Laura Solomon is a poet, novelist, playwright – and a ventriloquist for the dead. In her collection, *Frida Kahlo’s Cry and Other Poems*, she allows ghosts to speak, gloat and regret. Solomon pegs a variety of real-life historical figures to some kind of literary purgatory, where they are able to confess and lament their pasts, or alternatively admonish the present in which they find themselves. There is the titular Frida Kahlo, whose ghost attends her own exhibition at the Tate Modern:

The sickening part was the merchandise.

Coffee mugs, calendars, prints, clocks

Solomon’s poems impress immediately with their conversational freshness. And there are some humdingers of first lines. Joan of Arc’s postcard home starts: ‘Dearest, they burned me’; while American (suspected) murderess, Lizzie Borden, launches into her confession: ‘The devil made me do it.’ These speculative monologues are playful and caper around the usually grave subject matter. There is a sameness of tone in the case of each character, but nevertheless the particular voice rings out clear and charismatic.

There is also a dissociated melancholy to some of the poems, creating a kind of distancing effect. Howard Hughes ‘Gets the blues’ and Byron is bitten by ‘The black dog’, but the underlying melody is still chipper, or light-hearted. This is disconcerting, in an exciting, curious way. The effect is a kind of buzz: akin to listening to R.E.M.’s song ‘It’s the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)’ – there’s a disjunction occurring between the poem’s content and the resultant sentiment.

Solomon’s ghosts are candid and chatty, as though they’re all somewhat inebriated at a big noters’ shindig. They’ll spill the beans on their personal trespasses, hoping you’ll forget in the haze of tomorrow’s hangover.

It’s not exclusively dead people at the party, though. Other guests include ‘literature’s untouchables’: certain words made sentient and ‘shunted off the Z-list’. These are given voice in Solomon’s ‘Apocryphal’: ‘We are the clichéd words, the words that didn’t fit, didn’t click.’

*Frida Kahlo’s Cry* is elocution for the mute. It is a sanctuary for the dead, the lost and the cold-shouldered. It is ‘the howling of the tortured, the crippled / and the damned.’ Solomon is the mouthpiece for people constrained by circumstance to the periphery. The voices conjured are more deadpan than nuanced, but this feels intentional. Solomon puts on a good show; one whose razzamatazz might interrupt more than a few folk’s complacent slumberings.