Jessica Traynor

FABULOUS BEASTS

Alison Hackett, *crabbing* (21st Century Renaissance, 2017), €18.
Amanda Bell, *first the feathers* (Doire Press, 2017), €12.
Rosie Shepperd, *The Man At The Corner Table* (Seren Books, 2015), £9.99.

The debut collection is often a composite creature; a mythological hybrid of sorts, the result of a decade or so of poetic meanderings and experiment. When they are successful, they have the savage beauty of a sphinx or a chimera; this is balanced by the risk that the work could turn out neither fish nor fowl. These three collections all bear the hallmarks of the debut, containing poems on themes of universal relevance: love affairs (failed or successful), the death of beloved parents, and childhood memories. They all explore the use of form to give these familiar themes a fresh gloss. The mark of success in these instances is whether a fresh and engaging voice emerges to imbue these universal themes with a particular life and energy.

Crabbing by Alison Hackett is a first collection which deals almost exclusively with a childhood trauma, the sudden death of the poet's mother. This is a collection written with a sense of urgency, seeking catharsis. The first part of the collection deals with the discovery of the poet's mother's death, establishing the secure world of home before demonstrating its disintegration. Hackett displays a talent for simple but effective poetic language, capturing the sights and sounds of her childhood life with an unshowy precision that helps to convey the emotional depth of her experience. In 'Rocky Bay', a child's bewilderment at her mother's funeral is captured in the plaintive lines:

> In the evening the fire is lit, curtains drawn
> the hum and murmur of the crowd
> chicken fricassée and rice is served.
> It smells like a party.

An instinct for plucking a seemingly quotidian moment from memory and allowing it to speak volumes is also demonstrated in 'Fisherman's Friend', where a sick friend's pausing to eat the eponymous sweet becomes a telling moment of vulnerability: 'a sweet to keep him breathing / through the five miles ahead'.

Richer detail abounds in the book's title poem, 'Crabbing', which zooms in on a happy childhood memory:

We head out in the clinker built punt,
salt and dirt and streaks of rotten wood
trapped in its layers of varnish.
The seagull engine putters out its beat –
a staccato morse code message
of our journey out to sea.

Hackett captures the music of the sea in these lines, but tempers any potential sentimentality with the introduction of an adult awareness of the crab's fate: 'They froth and bubble in the choking air'.

Hackett outlines the poems' biographical context in an introduction, a rather unusual convention in a poetry book, and I felt a little cheated of the opportunity to discover the poet's experiences through the poetry itself. There are moments in this collection where the drive to achieve catharsis can threaten to overwhelm editorial considerations, meaning that some poems don't quite achieve the freshness of those detailed above. However, as a testament to a child's grief, *Crabbing* succeeds in its poetic aims.

If *Crabbing* is selkie-like in its engagement with a coastal landscape, Amanda Bell's *first the feathers* is an airborne beast, its reflections on life, love, and death threaded through with bird motifs and imagery. This is a tactile collection which doesn't shy away from the visceral. The title poem finds the poet plucking and gutting a woodcock, the action of which prompts an uneasy juxtaposition with more tender actions: 'though I can't erase the trace / of talcum-powdered belly / from my fingers'.

The collection contemplates harm, both accidental and institutional. A number of poems deal with events such as the death of Savita Halappanavar and make reference to the burials at Tuam, or the death of Joanne Hayes, either obliquely or directly. It's certainly refreshing to see a thirst for public and political engagement in a debut, but also quite a challenge to make an original poetic statement on these events, which have been dealt with in some very well-known Irish poems. Bell's method of setting her work apart involves an ambitious formal approach, and she makes skilful use of haibun, ballad, villanelle, ghazal, and sestina. Of these, the haibun are perhaps the most successful, serving to demarcate the various sections of the collection and to reinforce its central themes. The image of a rotting gannet disintegrating in the poet's hands in 'So Long' is particularly memorable.

Also noteworthy, among the formal poems, is 'The Ballad of Mary Anne Cadden', an impressive retelling of the story of the infamous back-street abortionist. The ballad form seems well-suited to this particular tale, creating unusual tonal contrasts, and although the requirements of metre can mean that some lines feel a little padded-out, the starkness of the form works to convey the shock factor of the story:

Charged with child abandonment, Mamie was sent to prison –
The guards went in to search her house and dug up the back garden.

Although they found a foetus there no charge was ever brought –
'Twas only for the living child she came before the court.

Plus ça change, the reader may well think. This collection looks at childbirth and rearing from a number of different angles, and Bell is particularly strong when juxtaposing the joyful physicality of this experience with loss. In 'Phantom', she meditates on a friend's experience of a mastectomy and her own memories of breast feeding. The poem's final stanza riffs on Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', culminating in a line suffused with aching sadness:

If an amputated limb continues itching,
and a missing breast still tenses in the chill,
I fear that what survives of us may not, in fact,
be love, but a disembodied longing to be held.

From one airborne collection to another, Rosie Shepperd's *The Man at the Corner Table* is perhaps the best travelled of our fantastical creatures; a cosmopolitan sphinx of a collection. Shepperd's is a unique and confident voice which delights in the surreal, and although we find ourselves again in the territory of love and loss, we've seldom viewed the terrain from this angle. In 'it's not just the underfloor heating that makes me lie down in the kitchen', the poet literally takes to the kitchen floor in an attempt to find a position which might make life bearable, 'even though I know the dog / will try to lick my face and / even though crystals of mouse bait lie / blue and a yard from my nose'.

This is a collection which tempers loss with humour in a manner that is always refreshing and surprising. These are poems which feature trapdoors into unexpected new landscapes. A quick wit means the poems are often spiky, but never devoid of empathy, and the reader often finds themselves moved by a deft change in tone. In 'What I need, Bernard, is a bit of notice;', the speaker tersely demands a little consideration from her unresponsive partner when planning his imminent funeral: 'I don't have a preference and it is your funeral. / I just wish, / I wish we had longer to look at the menus.' This funny litany is exploded later in the poem, as the poet blind-sides us with a moment of intimacy:

Bernard?
I'm going to hold your hand now.
This is like the old days. Remember the picnics?

You always forged ahead with your spy-nocs to find the perfect spot,
said you wouldn't risk detritus spoiling our cold cuts.

Your hands were always fresh and cool,
rather like ham, Bernard, rather like
a nice tinned ham.

Shepperd's eye for minute but meaningful details, and her ability to balance pathos and bathos, are again demonstrated in 'Lump', a poem that deals with an ungainly and neglected teenager. It's a rare talent to be able to address a tragic situation with such clear-eyed wit, and the wry sadness of the poem's final line echoes in the reader's mind:

Last month he ran onto platform 11, towards an Intercity and into

a ticket attendant from St Lucia who provided a small sweet cup
of polystyrene tea, a telephone number and enough soothing
silence. Poor lump, I should not know this about you, but I do.
I know this about you and you know I know and I know you do.

Shepperd's poems loop and unravel across the page, and many of their titles serve as the poem's first line. This approach helps to unpack the density of Shepperd's vision, which at times can take a little time for the reader to access. However, these poems are full of rewards and each of their composite parts – their lion's mane, their serpent's tail – is a thing of beauty in and of itself.

Each of these three collections merits further exploration than time or space will allow here; this, again, is the challenge of commenting on debuts which have clearly been many years in the making. It will be interesting to see how these fantastical creatures evolve – whether they choose to settle, daemon-like, into one form, or to maintain their composite nature over the course of collections to come.