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## Grace Wilentz

### CITATION & RECITATION

Ellen Cranitch, *Crystal* (Bloodaxe Books, 2024), £12.

Milena Williamson, *Into the Night that Flies So Fast* (Dedalus Press, 2024), €12.50.

The rise of documentary poetics has seen increasing use of records, archives, and fieldwork in poetry, and new books from Ellen Cranitch and Milena Williamson add to this body of literature. But what is unusual and surprising about these collections are the ways they train their gaze on official documents to bring to light the mysterious, overlooked, and unsettled.

In *Crystal*, Ellen Cranitch's second collection, the poet traces a personal and familial journal that begins with the discovery of her partner's addiction to crystal meth. Cranitch is a poet with a strong sense of beauty, and this subject matter represents a departure from her previous work. Poems in the collection are modulated between the ekphrastic, diaristic, philosophical, and spiritual. The book opens with a series of poems encountering paintings by Pierre Bonnard depicting his model Renée in increasingly abstracted forms. In 'Bonnard I', the image of a woman oscillates from subject to object and back again. Cranitch writes: 'Her body, weightless, passive, floats in time. / The slim hands drift: but, still, her grip is strong.'

This gesture of locating one's autonomy, like a touchstone, carries throughout the collection. Cranitch looks to other poets and artists – Bonnard, Cavafy, Eliot, Prynne – for a kind of salve for her situation, though all the while it is she who makes it. Cranitch's project is to transform her suffering into something beautiful and of value. However, the poems do not shy away from the grim realities of the situation, letting the reader know the stakes are high. In 'Stricken', Cranitch writes:

The passenger/She, is strapped in. Something had caused her to hesitate before placing the metal plate in the red buckle. He had started to drive faster, faster. He had started to speak slower, slower. His tone, level, like the road. Immaculate, his honed aggression. With the speed, the verbal assaults intensify [...] There is nowhere to go. A mind can be placed in the vice of another mind and the screw tightened at the same time as a personality is prised apart.

Poems in *Crystal* build to capture the ways addiction pits the rational and emotional minds against one another. In 'Dissonance', Cranitch writes,

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'My intellect and my emotions were travelling at a different pace'. The reactions of friends, turned to for comfort and support, only compound this sense of disorientation and isolation, as in 'The Undertow':

I'm struck by the intensity of peoples' response. How, in this area of unknowing, where so much is still not understood, there is such a rush to deliver a verdict; and how, so often, in the presence of the multifaceted and uncommon, it is the common tendency that operates, whereby people are unable to see another's situation except through the prism of their own.

The poet manages her spiralling loss of control through control of her own voice and through form. Together they provide a channel, a way out. Repeatedly, the speaker seeks protection for her own poetic receptivity, the ability to see nuance, to grieve without reducing, dehumanising, or condemning. In 'Church of St Michael and All Angels', Cranitch makes an imagined or real pilgrimage to the place where TS Eliot's ashes are interred, taking comfort in the words of the *Four Quartets* before issuing this prayer:

Let me take it in the palm of my hand, let me cradle it with infinite care, this frail, bewildered thing. Let me make of the shelter of my hands a place of refuge. Let me keep you safe, my soul, through the onslaught.

The trajectory of *Crystal* is diaristic, and the revelations regarding the fallout from addiction unfold against a backdrop of the mundane: driving one son to his last year at uni, Facetiming with another son who is travelling abroad. These moments ground the collection and highlight the rarity of being in a place of extremity and keeping a record of experience. Though *Crystal* is a piece of art, a book of poetry, these moments remind us there is an actual family involved here, shouldering real risks to finances, safety, health, and life. To be in the midst of immense pressures and to strive to act in a way that is fair while maintaining a record for an audience who might need such a book, is transcendent and an act of genius.

In addition to the record of experience, other documents creep in as the poet searches for facts in a destabilised reality. Poems such as 'THEORIES OF ADDICTION' quote from sources including *The Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, The American Society of Addiction Medicine, *The Journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, and *The Cambridge Handbook of Substance and Behavioural Addiction* to reveal how, for all the debate, research, and investment, we still know little about the root causes of addiction.

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As *Crystal* draws to a close, there are meditations on the forces that shape our lives. In 'The Parable of the Emerald and Dark Water', Cranitch writes, 'Only an incandescent heat / permits a gem to form.' Here, green beryl forged under elemental extremes might represent an inevitable succumbing to addiction, or the jewel's forged brilliance may stand in for the poet's own resilience. *Crystal's* ending, as it veers towards acceptance, is suspended, and surprising.

*Into the Night That Flies So Fast* is the debut collection by Milena Williamson, who moved from Pennsylvania to Belfast in 2017 to pursue a PhD in poetry at Queen's University. The book charts Williamson's journey to Ballyvadlea in County Tipperary, where she searches for subtle clues about Bridget Cleary who was burned to death by her husband Michael in 1895. Michael sought to defend gruesomely murdering his wife by saying he believed her to have been abducted by fairies and replaced with a 'changeling'.

Like Cranitch's *Crystal*, Williamson's debut weaves multiple strands, and makes frequent use of the prose poem to punctuate verse with more intimate asides. *Into The Night that Flies So Fast* opens with two epigraphs from Justice William O'Brien, who presided over Cleary's case, the first quoting from *Macbeth* and the second blurring the lines between what people believe and what can be known or proven:

I will not allow a question as to where fairies are supposed to be.  
They may be supposed to be in this courthouse. We are not here  
acting a play, but to inquire into matters of fact.

– Justice William O'Brien

This conceit, setting up courtroom as theatre, carries though; the book is scaffolded by the structure of a three-act play, including an interval. Characters enter, speak, as the text swells with their presences, making the absence of Bridget and her voice all the more ubiquitous. Talk accumulates, but no single, reliable record of events unfolds.

Accounts are imaginative and enticing, as from William Simpson, Bridget's neighbour:

She crossed my fields, empty but for  
the cows who lowed for more.  
It's true, my tongue loved a butter-  
woman's mouth, an egg out of a cloister.

– 'A BUTTER-WOMAN'

Other accounts are conflicting, as from Mary Kennedy, the only woman among five defendants accused of being accomplices to Michael Cleary in torturing and murdering Bridget: