Michaela Coplen, *Finishing School* (ignitionpress, 2022)

Editor's Note by Niall Munro

What could be simpler than learning your ABCs? Yet Michaela Coplen's *Finishing School* challenges us to think differently about how we learn, what we are taught, and who is doing the teaching.

Simultaneously charting a young woman's experiences in education alongside her own personal growth, the pamphlet uses an abecedarian form, each of its twenty-six poems (Coplen's age when she put the collection together) taking the first letter of its title from a letter of the alphabet. The abecedarian form is more commonly used in individual poems where each word begins with a different letter, like Robert Pinsky's 'ABC', but Coplen isn't the first poet to use the form for a whole series or collection. Inger Christensen's *Alphabet* (1981, translated by Susanna Neid, 2000), *Sleeping with the Dictionary* by Harryette Mullen (2002), and Mary Jo Bang's *The Bride of E* (2009) are just a few examples, as well as Matthea Harvey's sequence 'The Future of Terror / The Terror of Future' that appears in her book *Modern Life* (2007).

There is of course an air of predictability about the abecedarian – we know how it starts and where it is going to end – but one of the compelling features of Coplen's pamphlet is that the poems describe a journey from A-Z which is anything but predictable. The title of the very first piece, 'Apple', seems to correspond to our formal expectations (remember those alphabet wallcharts you saw as a child?), but it turns out that the quiet, passive kid described in the poem actually has a mind that 'begins this squeaking / like a mouse or a garden gate.' This is the sound of resistance, a young person who is contemplating – for now in private – which rules need to be observed and which might be broken. And by the time we reach halfway in the pamphlet and the poem 'Letter', we encounter someone who, even if they haven't opened the envelope mentioned there that contains news of their academic future, is already set on a path that removes

from their comfortable home. They are about to set out along one of the 'two roads leading out of town'; they are breaking free.

In many ways, Coplen's project is about offering a corrective to the limited expectations for girls and young women that are still so conspicuous. It is about subtly but incisively discrediting the kind of comment we heard recently from a UK government social mobility commissioner, who claimed that girls don't want to do physics because it involves 'a lot of hard maths', implicitly suggesting that certain subjects are suitable for boys and others for girls. In poems like 'Prize', Coplen shows how that commissioner needs to go back and do her homework, exposing those damaging gender stereotypes – and how incredible it is that they still exist – by drawing attention to historical figures like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Mexican nun, scholar, and writer; poet and novelist Sylvia Plath; and the writer Flannery O'Connor – three women who also wrestled with societal expectations. Coplen, who is in the process of completing a PhD, has encountered just such myopic views herself – her undergraduate college was once considered by some as a kind of finishing school where young women would be sufficiently educated so that they might prove a suitable prize for a man in marriage.

These expectations extend beyond academia. The women in the old photographs at the end of 'Prize' who are photographed naked 'to teach them posture' (and these images aren't imagined – they really exist in a certain college's archive) are objectified in a similar way to the female body elsewhere in the pamphlet. There are poems like 'Knot', that describes an adolescent tryst in which the girl is an 'ever-willing subject of the list/I had to tick' (someone has taught her this is what she is supposed to do), or 'Grasp', where the speaker makes the terrifying pronouncement: 'You can't be alive and untouchable'. They remind us – if we needed reminding in the wake of events like the overturning of the Roe vs. Wade decision in the United States – that women's bodies are simply not treated in the same way as those of men.

But Coplen doesn't always have to reach back into history for her mentors and teachers – they can be found much closer to home in the sister and mother who appear in the pamphlet. The mother in particular is a constant presence. In 'Bug', she is a figure of authority, dealing with an infestation of what seem like ladybugs whilst matter-of-factly discussing the dangers of male power on the phone. She wordlessly passes on the means of exterminating the 'quiet congregation' to the daughter, who diligently vacuums the intruders up. These creatures may ultimately be beyond

control, but the speaker's mother gives her a way of coping with such forces.

In 'Middle', Coplen takes her exploration of the mother-daughter relationship a step further as, through a wonderful conceit, the two are in a car, both aged eighteen, both on their way to college. It's such a moving poem partly because it describes an impossible situation (just what *would* it have been like to spend time with your parent when they were your age?), but also because the poem – and maybe even the two young women – know that the moment isn't real and cannot last. '[A]ll the fields', Coplen writes, 'are full of passing time', and although we understand that mother and daughter are intimately connected ('We hold our breath//across the bridge'), at the conclusion of the poem, as they listen to songs they both recognise on the radio, they are 'both humming,/both facing ahead.' Perhaps they're not speaking because they are so close, but perhaps it's a recognition that they'll always be different.

Despite this generational difference, despite the stubborn academic status quo and threat of patriarchal power, Coplen's poems frequently find ways to assert possibility and hope. Even though she knows that she is being observed, the protagonist in 'Yawn' 'keeps doing what she would do'. And in 'Zipper', '[s]pellbound, self-possessed/the body advances its argument'. That argument, in a poem that is in dialogue with William Carlos Williams's 'Dance Russe', is all about celebrating the self, of finding a place in the world and a way to speak about it. And in these final moments of the pamphlet, before we release the speaker back into the world to get on with her life, we see her mouthing those words, finding her voice.