Stephen Knight

All That You Can't Leave Behind

The Home Child
By Liz Berry
(Chatto & Windus 128pp £14.99)

Blood Feather
By Patrick McGuinness
(Jonathan Cape 80pp £12)

The Fourth Sister
By Laura Scott
(Carcanet 72pp £11.99)

Settling on cobblestones, lying chest-high in a field or 'slushing to silver', snow permeates *The Home Child*, Liz Berry's fictionalised account of the youth of her orphaned great-aunt Eliza Showell, one of many thousands of poor British children sent to Canada between 1869 and 1939 to work as indentured farm labourers and domestic servants. Evoking not only Nova Scotia but also the loveless world to which Eliza was banished, this chilly motif is counterbalanced by Berry's tender writing, most touchingly when, in one of several prose passages, she imagines her ancestor as a figure in a snow globe at the end of a day of chores, 'curled on her side on her narrow cot, eyes open, mouth ajar, watching her breath freeze in the air'.

Into this all but monochrome world – where a foal is 'black as a seam of coal' and Eliza's Black Country dialect is filthy as soot – comes another home child, Daniel, with whom Eliza has a romance. Renamed Lizzie by the farmer and his ailing wife, she has her name restored by Daniel: 'he says it, says it, says it so soft.' The language warms with his arrival and flashes of colour light the gloom, most strikingly through Daniel's gift of a scarlet ribbon. It's a moment reminiscent not only of those episodes of Edgar Reitz's otherwise black-and-white film series *Heimat* in which significant, colourised objects glow, but also of the wistful song 'Scarlet Ribbons (for Her Hair)'.

Berry's work is a tour de force of vignettes, letters, reports, prose and poetry propelled by alliteration, assonance, rhyme, repetition and metre. Is the marketing of the poem as 'a novel in verse' a publisher's ploy to attract the widest possible audience? It would be a pity if readers of fiction hoping to lose themselves in a novel's maximalism were disappointed by the brevity of Berry's approach. She isolates on the white space of the page the heartbreaking image of Daniel's keepsakes ('tranklements') arranged in his attic room 'like a little chapel' and preserves Eliza's 'owd words', like 'blart' ('cry') and 'wum' ('home'), as her own linguistic keepsakes, most piercingly when, missing her mother, Eliza says

INDENT er name, er beautiful name, er name
like a song, *Mom*, *Mom*,
til it turns to *wum*. INDENT

If this risks sentimentality, it's a risk worth taking. Beautifully crafted and quietly devastating, *The Home Child* is a masterpiece.

Patrick McGuinness's Belgian mother haunts *Blood Feather*. Her son brings her vividly to life, from her perfume to her habit of prematurely clearing up after her son. '*Le jour est fini*,' she says when he protests. The book's central section, 'The Noises Things Make When They Leave', ramifies the melancholy of Theodore Roethke's 'Dolor' (which opens, 'I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils'). In 'Travelodge', 'The mirror watches you unpack/your endless shallow bag,/its well of lonely clothes', while 'Landline' finds the poet clearing out a house (his mother's?), leaving 'the polished square where the phone had sat,/framed in dust, pieces of skin or dandruff at the edges'.

These brilliant studies are energised by precisely noted details and exact language, a feature typical of the whole book. Catching the light, pigeons' necks 'are the rainbows in petrol-station puddles', Travelodges are located 'off roundabouts,/after circumlocutions of motorway' – what excellent work the penultimate noun is doing – and, in the title poem, a bird hitting a window makes 'the noise of a punched cushion'. McGuinness is drawn to liminal spaces; even his writing is sometimes betwixt and between. He ends a prose meditation on grief, 'Of all the poems I've ever written, this is the one I didn't', and asks in the collection's final sequence, 'I wonder if this is still a poem,/and if it even wants to be.' Separating worlds, not least those of the living and the dead, panes of glass recur. The lives of others are vague behind net curtains; passengers pressed against a carriage window look out on a land of lost content in a book alive with understated yearning.

Although the tone of Laura Scott's poems, like McGuinness's, tends towards melancholy, *The Fourth Sister* is indirect and often cryptic, its poems of loss – of parents, of children reaching adulthood – akin to hallucinations. While there are striking individual lines and images here – a necklace is placed on a shelf 'link by link/like a snake/uncharmed' – her poetry's power to haunt lies more in its mysterious scenarios and low-key openings: 'I left it'; 'They play with us'; 'So there you were'.

Sometimes inconclusive, occasionally perplexing, Scott's poems change tack like dreams. 'Thinking of Tony Hoagland' begins with a reference to that poet's poem in which he is in a hospital waiting room crying about Leonard Cohen: Hoagland was terminally ill, Cohen had died two years earlier. Then, after five lines, the speaker turns her attention to a tree in her garden with bark in the shape of eyes that seem to cry. Grief is subsumed in the image of the tree, though 'it's just a tree in a garden', the speaker insists. The reader is on unstable ground.

When this strategy is at its best, the poems not only unsettle but also, for all the oddness of the invention, are ultimately affecting – perhaps all the more so because emotion is reached so circuitously. The conceit at the heart of 'When Death Got Bored in the Hospital' is the strangest and most moving of all. Deathbed visitors talk until their voices turn 'into splints/in a parasol

… shading us from the heat/of what was happening to you'. The visitors struggle to keep the parasol open; death returns and smiles as the bird-decorated canopy collapses and the birds tuck 'their wings back into their bodies,/locking their pattern away into the blue creases'. I have read nothing quite like this extraordinary poem.