viewpoint from the voyeur to scrutinize the male customers. They are barns empty of grain, a metaphor which emphasises the hollowness at the heart of those who buy sex, and poses questions about the source of such emptiness. Altogether, *Drawing in Ash* is a striking and poignant piece of work, which strikes at the heart at the problems of modernity. Through telling the deaths of famous individuals like Benjamin, Himmler, Chopin or Nietzsche, Stone raises disturbing questions about civilisation and brutality. Bleak and beautiful, the poems elegise and bear witness, lamenting

the emptiness at the heart of Western society.

Bringing a very different sensibility to poetry, Lebanese-British writer Omar Sabbagh considers the social intersections of family, place and community in his sensitive and endearing new collection *Waxed Mahogany*. Sabbagh is a surprisingly prolific writer for a young poet, and has already published two collections: *My Only Ever Oedipal Complaint*, and *The Square Root of Beirut*. Sabbagh's earlier collections celebrated his Lebanese heritage and family, mused on the nature of civilisation, and considered the vagaries of love, in a notorious series of poems to an unrequited lover named C. This new collection develops these themes, reiterating that the personal and social are inextricably linked. The collection begins and ends with quotations from Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which revolves around the invented poet John Shade, who is arguably an alter-ego for Nabokov. The reference subverts the expectations of the reader. Is the narrator of the poems Sabbagh or a version of Sabbagh, and just how far removed are these versions from the 'real thing'? The epigraph reads: 'I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure in the windowpane.' The quotation laments the waxwing's mistake – seeking space and freedom in the reflection in a pane of glass – but it also questions notions of authenticity. The speaker is not the waxwing, but the waxwing's shadow. At the end of the collection, however, when Sabbagh quotes *Pale Fire* again, he signals that the purpose of *Waxed Mahogany* is to recover something of what has been lost: 'I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.' The feather of the dead bird represents what survives in both real and mirrored worlds.

Similarly, Sabbagh's poems do not merely explore the self – the cult of personality that Nabokov so cleverly subverts – but introduce a cast of characters, many of them real people from Sabbagh's family. Place is also integral to these poems, and Sabbagh continues to list the location where the poem was written beneath the title. These poems are never isolated textual artifacts then, but always embedded in a social context. For Sabbagh, 'Poets, like poems, are pith, are Palestine,' a metaphor that seemingly locates poets and poetry in arenas of revolt, insurgency and upheaval (in 'Palestine'). This is Sabbagh at his most political, yet his main preoccupation in *Waxed Mahogany* is the interconnections between family, lovers and friends – how such connections shape and mould the way in which we view the world. It is no coincidence that in 'A Manned Island,' Sabbagh quotes Donne's maxim: 'No man's an island.'

The first section, 'Of the Licit and the Dear,' is most concerned with family, the title being taken from a poem about his grandfathers whom he never met, but who are described as 'rapid scholars / Of the licit and the dear'. The use of the word 'licit' is interesting, and it is linked in the poem 'The

Band of Brothers' to the task of retaining part of what is lost – the feather of Nabokov's waxwing.

Stitches for the words, words for the stitches
For the licit dissection of the river and mist
That's at the core of what a heart, in its
Prolonged loudness, misses, missed...

Sabbagh has always been preoccupied with writing about his family, having presented a number of beautiful and poignant poems for his grandmother, mother, and father in earlier collections. What is especially striking in this new collection though, are the complex poems about women through which Sabbagh explores the notion of femininity itself and his own relationship with it. In 'La Veuve' for example, he considers 'a widow busy with her widowhood,' and notes how 'Eyeing her I seem to tug at her'. What emerges from this scrutiny is an astounding litany of beautiful images that unravel what Freud called the 'dark continent' of femininity:

She wears black: a lewd rhapsody against snow –
A jeremiad and a passion and a paradox in its folds;
Something wailing, Pre-Raphaelite, warming, saucing the cold

More explicit examination of womanhood occurs in 'The Feminine,' where the feminine moves from outside the observer to inside: 'That frittering machine within, within, / That lewd racket, that raucous, cloudy din'. In 'Nymph and I,' the epigraph quoting Lacan on the mother reveals a psychoanalytic, philosophical approach to the feminine. Addressing the 'nymph,' the narrator imagines femininity as a greater interconnectedness, a sense of what Freud would call 'oceanic feeling':

Tell me how all men vanish in you.
The tall ones and the short ones, the brown,
and the white, the lacklustre bony
And the fat treasured ones.
Tell me your story: we are at sea together
You and I, unravelled by landfall as yet.

'Nymph and I' has a kind of nostalgia for the connection between mother and child – the state of 'not knowing where I end / and you begin'. This is reiterated again in a poem for Sabbagh's grandmother, 'The Old Pear of Her Body,' where he describes the selflessness of maternity: his grandmother 'Crouching low, making from the old pear / Of her body, a total tender offer'.

The main sequence of the collection, *Waxed Mahogany*, extends this fascination with generosity and unboundedness, but adds a poignant feeling of things lost: that there are limits to how well or how long we can know others. Redemption is still to be found in the feminine, which is what mahogany seems to represent. In “‘He’,” a poem that begins in self-exploration, Sabbagh turns back to the oceanic, maternal feeling of the feminine: ‘Let the polished wood guide us back to our beginnings: / The warm mahogany of burgeon and motherhood’. Whether we can recapture the interconnectedness with our mothers, with the maternal, with the feminine, is questionable, however. In ‘His Eyebrows’, another poem for his unrequited love C., Sabbagh laments ‘What’s lost is lost,’ and recalling Shakespeare’s *Richard III* in ‘A Horse, A Horse,’ Sabbagh describes the possibility of failure as ‘something awry in the corner of a room’; it is ‘Something vanishing as a horse; / Something vanishing as horses do.’ Sabbagh’s antidote for such loss and failure is to commemorate members of his family: his grandfather in ‘His Scarf by my Heart’; more poems for his deceased uncle Bisher Faris; and a series of moving poems to his father. The possibilities (or not) of inheritance are explored in ‘Sultan,’ where Sabbagh describes his father as ‘the pulse that wings and sings / and the blood that bleeds in me,’ yet the narrator excoriates himself for being ‘to him as profane leaf // To mythic tree’. The son can never match his father’s greatness, but remains an imprint or shadow.

The sense of loss in familial and romantic relationships is also found in communities and place. So, in the sequence ‘Music of the World’s Defeat’, Sabbagh describes (in the sequence’s title poem) how ‘we are cusps without feet, fleeting; / That *there is no* measure or meeting / Between the notes, no cause, no ceiling’. Sabbagh locates this feeling of nothingness in the city of Beirut in particular. In ‘*This City*’, he describes Beirut as a ‘lame finger triggering / A gun’ and ‘a struck drum / Which fails to resonate.’ Beirut’s lack, however, is finally brought back to the context of family and social interaction in ‘Split-tongued’:

The deep blues of these locutions,
 My split-tongued family stirs
 A massive, hoary cry in me,
 A huge, dolorous secret,

Like a sea’s, say, chief
 Rut, rent, its most choice
 Emotion –

Being dislocated from a single tongue is both painful and generative in

Sabbagh's vision. It creates a lack of permanence, of security, of single and whole identity, but it also brings us back to that sense of oceanic feeling – of being connected to others in a profound and inextricable way. It means existing in a borderland, which echoes the symbolism of the final sequence: 'Lines in the Sand'. Perhaps the most revealing poem in this sequence is 'After Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*'. Sabbagh completed a PhD at Kings College London on the work of Ford Maddox Ford and Joseph Conrad, and the conclusion to this poem is very Conrad-esque: 'And sense has two meanings: / To make you see and to make you see.' Like Conrad, Sabbagh's poems seeks to evoke sensual experiences, but he is also (as Edmund White labels Ford) a *mythomane*, creating bombastic and hyperbolic images for the love of storytelling. One of Sabbagh's greatest strengths is the beauty and surprise of his images which evoke powerful emotional responses. Take 'In the Harem', where he describes the inhabitants speaking 'like silken imbeciles, / Distant as bony crickets or khaki crocodiles, / As dry and useless as tardy codicils', or for another example, see 'The Desert of Her' where a kiss is 'lip upon lip like cut wrists'. In painting the self as a series of reactions to people and places, Sabbagh presents a series of poignant and moving poems that transcend the mundane in search of the sublime, the beautiful, the dear and the oceanic. His approach might be summed up by the epigraph to 'De Anima' which quotes Roger Scruton's *The Face of God*: 'The smile of the Mona Lisa is a smear of pigments on a canvas. But the lived world is as real as the Mona Lisa's smile'.

Like Sabbagh, Rebecca Goss is preoccupied with relationships within families, and her new collection *The Anatomy of Structures* deconstructs marriage and relationships in particular. Her poems are disarming; their stories sound anecdotal and personal but the variety of characters and situations involved mean that they can't all be true. The title poem scrutinises human bodies, human memory and the human heart, finding 'historical movement' in 'a new freckle', before turning inwards to map out the 'parts of my heart divided for our children'. The poem and the whole collection represent 'the slow digging out of our histories', and while so many stories end with the 'happily ever after' of betrothal, Goss seeks to uncover 'this new structure of marriage'. The glamour of a grand passion is not the subject of *The Anatomy of Structures*, but instead mundane moments of intimacy and feeling are foregrounded throughout the book.

Goss is preoccupied with observing everyday interactions, while human pain and weakness are often subjects for her poems. So in 'Rise,' a mother allows her child to trace old burns – 'twists / like raw white dough stretching over veins,' and in 'Labor Day, Long Island,' a man watches a loved one's flirtations: how she laughs with another man 'as if she really didn't know / he

wanted to touch her.’ In ‘Jealousy,’ a mother witnesses a father/son rivalry so extreme that the father ‘Wants the boy to see him being held tight, / fucked into existence’ by the boy’s mother, and, in ‘Her Things,’ when a woman asks her boyfriend to remove the toiletries of his ex-lover from the bathroom shelf, she is dismayed to realize that the other woman’s ‘belongings have morphed / into mine’. Through telling these small, intimate moments, Goss captures the misapprehensions, interactions and frictions in human communities.

The mundane details of these poems are not only powerful but political. In ‘Burgle Me’, Goss questions the slippage between objectifying women and brutalising them. The woman in the poem is subjected to a burglary during which she is tied up ‘like a bound piece of game, / watching them search, empty, steal’. Goss describes how ‘one of them leant close, / did something terrible to her eye’, an act that secures the right of voyeurism for men only. Flashing forward to months later, Goss describes the woman dancing at a wedding. Moving to the voyeuristic perspective of a male guest, Goss describes how he admired ‘the boldness of her pose, / the slit in her skirt’ and desires to ‘tuck his nails // beneath her eye patch’ and ‘steal a look’. The victim of the robbery is still objectified by the men who regard her, and the act of making her an object of fantasy is represented as yet another violation.

Goss’s poems convey the contradictions and cruelties of human behaviour, as well as vulnerabilities and frailties. This latter feeling is especially redolent in Goss’s poems about parents and children. While Sabbagh contemplated parents from the point of view of a son, Goss focuses on parental anxiety about harm coming to one’s children which is not often the subject for poetry. Goss conjures a sense of parental helplessness very effectively. In ‘Knowledge’, a mother imagines her son’s suicide as a grown man: how he will be found ‘Boots with laces dangling / in a garage, his own children playing outside’. Another mother in ‘Growing’ describes her husband’s guilt when his son’s arm is ripped off by an elevator door; she notes that ‘We never speak of the blood or the foreign sound // that was my husband screaming’. ‘Keeping Houston Time’ revolves around parental guilt too, as a mother and father sleep through their son’s death in a different time zone. Most poignant is ‘Aeroplanes’, in which a mother begins to deal with the death of her daughter in a plane accident; she replays the accident, this time imagining herself there able to save her child: ‘My hands getting ready to grab the feet, / pull her safely through the trees’. The impossibility of the dream is horrifying and beautiful, and it emphasises the frailty of human hopes. Altogether, *The Anatomy of Structures* is a powerful debut collection that mercilessly scrutinises human follies and weaknesses. Goss’s poems about guilty parents, jealous siblings, and mistrustful lovers create a sense of a community of individuals who are helpless on the tides of coincidence and happenstance.