

## Laura Seymour

Rita Ann Higgins, *Ireland is Changing Mother* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2011), 72pp., ISBN 9781852249052, £8.95 paperback; Jackie Kay *Fiere* (London: Picador, 2011), 63pp., ISBN 9780330513371, £8.99 paperback.

Two collections of poems have been published this year that may be described as works of excavation, seeking the parental presence through layers of time, whether preserved pristine, or tectonically shifting and crumbling underfoot. *Fiere* continues the theme of Jackie Kay's 1991 collection *The Adoption Papers* (Kay was adopted by a Scottish couple, and has a biological Highland mother and Nigerian father whom she managed to trace in what she emphasises is her *middle* age). It is also a companion piece to Kay's prose memoir about her upbringing with her adoptive parents and search for her birth mother and father, *Red Dust Road* (2010), currently on the longlist for the 2011 Green Carnation Prize for LGBT writing. Often using small, even unassuming sentences from *Red Dust Road* as the touchstone for exploratory poems, *Fiere* straddles continents, and traverses other people's heads, kitchens, and bodies in a quest founded on equality, love, and friendship (all meanings encapsulated in the word 'fiere'). *Fiere* exemplifies a peculiarly maternal tolerance of the other (whether Muse, lover, child, remembered mother, imagined father) inhabiting the subject's body or head, and the book is a testament to the copia of the female creative voice and body. One need only turn to the poem 'from A Drunk Woman Looks at her Nipple' (pp. 16-17), where the drunk woman imagines her nipple as a medieval castle, an asterism, and the earth's core. The constant flow of imagery echoes in its mutations the milk flowing from the woman's nipple, 'the milk that spilled...creamy yellow, sandy dunes'. Arguably the most beautiful poem in *Fiere* is '21<sup>st</sup> Birthday Poem for Matthew' (p. 34), through which Kay's son swims from amniotic fluid to tropical seas; the poem has an almost Biblical (to excuse the phrase, as Kay affirms throughout her memoir that, unlike her enthusiastic birth parents, she is an atheist) aura of fertility, of personally peopling the sea with creations, that marries the expansively ecological and intensely human. The sentence in her prose memoir 'My baby turned and flipped inside me like a little fish' becomes the awesome cornucopia of:

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And you are still dancing underwater, my son,  
 with stingrays and yellow fins  
 barracudas and marlins,  
 finding in the deep mystery of the sea  
 something of that tranquillity.<sup>1</sup>

In the second volume of poems under review here, where parenthood is less a direct theme, *Ireland is Changing Mother*, the crash and rot of the Celtic Tiger evokes a ruined potential, a lost heritage felt most keenly in the everyday world of ‘vagabond sons’, mothers slipping from memory, gas-rich land and the empty shelters of unfinished development projects that now cover it. The title’s (and title-poem’s) formative pun encapsulates the figure of a changing, blurring heritage which is nevertheless *talked to* in a dexterous, daedal, resisting voice. For, in the title, ‘Ireland is Changing Mother’, ‘Mother’ could be the vocative, or the direct object. Thus, we hear ‘Ireland is changing mother’ both as an address to the mother (I’m telling you mother, Ireland’s changing) and a description of an Ireland that, with its economic change is changing the mother we remember (Ireland is *making* my mother change). Higgins’ wordplay, though she is not adverse to the punchy quip (for instance, her post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is, due to the bad consequences of its gas investments, ‘Shell on earth’ (p. 71)) tends to work indeed at just this level of the polyvalent sentence: musty proverbs bend under Higgins forthright hands to achieve terrifying immediacy. For instance we are told in the title-poem (pp. 9-10) ‘It’s not the double takes so much| it’s that they take you by the double’: a worn phrase, ‘double take’, mutates quickly into the shock of a quick-march militarised kidnap, whilst also evoking the shock of finding oneself as part of a dyad, a twosome: ‘they take you by the double’. Powerful, too, is the phrase in the poem’s centre, whereby the mother underpins and facilitates Higgins’ characteristic play between the figurative old proverb and the literal context; before the Celtic Tiger failed, men really ‘could eat a horse’ but only with the help of their mother:

your sons are shrinking mother

Before this mother,  
 your sons were Gods of that powerful thing.  
 Gods of the apron string.  
 They could eat a horse and they often did  
 With your help mother

Similarly unsettling the comfortable and well-known in language, Higgins' poem 'His Brazen Hair' (p. 17) describes a man dying outside an exhibition; his corpse told punningly by the guards:

Don't you know  
there's an exhibition in there Gerry  
and you are making a right exhibition  
outta yourself out here.

Like Gerry's ironically self-aestheticising act, the dissolution of the verbal everyday in *Ireland is Changing Mother* never negates the fact that these acts also generate works of art impervious to a simple description as cliché. Higgins' dexterity creeps up unawares; most pervasively, she makes use of repetitions that imprint the memory before they can consciously be deciphered. Thus her poems are so powerful precisely because they work on us even as the way they work is retrospectively transparent. A group of tourists gape from a boat at natives playing cards in Hong Kong's Tai O village in the poem 'Gawkers' (p. 35), for instance. In this poem, Higgins creates effects of depth through almost embarrassingly simple repetition, folding instant layering within the group of gawkers with the repetition and modified ending quiet/quieter: 'Some of them were quiet| Some of them were quieter'. The indifference of the gawked-at card players is wryly doubled through another shifty parallel 'some of the card players| nearly looked up| Some of them didn't.' Jackie Kay uses strikingly similar effects to Higgins here in *Fiere's* warmly rhythmic poem 'Black River' (pp. 11-12), full of dark reflections of rhyme, cadence, and rhythm (itself like the black river, 'darker than the darkest mirror'). This poem describes 'the mangrove roots trailing the river bed| as if searching for the dead down there'. Here is an example of Kay's sensitive style of song: rhyming 'dead' with 'bed' brings the second line to a premature stop, such that the subsequent 'down there' creates a sense of going beyond an end-point (whether this was an intended end-point or not: 'the dead' do appear as rather a jolt): a simple but effective sense of plummeting deeper into the river, of strata of discovery.

Both Kay and Higgins seek the mother through memory as well as through the almost physically-jolting evocations of excavation as those just described. For Higgins, the mother appears as a shifting presence. In her marvellous poem 'The perfect lash' (p. 14), the speaker only has one photograph of her mother but wants it changed in a very specific way:

She asked the man in the photo hut  
to fix this photo of her mother.  
You can't see her eyes

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I want to see my mother's eyes  
is it too much to ask?

The final stanza showcases Higgins' mastery of the uncanny, as the aesthetic perfection of the mother turns to horror. Upon her return to the photo hut, where the man claims to have fixed her mother's eyes, the speaker is at first pleased but in this headlong collision with the mother and the commercial

Soon she noticed  
They weren't her mother's eyes

Her mother as everyone knew  
Had a big heart,  
but she had glaucoma and styes  
now she has long lashes.  
Sophia Loren's eyes

Though like much of the volume the satanic jokiness of the trickster is at work (what on earth did the speaker expect? How was the man in the photo hut supposed to know what this stranger's mother's eyes looked like?), this change in the mother is specifically poignant and dramatic because it is irreversible: the speaker has no other photos of her mother ('this is the only one I have'). The speaker's sudden alienation from her mother is intensified for readers of the poem in that we cannot see the photograph in question when the speaker presents '*this* photo of her mother'. Higgins' destabilisation of the reader's position within the poem—rather than having the poem presented *to us* we feel we are glimpsing a moment we ought perhaps to be excluded from—characterizes the volume at times. As the mother only becomes clear to us in this poem with her 'glaucoma and styes' in the final stanza when she has already been obscured by 'Sophia Loren's eyes', the mother swerves and changes throughout *Ireland is Changing Mother*. The consequent layering of past and present evokes the uncanniness of the shelter both 'empty and occupied' following the fruitless boom in the construction industry of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The gentle incantation 'mother...mother' at line-endings in the title poem is also picked up in 'The Builder's Mess' (p. 29), a poem that also brings news to the mother, this time about the state of shelter and homelessness. The creative builder's mess, like Higgins' own creative acts, often has disturbing implications. In describing the 'builders' mess' that is Ireland as 'toxic and tired mother', another implication, simply by shifting the intonation of the line slightly – of a 'toxic

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and tired *mother*, a mother who herself is toxic and tired – lurks beneath the surface. This effect is cumulative, the builder's mess is 'Unsignificantly and neglected| dirty faced and dour mother| toxic and tired mother', and 'The Builder's Mess' ends with 'a travesty mother'. The ill or toxic body, the neglected, dirty, dour, toxic and tired mother and her concomitant the broken or unfinished shelter runs throughout the poems in this volume and even twinkles superficially in the 'toxic tan' of the despised Lothario in the winning 'He Knows no Artichokes' (p. 60).

For Kay, images of the female creative voice and body shift in a different way, showcasing their ability to inhabit, or be inhabited by, the other, and to generate a multitude of wonderful phenomena. Kay's voice is supremely able to both empathise with and become the other and to cohabit with others whilst preserving their individuality, generating a plethora of creative misreadings of others' meanings. 'Between the Dee and the Don' (p. 23) affirms a mesmerising litany of liminal being 'I am father and mother...' (in this poem too, Kay shares Higgins' talent for jolting readers with everyday sayings, endowing, among the many rebirths of the poem the usually scolding phrase 'I was not born yesterday' with calm, mystic potency).<sup>2</sup> Several of Kay's most haunting poems evoke a flitting between, and encountering of, other selves. 'Longitude' (p. 2) mutates Robert Frost's invocation of the self-splitting involved in the decision to become a poet in his 'The Road Not Taken', into an image of a self not adopted (in both senses of the word). The voice is 'walking the road not taken' through the uneasiness of origins ('there is no starting position') and in kinship with her other self 'the breeze on our light-dark faces'. These are poems fruitfully aware of their own appearance, as kinship and distance are mapped spatially on the page. For instance, in 'Igbo Bath' (p. 5), as the speaker learns to bathe in 'the Igbo way', she finds herself 'inside the body| of my grandmother', the split line opening up the body like a Caesarian and physically evoking the simultaneous nearness and distance in being 'a split second' from this other woman. Kay's 'The Bird' (p. 33) ends with a physical gap (you can see it on the page) crossed between self and other

And when once it hurt to think of you dead  
now you move at ease around in my head

The domestic space ('Windows Lakes' is a sweetly-written narrative of her mother's dream homes) features equivalent breakings-in from others in *Fiere*. In 'Night Moths' (p. 3), a beautiful and unsettling example, the eponymous visitors to the speaker's home, later released, hover like

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'ancestors' welcome and unwelcome, 'their fluttering wings became a hello and goodbye'. An (un)welcome entrance into the subject's personal space becomes explicitly tied to the creative act in 'The Muse' (p. 35). Entering like such 'a night moth', 'The muse sneaks into your house by stealth | | like a burglar, slides into your kitchen...It thinks it knows you well. It thinks it is your friend'.

For Higgins the creative act is also disturbing in its ability to invade the speaker's mind. In the startling poem 'Houdini' (p. 28), about that man famously obsessed with his mother (this poem exemplifies the way the word 'guilt' so often hovers about images of parents in *Ireland is Changing Mother*), words provide a painful link between self and other, exploring the edges and points of words. Houdini is, again making language disturbingly concrete (this time really sharp, a dangerous 'needle'), glad to be 'where no one could needle me'. Yet even as he disavows the power of others to impact upon him, Houdini uneasily puts forth the striking image of a word both penetrating and establishing almost umbilical dependence with its hearer or speaker. He says 'oncology couldn't touch me. | After all it was only a word that went in deep | Like a cannula or a drip'. Yet what does a cannula or drip do but enter into and feed the patient with fluids and remove fluids?

One thing striking for me about these two collections, finally, was the association of fathers with eating. Since at least the myth of Cronos this has been an uneasy combination, and indeed it is so, though not so radically perhaps, in Higgins' 'Visiting my Father at Christmas' (pp. 37-9). Food imagery is barbed throughout this poem: though the speaker assures herself that the visit will be 'a piece of cake', this everyday expression is subverted. Food holds no comfort: 'The booby traps are under | The Quality Street box', and the potential, literally pernicious, effects of the piece of cake itself are described: 'a piece of cake | dyspepsia maybe | or no heart scald at all' through 'the whole gastric acid afternoon'. In *Fiere*, the poem 'Egusi Soup' (p. 9) represents Kay's first meeting with her father; as she enthusiastically hopes to build a mutual connection with him he almost one-sidedly fills the poem (indeed overflows it) with soup as he describes his favourite soup and its ingredients. He vanishes from the poem as soon as he has finished eating just at this moment of connection (the speaker notes his laugh: it is like hers), a fairytale gastric father transmuting before her eyes into various menacing shapes and leaving only an empty plate:

laughing his laugh that is a little like mine.

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Then, he put down his bowl and his spoon  
 as if he were from a fable and a fairytale,  
 a bear or a wood-cutter, a wolf in a frock  
 and vanished like a cow jumping over the moon,  
 or the dish running away with the spoon

What more has he eaten? What else has he taken? – we ask.

Both poets write occasionally in dialect (Kay the most so, but Higgins also has cause, like Kay, to explain words in notes). *Fiere* is a volume all about the cultural geography of affect (notably in the poem ‘Body o’ Land’),<sup>3</sup> and the ‘mother’ tongue is a source of beauty (as in the lovely ‘Marigawds’). Kay’s paternal tongue, Igbo, becomes a source of poignant but creative misreading and mishearing of the other. In the poem ‘Ukpor Market’ (p. 8) for instance, the speaker hears women at Ukpor market calling to her: ‘Oyinbo’; thinking she is being greeted as a fellow ‘Igbo’ she responds ‘excitedly’ only to learn at the end ‘*Oyinbo is a pidgin word | for white woman*’. In ‘Twins’ (pp. 27-8) the alienation of parenthood is explored from both sides: ‘Our mother | says | we are a miracle, but we make her | feel alone’.

Whilst Kay’s tone is warm and affective, Higgins’ awareness of barbed memories and poisoned heritage is captured I feel by her own phrase ‘christening blanket with thorns’ (which is what the ominous mother warns that whitethorn’s unlucky blossom provides in these economic times (p. 52)). *Ireland is Changing Mother* repeatedly invokes and contests mythology (as in the poem ‘No Pity for Polyneices’, and the apotheosis of boy-racers in ‘The Immortals’). The volume ends with a father still waiting for these (im)mortal sons even as the parent himself treads the line of mortality; a mythic father who ‘watched like Argus’ for his dead sons himself dies: ‘Legend has it, | that on the night he died, | the half door was left open | the light was left on’ (p. 72). This ending line aptly characterizes Higgins’ mastery of making the homely haunting, of half-welcoming the reader in to someone else’s story. Echoing Higgins, Kay’s ‘The Returning’ (p. 4), deals with the return of her son from illness, and it is feared, death: ‘I held your small shape reborn in my arms...’. The poems in both volumes, the austere bare rooms of Higgins’ voice, and the flowing waters of Kay’s ought likewise, most emphatically, to be welcomed in to inhabit us.

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> In *Red Dust Road* she explains (p. 133) 'In my mind, I was conceived between the Dee and the Don, a confluence of rivers, the mouth of two rivers'. 'Between the Dee and the Don' gives us 'Aberdeen', the granite city where her birth parents met. The poem 'Granite' in *Fiere* describes her search for them in the buildings and texts of Aberdeen.

<sup>3</sup> The sometimes obscure referent of this poem –the unnamed body of the land which appears like a 'seal' or a 'selkie' – is, like much of *Fiere* again illuminated by a single sentence in *Red Dust Road*: 'imaginary parents...rising as they do like seals and selkies from the haar of the North Sea' (p. 140).