

# Zoe Brigley

## Reviewing Neglected Younger Poets

### Part 1: Mythmakers and Breakers

**Leanne O’Sullivan:** *Cailleach, the Hag of Beara* (Bloodaxe, 2009)

**Paul Kingsnorth:** *Kidland and Other Poems* (Salmon, 2011).

**Emily Berry:** *Stingray Fevers* (Tall Lighthouse, 2008)

**Sinéad Wilson:** *The Glutton’s Daughter* (Donut Press, 2006)

**Sasha Dugdale:** *Red House* (Carcenet, 2011)

**Meirion Jordan:** *Moonrise* (Seren, 2008)

In the past few years, youth has been a significant word for British poetry canon-makers. James Byrne’s and Claire Pollard’s *Voice Recognition* focused mainly on younger writers, while this year Salt brought out *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* co-edited by Roddy Lumsden and Eloise Stonborough. Finally, Todd Swift and Kim Lockwood are bringing out an anthology in 2012 of young poets for Oxfam titled *Lung Jazz*. The remit of this essay is to take a closer look at some alternative younger poets who may have fallen in the cracks between anthologies, or who may not have received as much attention as they deserve. I do so on the proviso that it is not only the ‘young’ who are ‘breaking into’ poetry or producing ground-breaking work. The review, however, is written in the spirit of giving new work by younger poets more attention than a one-hundred-word mention in a standard round-up.

All the poets have been highlighted by *Agenda* in the online Broadsheets, as well as in the journal itself, and all of them have distinct and arresting voices which merit further scrutiny. In order to represent them as fully as possible, I have split the poets into three categories: ‘Mythmakers and Breakers,’ ‘Social Anatomists’ and ‘Cartographers’. These categories are not meant to reduce the writers’ unique personalities. Nor are they an attempt at creating a canon. They 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.

Leanne O’Sullivan’s debut collection *Waiting for my Clothes* provided moving portraits of personal vulnerability, but her most recent, *Cailleach, the Hag of Beara*, uses the same probing emotional scrutiny in a mythical context. The Cailleach Bhéarra is a mythical hag in Irish (and Scottish) legend who stands for the nation, but O’Sullivan’s version becomes an authentic, flawed human woman. Challenging nationalist icons of women in Irish discourse, O’Sullivan gives the Cailleach context and humanity, setting

out five stages of her life through birth, sex, sibling rivalry, desire, and old age. The poems also explore how and why myths are created. As O'Sullivan comments in an untitled prose poem: 'Age continues with its backwards glances, with all its ghosts and one layer of stone settles on another.' The layers of rock refer to the legend of the Cailleach's birth from stone, but the image also gestures to the caprices of history where 'backwards glances' become permanent, immovable strata. O'Sullivan considers how gossip and innuendo solidify into mythologies or histories. So in 'Rumour,' when the neighbours gossip, the Cailleach explains: 'The rumours didn't end, became gestures, / like branches nodding.' The rumours imagined as the wind in the trees suggest that gossip-mongering is as fundamental as breath. O'Sullivan's storytelling, however, focuses on the Cailleach's humanity, especially when she finds a lover, who is not a god as in the old tales, but a fisherman. The poems that describe their relationship celebrate the palpable joy of physical and emotional love. In 'The Unwhispered Hush,' the Cailleach describes her lover as 'the first thought the world had / when it dipped its palms and made rivers' making 'everything suddenly, beautifully, touchable.' The splendour of this description makes it very poignant when the Cailleach's lover dies. In 'Her Husband Says,' her lost love comforts her from beyond the grave:

I said that the leaves will come,  
deep green shadows

rising over the frost after I am gone.  
I told you that you would stand here again

Through representing the Cailleach's delights and tragedies, O'Sullivan conjures a human woman who is defiant, passionate, and indomitable. She also defies the archetype of the crone or Mother Ireland, and ultimately, the Cailleach is far more complex than traditional myths have admitted.

O'Sullivan's collection is in a long tradition of Irish women rewriting myths to humanize women, but Paul Kingsnorth's collection, *Kidland*, uses myth in a decidedly more masculine way. Reminiscent of Ted Hughes, Kingsnorth focuses on the primitive side of nature and human life. *Kidland* also references Robinson Jeffers and Rainer Maria Rilke as influences. Like Jeffers, Kingsnorth describes the futility of human life on the world stage, and, similar to Rilke, he admires nature's lack of self-consciousness, a very human quality. The most successful poems represent the chilling dynamic between predator and prey in natural and human worlds. There is a primal sensibility to the poetry when Kingsnorth speaks in the voice of 'The bird killer' whose prey 'is warm and moves in my hands / like a newborn. I do

not have to. I have to.’ The bird’s destruction is as horrifying as infanticide, yet Kingsnorth suggests that the death is inevitable. The urge to be merciful is always overridden by the desire to kill. Kingsnorth reiterates this message again in the poem ‘stalker’ but from the point of view of the prey. The quarry is described in unpunctuated, breathless lines: ‘flat in the hollow press your ears to your back still your wings pray / that he passes.’ Kingsnorth concludes about the hunter: ‘You will kill because you must.’ This drive to kill is also applied to human worlds – to English history in ‘Angles’ and to Nazi philosophy in ‘Master Race’, but most of all it is mapped out in the long title poem. ‘Kidland’ is a kind of modern myth which recalls Freud’s theories of the death drive and his view of the child or primitive as a mass of violence and desire. In ‘Kidland’, drives for death and pleasure run wild, working as an antidote to sterile metropolitan life, because modern subjects are

[...] a leaden race, a numb people  
nursing our yellow volumes while America’s empire  
smothers us with its dying breath.

Most disturbing is the encounter between Sarah, a tourist, and an anonymous ‘Green Man’ who represents the chaotic wilderness of Kidland. What begins as a conversation between Sarah and the man ends in a rape, and there is something distasteful about Kingsnorth using sexual violence in this way. Kingsnorth does try to shift the power binaries, describing the man as ‘Small and violated,’ while Sarah thinks ‘You are in my power now.’ The following passage, however, is rather disturbing:

You did it because you wanted to, because you could,  
because you are an animal, because you will escape. You did it  
because this is what men do when the walls are lowered and the ropes  
removed. Applaud yourself; you have shown an honesty tonight  
that few men show.

Is Kingsnorth questioning why men rape? What are his conclusions? What is this modern myth trying to tell us? Does it offer new insights or is it merely the same old message that men are at the mercy of their ‘drives’? Many questions are left unanswered and such mythologizing works on dangerous ground.

Another poet writing through mythology, violence and violation is Emily Berry in *Stingray Fevers*. If Kingsnorth recalls Hughes’ primitive tricksters, Berry’s voices are certainly reminiscent of Plath’s poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’ where masochism and defiance meet. Berry, however, does not just produce

pastiches of Plath, but develops her own specific approach. Most often, her narrators give themselves away – their anxieties, their failings – without realizing it. By using this technique, Berry engages ironically with gender issues, myths about sexuality and bourgeois attitudes. For example, when the narrator describes her hero in ‘Vignette’, stating ‘He was like a *total prophet*,’ the modish language creates bathos which undermines the voice’s authority. Other poems are more sinister in their implications. The narrator of ‘A Short Guide to Corseting’ describes her compliance to her lover’s desire: ‘We agreed small waists were more attractive; / we were in a loving and supportive relationship.’ In this and other poems, the narrators’ insistence on their own masochistic choices is portrayed in a menacing manner. Often these women are giving up control of their own bodies, as in the Bluebeard story ‘A Piece of You’, where a lover chides his masochistic beloved ‘Why did you provoke me, when I always wanted to be gentle?’ Violence and coercion are also redolent in ‘Things Fall Apart’ where the foreboding and despair of Yeats and Achebe are transferred to a mundane, domestic setting and a destructive relationship. Berry explains: ‘He didn’t hurt her physically. She hurt herself, / fist to the wall, a bruise like a spillage.’ Like Kingsnorth, Berry creates a kind of Freudian mythology which intimates the frightening power dynamic between the violator and violated, the hunter and prey. Berry’s irony, however, reveals how coercion works without glamourizing it.

Spanning the gap between Kingsnorth and Berry is the myth-making of Sasha Dugdale in her most recent collection *Red House*. Dugdale is a librettist who creates decorous and stylish poetry, and in this collection in particular she draws on Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva. To create the dark, vital world of the ‘red house,’ Dugdale draws on the startling imagination of these Russian poets. She also maintains a vivid sense of history, moving between time periods to interrogate legends – real or mythical – of violence, cruelty and civilization. The title poem explains that the house is ‘made of wasp-thought and saliva.’ If the red house was a church it has long since been abandoned, but Dugdale ironically employs sacred imagery to describe a godless community. ‘On Beauty’ for example, is a litany that pleads for a haven from violation, poverty and imperialism:

Lord, give me the strength to protect these children  
From the soliders, ex-soldiers, arse fuckers, shitmongers  
The unclean, unwashed, the simple, the hopeless, the West  
With its bulbous self-determination.

The speaker laments with parental concern, but some of the threats listed are ambiguous. When the voice denounces ‘arse fuckers’, is this the voice

of bigot deriding alternative sexualities? How trustworthy is the storyteller who presents this myth? It is difficult to ascertain the speaker's reliability, but, like Paul Kingsnorth, Dugdale emphasises the lack of certainty in Western ideologies. There is anxiety too that the current status quo might be overturned to be replaced by something worse. In 'Maldon', Dugdale references the Battle of Maldon in Essex, England when the Vikings defeated the Anglo-Saxons. The narrator describes how 'a new race / Has come up out of the sea, dripping with gold, crueller than the last.' Dugdale's poems reel with horror at the violence of the world and express this horror in mythical terms. In 'Asylum', Penelope describes the state of things after Odysseus's return home, and the carnage after his homecoming merely continues the cycle of destruction and violence:

The prostitutes hang from a beam like mice.  
The suitors are piled unburied in the yard.  
And some say that it is now much better  
And others, that it is worse.

The world of the mythical red house is one of discord, hence Dugdale's 'A Ballad without Rhyme'. The subject of this dissonant ballad, however, is a courageous woman, who remains standing 'wrathful, impossible to behold.' Drawing on history and myth, Dugdale creates an imperfect domain for her poems where violence is neverending, though women and poets might stand against it.

Dugdale's mythical women represent a principle beyond barbarity and violence, but Sinéad Wilson's neat chapbook *The Glutton's Daughter* is more likely to deflate myth than to create one. Drawing on classical literature, art and film, *The Glutton's Daughter* is not afraid to mix classical allusion with everyday culture. Take for example the bathos of 'Memories of Bewick Street and Dyfrig' in which London prostitutes are described via allusions to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Referencing Shakespeare's lead casket and its message not to judge by appearances, the narrator tells how a friend gives the local prostitute a name – not Portia, the lady won by Bassanio in the casket game, but Porsche immediately deflating the moral and classical associations. Wilson invokes Shakespeare again in 'The Tycoon's Wife', especially Romeo's comparison of Juliet to a 'rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear.' Wilson juxtaposes the wife's 'quiet black maids' and her 'jet teardrop studs,' signalling that the human maids have become just another commodity – another aspect of 'all this stolid, cold wealth.' The prostitute in 'Memories of Bewick Street and Dyfrig' and the maids in 'The Tycoon's Wife' are both rendered to mere objects. Wilson's interrogation of myth and gender is not

always convincing, however. The *femme fatale* in 'Le Film Noir,' seems to merely rehash old stereotypes: 'I know these dames are dolls, / fickle as smoke that seeps from lips.' Generally though, Wilson's interrogation of myth, art and gender is exciting, complex and convincing. The title poem 'The Glutton's Daughter' is a good example. La Goulue (The Glutton) was a can-can dancer in 1890s Paris, but she also became a model for Toulouse-Lautrec's famous Moulin Rouge posters. Wilson considers the myths surrounding this real woman using a monologue from the point of view of her daughter, a step which extends the strategies of O'Sullivan, because it considers the inheritances of myth-making surrounding women. Describing how she too becomes an artist's model for Degas, the daughter affirms 'I'm no black cat trapped, / crying her fate behind his wall of paint.' Alluding to Toulouse-Lautrec's poster for Le Chat Noir, the daughter places the artist's model as muse firmly in the past, and rejects the mythical status for a more active creative role.

Wilson's deflation of myths – related to gender and art – have something in common with the wry bathos of Meirion Jordan in *Moonrise*. Wilson punctures her pumped-up mythical subjects, and Jordan's aim too is to undermine elevated and sentimental subjects. In Jordan's 'Wolf,' the narrator tells a kind of fairy tale, 'Once I was told that long ago / there were no poems, only wolves,' but concludes that 'now most bring back dog skin, badly dyed.' 'Wolf' undermines the elevated status of modern poetry, recalling the anxiety of influence. Modern poems can only be fake wolves. Such deflation can be seen in the title poem, the villanelle 'Moonrise', and its refrain, 'The moon will rise, the blue screen will console.' The mingling of the modern and the everyday with classical, poetic imagery characterizes *Moonrise* as a whole. The book also offers a mixture of poetic forms juxtaposing freer narrative forms with traditional types like the villanelle, and it mixes classical allusions to sources like Homer, Catullus and the Bible with references to popular genres like science fiction. It is difficult to know how to read poems like 'Another poem about living on Mars' where the casual title contrasts with the seemingly genuine feeling in the wish for 'rain in purple clouds rotting / through the red crust on olives.' Poems of other worlds are brought back to earth by verses on the banality and mundaneness of everyday life, such as 'Blockbuster season' and 'Pirate music'. It should not be forgotten either that Jordan is a Welsh poet; he brings his keen sense of irony to bear on the Welsh affinity with Latin America in 'The new world.' This parody conjures unlikely characters like 'Olwen Perón' to undercut nationalist myths of Wales's importance. This does not mean, however, that Jordan is a self-hating Welshman. In 'A camera at Senghenydd Pit', Jordan invokes the Senghenydd Mining Disaster:

But there were scenes I did not capture, men  
grottoed like statues underground, the smoke's  
slow wringing of their lungs or that one searing  
flash.

The opening lines quoted above begin with an absence – the scenes that were not captured, that could never have been captured by the living. Jordan does not create a jingoistic myth of the pit disaster, but instead tries to invoke the tangible, painful experience. This strategy respects the reality of the event, without making it into fodder for nationalist myth-making.

Myth-making or myth-breaking are significant activities for all of the poets discussed here. Each one engages with cultural or traditional mythologies in order to enhance or subvert them. Leanne O'Sullivan reinvents the myth of the Cailleach Bhéarra, who becomes not just a feminine figuring of the Irish nation, but a real human woman. Paul Kingsnorth invents 'Kidland,' a mythical place that represents the primitive nature of human beings. Emily Berry taps into Freudian sexual mythologies to challenge scripts of sexual domination, while Sasha Dugdale creates in her 'Red House' a frightening myth about human nature – its inconstancies, its barbarity, as well as its beauty. Sinéad Wilson deflates gender myths about women's appetites – sexual, artistic or otherwise, while Meirion Jordan is keen to debunk grand narratives of nationalism and punctures the elevated status of poetry. All of the poets engage with the act of mythologizing or demythologizing in unique ways, and they all suggest compellingly that mythologies – for better or worse – are fundamental to how human beings perceive the world.

*Editor's note:* at the time of going to press, Zoe Brigley's new collection, *Conquest* (Bloodaxe, 2012) and Meirion Jordan's new collection, *Regeneration* (Seren, 2012), have just been received. These will be reviewed in the next issue of *Agenda*.