Carol Jenkins’ $X^n$ begins, with its title, with mathematical notation, an immediate evocation of the so-called hard sciences, of rationalism, order, and logic. However, despite invoking science and mathematics throughout the poems in this collection, Jenkins draws a stark contrast between the explanations provided in abstract scientific terms and those drawn from the phenomenological experience of life and the body.

Many of the poems in $X^n$ draw attention to beginnings, to the natal stages of stellar and quantum matter, particles and universes operating at vastly different scales with the human body positioned somewhere in between. In light of this, it is no wonder that science is insufficient to explain our bodily experiences. ‘How The Universe Begins’ challenges large-scale scientific observations and explanations of phenomena in favour of an experiential universe ‘unformed beyond a certain point of bunny rug / breast and bassinet’. This account of the origins of the universe is not scientific, per se, though it offers a poetic and personal alternative to quantum mechanics: rather than explaining the interactions of the smallest known particles of matter, it offers the quantum state of human experience, the tiny world experienced by a newborn child. The language here is neither metaphysical nor jargon, and science is implied rather than directly invoked; rather, Jenkins uses ordinary language and undercuts the cosmic grandeur of her title in the final lines with the vernacular ‘assuming … that the infinite must start somewhere, like, yeah / whatever’.

This notion of the ‘unformed’ universe, of a world that only exists when we come into contact with it, is echoed in ‘Waiting For A Name’, which deals with the beginning of the
grand cosmos that is a human being. Here, Jenkins addresses the newborn, before naming, before sense and reason and the emergence into the Lacanian symbolic, as a ‘body now given over to your own making / you’re building you with milk and sleep’. This is, perhaps, the infinite starting somewhere, on a scale that we can understand and that has been and remains the miracle of organic life, beyond the explanations available through scientific observation or even through the language of poetry. Here again, the language is uncomplicated, though this poem introduces mathematical language as an attempt to quantify and comprehend this miracle of self-making.

Throughout this collection are poems that attempt to offer mathematical explanations for human relationships and experience. In ‘Exit Speed’, Jenkins invokes the simple algebraic formula of ‘(x+y)’ as an explanation of the variable ‘speeds’ of departure of ‘[t]he man that leaves his wife, the plane the runway, / moss spore the sporangia’, positioning the human as one of many possible objects following the same invariant equation. In this poem, as in ‘Zero-vs-Nothing’ and ‘Set Pieces’, Jenkins invokes mathematical objectivity as though it is possible to dispel human experiences of pain, heartache, and trauma. The contrast between the objective and subjective in these poems highlights the absurdity of expecting to use logic to explain human experience, as described in the first section of ‘Set Pieces’:

In the set of things that are
all of the things not in the set
a poem might work best.

In other words, perhaps in the face of a logical contradiction we need to turn to poetry, the ultimate form of anti-logic, characterised as it is by its affinity with association, subjectivity, and ambiguity.

Jenkins engages in a kind of experimental linguistic play that works as juxtaposition and as augmentation to the scientific vocabulary she employs. Experimenting with rhythmical and metrical patterning, she echoes the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins through her use of alliteration, repetition, and short phrases. Hopkins was, of course, a poet of abundant, yet often contradictory, religious fervour, and this metrical experimentation might be regarded as an attempt to grapple with the grand patterns of a complex universe. In ‘In Loco Parentis’ and ‘Perianthetical Apple, Cherry, Plum’, Jenkins uses short, comma-laden lists and compound names in her descriptions of a cuckoo and a group of fruit trees, respectively. It is ripe with rhymes and alliteration, echoing the chattering bird that is its subject. ‘Perianthetical Apple,
Cherry, Plum’ deals with botanical jargon but can be enjoyed for its alliterative descriptions of the trees as ‘glory, gobsmack, gregal, descending grace-note / and colour grid, giddy girasole bending sunlight’, as much as for its scientific acumen in the discussion of the tepals and perianths of *Malus domestica* et. al. This poem is a riot of blossoming language; the alliteration of the ‘g’ in the previous lines is immediately obvious, but the mid-line rhyme of *descending/bending* foregrounds the ‘d’ as a second plosive, which is repeated throughout the line to create an even more pronounced beat.

Overall, this collection utilises scientific and mathematical terms in order to more clearly demonstrate the fallibility of these realms of discourse and the necessity of drawing on poetic ambiguity and experimentation. Jenkins’ work is predominantly concerned with the natural and cosmic realms, those spaces that are generally the subject for the ‘hard’ sciences. Poetry offers a ‘softer’, more flexible approach.

In Tricia Dearborn’s *The Ringing World*, we see the same propensity for ambiguity, but in this case the focus is on corporeality and the sensory phenomena arising from the human body, its moments of contact with other bodies and objects in the world. Sex, kissing, eating, the accidental intrusion of a sliver of glass; the first section of *The Ringing World* is dominated by these moments of sometimes brutal contact in which the boundaries of the flesh are challenged. In ‘Scan’, there is a double intrusion: the body ‘slithered feet-first’ into the ‘belly’ of a monstrous MRI machine. The ‘unpleasant electrical crawling sensation’ of the magnetic fields and the ‘onslaught of sound’ that surrounds the speaker of the poem intertwine the physical and the aural. The two bodies in this poem interpenetrate with an eeriness that is underscored by the denial in the final lines:

> [the sensation] which the radiologist assures you
> you did not feel, and do not
> still feel
> over arms and hands days later.

Here we see a clear denial of the capacity of medical science to properly account for bodily experiences – this poem leaves little doubt that these sensations were felt, despite the objective and heartless reassurances of the radiologist. Indeed, under such circumstances, swallowed into the belly of this diagnostic machine, it might be preferable to feel something, to be able to interpret this experience through bodily sensations as well as abstracted
intellectual knowledge. In cases such as this, when corporeality cannot be explained or accounted for objectively, it is fitting that poetry should step into the void – particularly given its capacity to evoke a visual and auditory sensorium and to enhance this through metaphor, juxtaposition, and zoomorphic shifts that blur the distinction between the animate and the object. The MRI machine becomes an uncaring and ravenous leviathan, making echoic whalesong as the speaker is swallowed, Jonah-like, into its belly. The poem opens up a complex of associations, both sensory and cultural, around this tool of medical rationalism and knowledge.

Other sections of *The Ringing World* deal with different forms of bodily contact, becoming increasingly interiorised and subjective as the book progresses. The final section, dominated by and named after the longer poem ‘The Ringing World’, depicts the body’s experience within and in contact with itself. The poems in this section dance a complex orbit around the binaries of sound/silence and birth/death, beginning with ‘The Quiet House’, in which the poem’s speaker observes ‘the gathering tsunami’ of grief as a member of the family deals with a stillbirth. The silence and stillness here is in stark contrast to the clamour that might normally accompany a newborn child, and the speaker wishes for the newborn to be ‘squalling against my chest’ in place of the unnatural and unwanted peace. The grief that fills the titular Quiet House is unspeakable, and the displacement activities of family members who ‘amuse’ themselves by ‘inventing more offensive ways of swearing’ are deafening in comparison. We expect grief to be silent, to emulate the tragic losses to which it is responding. Life, however, reasserts itself as incorrigibly noisy, in this poem and ‘Another Week’, in which the successful implantation of a fertilised ovum is represented metaphorically by the ‘frenzy / of bells and lights’ of ‘fate’s poker machine’.

This collection is closed out by the title poem, ‘The Ringing World’, an account of tinnitus, that ringing-in-the-ears that accompanies the persona’s every conscious moment yet remains ‘undetectable by any instrument / except for the spiralled chamber of bone in my ear’. This poem breaks down this seemingly fixed binary of sound and silence: tinnitus is a sound that fills silence, makes silence impossible, yet is undetectable from the outside and cannot be measured. Here is the bodily and sensory experience *par excellence*, private and unknowable from the outside. ‘The Ringing World’ is part love poem, part benediction to this affliction, as the speaker treats her constant companion with intimacy, her ‘favourite small / frayed piece of sound’ that is comforting in its familiarity, something that her ear ‘holds to itself’.
‘The Ringing World’ exemplifies the key concerns of Dearborn’s poetry – bodily experience and small moments of domestic intimacy are threaded through this entire collection – however, some of the pieces are an awkward fit and seem thematically and tonally dissonant. Dearborn’s work is most compelling when there is a strong sense of personal narrative, as in the longer pieces ‘The Quiet House’ and ‘The Ringing World’; by comparison, poems such as ‘Galley Slaves’, which slip into a less personal and more intellectually playful mode, demonstrate the poet’s depth but add little to the collection’s sense of cohesion. By first postulating the body as an unpredictable and often-overlooked miracle, Dearborn is able to explore other moments of the everyday sublime – it is only in the absence of this initial postulate, the lack of corporeality, that some of these poems fall short.

In both Carol Jenkins’ $X^n$ and Tricia Dearborn’s The Ringing World we see the intersection of poetry and science – Jenkins deploys the vocabularies of mathematics and the natural sciences, while Dearborn focuses more on the particular material and biological conditions of the human body itself. In both cases, however, science and the discourses that enable it prove inadequate tools to grapple with the complexity of lived human experience. Thus, the invocation of the scientific in these poems serves to draw greater contrast between rationalist attempts to depict human experience through a consistent model of scientific enquiry and an acknowledgement of poetic ambiguity, complexity and the non-rational.