

Beautiful Girls

by Melissa Lee-Houghton



Staking the claim for the small independent press on the Next Generation list, Penned in the Margins' Melissa Lee-Houghton has published two collections of 'raw, anthropological and sassy' poetry (David Caddy). Her work does not shy away from the triggers and traumas of the mental distress she's undergone –her first collection *A Body Made of You* was written in and out of psychiatric hospitals – but through craft, compassion and wit, she transmutes difficult individual experience into something universally resonant. As Chris McCabe puts it, her work is 'a testament to poetry's force in overcoming'.

Beautiful Girls

In our graves we are all
beautiful girls. Our skin
is falling away like the tide.
Our bones are
long and slender,
all inhibitions gone. We're
lovely in the mud
that fit boys have dug
for a council wage,
not knowing how beautiful
we lay there
like honeymoon brides
anticipating sex,
not expecting death -
serene as pawns and queens
and home in ourselves
forever.

Sixteen

The red velvet coat meant I was not for sale, but bought.
Its fur trim was part of the illusion, and one month in
to my living away from home it garnered a stain
which no washing machine would ever clean. Just say
you were a doll and someone owned you and petted you
and you wanted to wake up but your eyes never closed.

Just say you were wearing red because you loved the sunset;
not because it clung to your body like a bin bag on a wet corpse
and your femininity was misinterpreted. Just say death
was in and out of your mouth. I wore black boots
that didn't need lacing, and I wasn't going anywhere.
They were no good for winter, no good for snow, no good
for running home. I remember I used to count up the loose change
for cigarette papers. I would go out in my red velvet
to the chip shop and barter for a bag of salted fat.
I was good for roasting. I was good for roasting.
My face was like a slot-machine. I make sure
we never drive through that town now, in case I see her –
a girl in a red velvet coat and boots that don't lace, thumbing
a ride. I wouldn't take her anywhere.
I wouldn't know *where* to take her.

That Afternoon We Listened to Sparklehorse And Thought About Dying

On the fourth floor we looked out at factories, Autumn's eccentricity
elevating the determination of grey. We couldn't
feel anything. We smoked until we were numb.
I fell asleep. The baby slept an hour and a half in the pram.
My head rested on your shoulder. You took my weight, held me.
I'd been to the weigh-and-save for a cup of sugar
and what little meal I could afford. You made me
a cup of tea strong enough to wake me;
played with the baby while I came round sipping at the steam.
There was beauty in every movement you made; your earphones
perpetually stuck in your ears to kill
or soothe the voices. How I loved you. How I
didn't care if you stole from the shop I worked in.
You had sex for your fix, though you denied it. Though you put
your arms around me. You existed in a parallel universe
I sometimes crossed over into. Your silences rolled around my tongue.
They were a language of their own – we'd roll and smoke cigarettes
in unison. Your neighbour had died from self-inflicted
stab wounds. You recounted the story to me
as though you had been in the room, smelt the blood.
His girlfriend had died at the wheel of a car.
She was going into labour, on her way home, Christmas Eve.
You know and I know how messy life can get
when you mess with it, when you push your luck.
I stepped out that day with clear eyes, a creased dress
and a hankering for sex and cigarettes and hot food.
As it was, I caught the bus and had the not-so-fleeting thought
that I might never see you again.

Discussion Ideas

- Who does 'Beautiful Girls' imply are the ugly girls? Is this the 'lovely', 'beautiful' and 'serene' poem that its language suggests?
- 'no good', 'no good', 'no good', 'good for roasting', 'good for roasting' – is 'Sixteen' a compassionate poem? Compassionate to whom – the sixteen year old self or the older poet self?
- Where and who were you at age sixteen? What would you say to your sixteen-year old self? Here's what others have thought - <http://www.dearme.org/>
- Sparklehorse <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sparklehorse> and a song <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjsUZRs770U> This is the last poem in the collection. Is it a happy ending?
- Consider *Beautiful Girls* alongside Rebecca Goss' *Her Birth* – both collections written from places of suffering and grief. What do their poems teach you? Is teaching a poet's – or a poem's job?

Melissa Lee-Houghton was born in Wythenshawe, Manchester in 1982. Her first collection, *A Body Made of You*, was published by Penned in the Margins in 2011, and *Beautiful Girls* was published in 2013 and was a PBS Recommendation. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in literary magazines such as *Poetry Salzburg*, *The New Writer*, *Magma* and *Tears in the Fence*. Her poem, 'Jim', was recently included in *Starry Rhymes*, a chapbook published by Read This Press. She is a regular reviewer for *The Short Review*.

<http://melissaleehoughton.wordpress.com/>

Other books by Melissa Lee-Houghton

- [*A Body Made of You*](#) (Penned in the Margins, 2011)

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