

Chick

by Hannah Lowe



A former English teacher, Hannah Lowe published [*Chick*](#), her first collection, in 2013, following an earlier pamphlet (*The Hitcher*) from The Rialto in 2011. *Chick* takes its title from the nickname of the poet's late father who, as a career gambler, was an elusive presence in her youth. The book's affecting poems balance the ordered progressions of childhood (piano lessons and ballet classes) against the myths and stories (the loaded dice, the hidden rolls of cash) which swirled around this charismatic man. Lowe is currently at work on a new chapbook for Hercules Editions.

Chick

We talked about you all the time.
Dan said he saw you ironing cellophane.
I said you'd let me hold a thousand pounds.
We found a hollow-soled shoe.

My cousins loved your tricks.
They'd follow the lady, search your sleeves,
blow luck into your fist. Mum called you a croupier.
At school I said you drove a cab.

Most days you were back at dawn.
I watched through a crack as you slept,
a hump of blankets in the purple light,
the smell of sweat.

I saw you once Dad, knelt over cards,
strewn on the floor, panic in your face.
For God's sake, Chick, you said.
You couldn't do the marks.

Then, each Tuesday, £16.30 – a paper,
tobacco, one hand of Kalooki. You sunk
into the settee like you'd been kicked there,
shouted in the bathroom, asked me for money.

At the wake, a ring of phlegmy men

with yellow eyes and meaty skin, told me
what your name meant, placed the ace of hearts
across your coffin, flowers shaped as dice.

Dance Class

The best girls posed like poodles at a show
and Betty Finch, in lemon gauze and wrinkles,
swept her wooden cane along the rows
to lock our knees in place and turn our ankles.
I was a scandal in that class, big-footed
giant in lycra, joker in my tap shoes,
slapping on the off-beat while a hundred
tappers hit the wood. I missed the cues
each time. After, in the foyer, dad,
a black man, stood among the Essex mothers
clad in leopard skin. He'd shake the keys
and scan the bloom of dancers where I hid
and whispered to another ballerina
he's the cab my mother sends for me.

Fist

When my brother put his fist through a window
on New Year's Eve, no one noticed until a cold draft
cooled our bodies dancing. There was rainbow light
from a disco ball, silver tinsel round the pictures.
My brother held his arm out to us, palm
upturned, a foot high spray of blood.
This was Ilford, Essex, 1993, nearly midnight,
us all smashed on booze and Ecstasy and Danny,
6 foot 5, folding at the knee, a shiny fin of glass
wedged in his wrist. We walked him to the kitchen,
the good arm slung on someone's neck,
Gary shouting *Danny*, Darren phoning
for an ambulance, the blood was everywhere. I pressed
a towel across the wound, around the glass
and led him by the hand into the garden, he stumbled
down into the snow, slurring *leave it out* and *I'm OK*.
A girl was crying in the doorway, the music carried on,
the bass line thumping as we stood around my brother,
Gary talking gently saying *easy fella*, Darren
draining Stella in one hand and in the other, holding up
my brother's arm, wet and red, the veins stood out
like branches. I thought he was dying,
out there in the snow and I got down, I knelt there
on the ice and held my brother, who I never touched
and never told I loved, and even then I couldn't say it
so I listened to the incantation *easy fella*
and my brother's breathing,
felt him rolling forward, all that weight, Darren
throwing down his can and yelling *Danny, don't you dare*
and shaking him. My brother's face was grey,
his lips were loose and pale and I

was praying. Somewhere in the street,
there was a siren, there was a girl inside
who blamed herself, there were men with blankets
and a tourniquet, they stopped my brother bleeding,
as the New Year turned, they saved him,
snow was falling hard, they saved us all.

Discussion Ideas

- Is 'Chick' a love poem?
- What are the full stops doing in 'Chick'? How does the emotional temperature of a short, one line phrase differ from one which winds over three or more lines?
- Read 'Dance Class' aloud to your group, but stop before you get to the last line. Does anybody accurately predict the content or tone of the last line?
- Some girls in the dance class are poodles, some are ballerinas, and the poet herself is a 'scandal' – what does the poem tell you about the groups and cliques into which young girls organise themselves? How does the 'scandal' among the 'tappers' relate to the 'black man ... among the Essex mothers'? Is this a poem about isolation?
- Is 'Fist' a religious poem?

Hannah Lowe was born in Essex in 1976 to an English mother and Chinese-Jamaican father. *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013) is her debut collection and was shortlisted for the Forward and Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prizes and the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize for Poetry. She has followed this with two pamphlets, *Rx* in 2013 and *Ormonde* in November 2014. She is studying for a PhD in Creative Writing and her family memoir *Long Time, No See* will be published by Periscope Press in April 2015.

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Chapbooks by Hannah Lowe

- [*The Hitcher*](#) (The Rialto, 2011)
- [*Rx*](#) (Sine wave peak, 2013)
- *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, forthcoming 2014)

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