

AT THE EDGES

Vona Groarke, *Infinity Pool*, The Gallery Press, €11.95,
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Olivia McCannon, *Lives of Z*, Pavilion Press, £15.99,
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Rowland Bagnall on two collections that explore the limits of
description and experience

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As poetry attempts to find the words for what is taking place, what is taking place seems somehow harder to describe. This tension animates the poetry of Vona Groarke and Olivia McCannon, whose new collections seek to understand the world on its own terms.

Groarke has always been a tactile poet. *Other People's Houses* (1999), her second collection, is a book of carefully curated stanzas – ‘a scheme of rooms’, she writes in ‘House Plan’ – proceeding with a sense of domesticity and delicate exactness. Groarke’s early poems reveal a balance of ‘confinement and poise’ (‘House Rules’), their boxes ‘numbered and packed / according to the condition / of their random artefacts’ (‘House Contents’). There is a quiet attentiveness at work, ‘the slight / precision’, reads a phrase from *Flight* (2002), of a poet sensitive to minor alterations – the movement of furniture, shifts in the light – ‘stuff / nobody minds or notices’, to lift a line from Philip Larkin’s ‘Livings’. That Groarke has previously written in response to the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi, known for his hushed interiors, seems more than a coincidence. Like the ghostly stillness of Hammershøi’s paintings, Groarke’s are poems in which ‘Everything is in its ordained place’ (‘Dream House’), ‘beginning with slightness’, suggests another poem from *Flight*, ‘and [...] taken from there’.

It comes as a surprise, therefore, to find that *Infinity Pool*, Groarke’s ninth collection, is guided by a species of uncertainty, the concrete

and the tactile giving way to ambiguities. Groarke's title establishes this texture, alluding to 'the illusion of one invisible edge', notes the collection's blurb, 'the dividing line between poems and the world they process [which] can be magically tricky to discern'. The book begins (mid-flight) with an image of obscurity, the poet returning to Ireland, flying through 'clouds so dense you think you / could hopscotch over them' ('Stansted to Knock, December 21st'). Elsewhere, the poems encounter similar moments of cloudiness and doubt, navigating 'places [that] seem to be either teetering or mired' ('What the day offers, so the day demands'), like the country road turned into sky-reflecting water 'lapped at by a sullen flood', 'slumped in overspill / from a lake without a name' ('The Low Road').

Far from waiting on the mantelpiece, the objects of *Infinity Pool* appear about to nudge or break, like 'a stop-motion sequence', Groarke suggests, 'where an object [...] shimmies between frames', 'always ghosting itself' ('Imagine the Atlantic as a Film-maker'). This instability is figured, often, by the ocean, a symbol of the constant shiftiness of experience and memory, 'just as one leaf-full of water / added or removed / makes for a different sea' ('Imagine the Atlantic as a Journalist'). Several of Groarke's poems carry similar titles, the Atlantic imagined by the poet into different roles – an actor, an artist, a bartender, a chambermaid – as if to signal its inexhaustible disguises, never quite settling on a single, indisputable identity. This sense of indeterminacy emerges as one of the major themes of this collection, observations from a world 'that's even now sawing itself in half / then sewing itself together' ('Mise en Scène').

These poems see Groarke wrestling with poetry, with its ability to adequately grasp the world at hand. The poet animates this struggle in 'Introduction', which records her failure to produce a poem about a telegram addressed to the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, 'unable to sweet-talk' the object into words, conceding that the reader will have to visualise it for themselves, 'just as you'll have to imagine, if you're minded to, the poem'. 'Infinity Pool' recounts a drowsy moment where the poet wakes with an idea 'but lacked the energy or will / to magic my body through / my own fourth wall and lower / myself, spit-spot, into the page.' In this sense, the poems share something with Groarke's previous collection, *LINK: Poet and World* (2021), an

‘(admittedly) quite odd’ dialogue between the poet and the world itself: “Help me out here, World”, I say; “I tell you so much about myself, won’t you reciprocate?”’

Groarke’s poems dramatise the process of encountering ‘cold / questions asked by rooftiles and / windows’ (‘With the moon in full spate such that’), negotiating ‘words, / unwords and stingy silence’, reaching ‘Down past questions / with flotsam answers I can’t quite get a hand / to’ (‘Inner Space’) – an image that recalls the closing lines of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘At the Fishhouses’, in which the poet reaches down into an achingly cold sea, as if grasping for knowledge. With typical elegance and control, Groarke documents a poet coming into contact with experience ‘as if it were [...] a shirt’, or ‘a page in a book / rubbing up against other pages’ (‘The Future of the Poem’). A believer in total immersion, she teaches us that we, too, are the world, both part of and no different from it, unable ‘to tell / the edge, the stitching or the seams’ (‘Infinity Pool’), where life and time are something that we ‘fall through [...] like a stone through air’ (‘Lint’).

The poetry of Olivia McCannon also occupies the space where one edge meets another, where the language to describe a scene appears to buckle slightly as it lands. Arriving more than ten years since her debut, McCannon’s bold, confronting new collection is equally concerned with how we understand our place within a constantly living and changing environment. Thematically and formally ambitious, *The Lives of Z* explores the role of poetry during our moment of rapidly accelerating crisis, searching for languages to speak to and interrogate the systems that are failing us. Presented as a series of experiments conducted by the eponymous ‘Z’ – ‘A translator multibeing’, reads one of the collection’s ‘Notes’, ‘a plural persona’ encompassing ‘Everybeing and all times at once’, the human and the nonhuman, ‘Biosphere and technosphere simultaneously’ – McCannon’s poems invite us to reconsider the scope and usability of language, to question the relationship of World and Word. ‘They are attempts to read, as much as write, an unreadable world’, she suggests, part Anthropocene inventory, part instruction manual for repair, both a warning against complacency and a call to broaden our horizons, to recalibrate our sense of what is worth paying attention to.

Like the speculative fiction of Richard Powers and Ursula K. Le Guin, McCannon’s poems expose the contours of the present moment

by imagining ‘its aftervisions [and] aftermaths’, enduring ‘like some great guilty hidden secret’ (‘Megalith’). Many of the poems here seem to take place in the future, offering fragments of material excavated from the spoilheaps of consumer culture like a form of archaeology, discovering ‘the trace of who you were and where how what became’ (‘Letter’), ‘A trolley dash through what is left of the world’ (‘Swarm Model’). McCannon’s project offers us an image of ourselves, showing how one world sets in motion the conditions of the next.

Several poems focus on the role of waste in shaping the lives and landscapes of the future. ‘The graveyards of things / are full’, read lines from ‘Autoemotive Funerals’, ‘Things do not know how / to say goodbye’, betraying the influence of ecological philosopher-in-chief, Timothy Morton. The poem conjures an image of layers of geological strata, crammed with what McCannon later calls ‘The over-permanence / Of [...] plastics’ (‘Logbook’). Elsewhere, rusty car parts are exhumed like precious relics from a burial chamber, the ‘Coins ingots bowls’ of former civilisations giving way to ‘RAC sticker piglet bones / Candelabra carburetor / Antlers spark plugs / Fuel injector’ (‘Autoemotive Funerals’). ‘It’s not filth!’ shouts Fry in an episode of sci-fi satire *Futurama* (1999), excited to explore a giant ball of garbage launched into space in the year 2052, intended to alleviate Earth’s landfill problem: ‘It’s a glorious monument to the achievements of the twentieth century. Look, a real Beanie Baby!’ McCannon’s poems hint at a posthuman future, a future of declining species, emptied oceans, and material detritus that evokes the poetry of Jorie Graham. ‘I was trying to tell you about us now’, suggests the distant voice of Graham’s striking ‘Prayer Found Under Floorboard’, ‘How we finally realized we made no difference.’

While there is an undeniable emphasis on the ecological in this collection – it’s easy to imagine *The Lives of Z* joining the likes of Inger Christensen’s *alphabet* (1981) an essential text of ecopoetry for years to come – McCannon’s greatest theme is one of interconnectedness, revealing how the natural and the digital, the political and the financial, the emotional and technological are all parts of a complex whole, a single system showing signs of dangerous wear and tear. Throughout, the poems offer an experiment in pronouns, attaching a subscript ‘Z’ to words in order to evoke ‘assemblages of human, nonhuman and more-than-human existence’, drawing our

attention away from the idea of a coherent lyric self to something far more all-encompassing. ‘What if English had a “collective possessive” pronoun,’ asks McCannon, ‘to counter delusions of individual ownership of Earth?’ signalling her debt to the American poet Joyelle McSweeney, whose writing on the role of poetry in times of crisis is cited in McCannon’s end matter: ‘Just as this catastrophe consists of **microactions, poems** may radiate their effects on microscopes.’

More than anything, McCannon’s poetry is interested in boundaries, in how they ultimately fail to serve us, establishing distinctions that restrict the world far more than they reveal it. ‘The ideal poem and Fox News are opposites’, writes Ben Lerner:

The former enlists your participation, teaches you to see patterns, while the latter is divided into categories [...] whose boundaries guarantee their emptiness. Maybe a culture that attends to poetry is in a better position to unfix the language from the ruinous project of concealing the forms we live by.

McCannon’s poetry grows among and from these ruins, challenging our ‘culture of forgetting’, as she writes in ‘Decomposition’, and putting language ‘to good re- / creational use’. ‘How else to change what appears / to be written’, she asks, ‘to digest words differently / remake the dotted line in motion / to bed down in the page [and] make it matter’?

These collections stretch our sense of what it means to make a record of experience, to use the words at our disposal to account for what is happening. Embracing ambiguity, they discover space for further exploration, reminding us to always ask more questions than we answer.

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