*A Handsel. New & Collected Poems*, Liz Lochhead (Polygon 2023)

At some point when I was at university back in the 1980s I saw Liz Lochhead read her poems. I've always assumed it was at college itself, but my writing lecturer, who I have recently been in touch with again, has no memory of it. Anyway, one poem that I have always remembered utilised the names of artists for paint colours. The line 'Avoid the Van Gogh, you'll not get it off' was the one that stuck in my mind. Over the years I've tried to find a copy and failed. There's nothing online, neither text nor performance video (Lochhead's Scottish accent really helps the poem), and the poem was absent from both the different Selecteds I picked up over the years; and, of course, not knowing what it was called didn't help.

Thankfully, 'Vymura: The Shade Card Poem' is present and correct in *A Handsel*, a handsome and impressive new book from Polygon. It would be unfair to claim the poem as Lochhead's best, but it is just as funny as I remember. Here's the third verse:

 She said, 'Fellow next door just sanded his floor
 and rollered on Roualt and Rothko.
 His hall, och it's Pollock an he
 did his lounge in soft Hockney
 with his corner picked out in Kokoshka.

Those near- and sometimes forced- rhymes are exquisite.

Whilst it's unfair to represent Lochhead's work with such a lighthearted performance piece, however cleverly written, it does highlight the down-to-earth and accessible nature of the poetry here. There are poems about friendship, relationships and the everyday; poems *for* friends, sometimes famous ones (Edwin Morgan, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay); as well as poems for occasions such as weddings, birthdays and anniversaries.

She is also good at capturing moments, in strong simple phrases and images. Here is the fifth poem, of nine, in a sequence about the construction of a new library at St. Andrews:

 Listen,
 chilly birdsong,
 sprinkling icewater
 over the garden, a tap
 turning on and off again.
 Library silence.

I'm less enamoured with the dialect poems in this volume, and the versions from *The Grimm Sisters*, which seem very much of their time: the 1980s when feminist retellings were *de rigeur*. The title poem from *Dreaming Frankenstein* is much better, a triptych that not only allows the creature to speak but turns into a lustful declaration in 'Smirnoff for Karloff':

 Sure, you can smoke in bed.
 It's a free country.
 Let me pour you a stiff drink.
 You're shivering.
 Well, you know, what they say, if you
 can't take the cold then get outta
 the icebox. What's that?
 Smirnoff?
 Well, you know, Mr Karloff,
 I used to think an aphrodisiac was some
 kinda confused Tibetan mountain goat
 with a freak-out hair-do until I
 met my monster and my monster
 met his maker.
 Oh yeah.

 That's who been sleeping in my bed.
 Some old surprise. Oh goody.
 Long time no see.
 Ain't going to let nothing come between
 My monster and me.

This made me laugh out loud. Feistiness is a common factor throughout the book, Lochhead is upfront about sex, lust, love and society, and how she feels about it all. But not everything is slapstick or fun & games, there are gentle, inquisitive and romantic poems here, political diatribes, human observation and comment.

None of it, however is mannered or 'poetic' in the bad sense. Lochhead uses everyday language without any false metaphors or allusions. It's down to earth, sometimes messy, poetry, although when the work seems to be too confessional, Lochhead is always ready to undermine it with a pun or self-deflating reference. The closing poem, 'In Praise of Old Vinyl' (one of my favourites), is a case in point, where the narrator revisits her record collection:

 Old vinyl . . . old vinyl
 Nostalgia's everything it used to be
 When you're half-pissed and playing that old LP

Over three-plus pages we get namechecks or quotations from 'Dusty and Joni and Nico and Emmylou / Dylan, Van-the-man and Rhymin' Smon too . . .' along with Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits and Elvis Costello, not to mention glam rockers and earlier jazzers and stars from the Sixties. But as the reverie continues and spirals out of control, with the speaker turning into a bohemian hippy, she pulls the rug out from herself, misquoting Paul Simon: 'Mama, please don't take my Parlophone away.'

The poet, who sometimes inhabits a character called 'The Dirty Diva', is on full throttle throughout, roaring through 460 pages at top speed. Maybe it's me, but she seems to have been somewhat forgotten as a poet, and she shouldn't be. Her quirky, individual and accessible voice deserves more acclaim and attention, and I hope this wonderful volume will help.

Rupert Loydell

(800 words)