TEXT Vol 29 No 2 (October 2025)

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TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

Gestures of recognition

review by Jen Webb

Dominique Hecq
Volte Face
Liquid Amber Press, Seddon VIC 2024
ISBN 9780645713145
Pb 85pp AUD26.99

Dominique Hecq is recognised for her innovative and experimental writing across scholarly and creative modes, and in the use of both language and forms. This recent collection of poems expands her corpus of work in English, and also expands the evidence of what prose poetry can do to shift understanding of diction, grammar and form.

I suspect that the apparently contradictory pairing of prose and poetry is itself an example of a *volte face*, a term Hecq defines as "a gesture of recognition" (p. 77): one turns to confront another, and then both acknowledges that other, and asserts one's own self. It is confrontation that becomes an act of fellowship: a being-open to engage, a "what do you want from me?" encounter.

The poems in this book are true to the notion of encounter, of engagement, of generosity and communion. Each of these little blocks of text come to us in sentences that obey the *logic* of poetry, the *grammar* of poetry, rather than that of prose. This makes them, on the one hand, accessible; prose is so closely affiliated with story, arguably the most characteristic experience of all human beings, across time. On the other hand, they introduce a confound: the uncertainty of whether one is reading a story or viewing an image, or experiencing raw affect.

Or, perhaps, whether one is reading a scholarly treatise. Hecq is, after all, a scholar, with deep roots into literature and philosophy – as is evident in the very first poem in this collection, 'Borges and I', where the voice of the poet is busy in debate with Borges, he of the "labyrinthine library" (p. 1). We don't need to know the background to the concept of the concrete image, or the quarrel between the empirical and the sensed, or even to have read Borges' 'The Library of Babel', to feel the energy and imagery in these lines.

The next poem, treading on Borges' heels, operates almost like a joke at the expense of the serious issues raised in the first poem. It moves us from philosophical and literary debates to a passionate (albeit, I suspect, tongue in cheek) discourse on fonts. These symbols we all use when writing anything on computer or typewriter take on a material identity to balance out their mere material properties. Rather than being simply patterns of lines, we find ourselves encountering – *volte face* – excitable letters; feel the delight of letters that have fun, that live on "air, blood and water, seeds and nuts" (p. 2); that have taste and aspirations and identity of their own. (And, jump ahead 30 pages to 'Magritte's Gravestone', and we are again contemplating the properties of letters – now in pen-and-ink, rather than lead – as the poem rather menacingly observes: "We are made of letters. Look how they liquify in the inkpot" (p. 32).)

Volte face: that abrupt turning; the reversal of opinion or understanding; the alignment of apparently impossible images. Such emerge again and again across the collection, their impossibility or implausibility being swiftly set aside by the gestures of the poems, by their articulation, and then contemplation, and allows the non-sense to make, all of a sudden, complete sense. Consider, for instance, images in the poem 'The Entombment', which starts "In the sky-blubbering sea stands entombed a dead alive elephant …" (p. 6). "Sky-blubbering*"*: an image that had never occurred to me, but now seems precisely the correct designation. And "dead alive"? Surely not this pairing of terms. Except, of course, that the dead are indeed alive as long as they are remembered. The dead *have been*, we might say, rather than *are*; but so frequently they straddle those two states of being (being alive in the abstract, dead in the concrete), shift between *is* and *was* within the same sentence.

The sense made by the strange images and segues offered by the poems is not a sense that belongs to the positivist world – the world of empirical measures – far less the world of reportage. It does, though, belong to the world of felt experience, of dreams, of the sudden surprise of spotting something unexpected out of the corner of one's eye. As such, it's a collection that generates thought because it ruptures the binary of denotation and association, introducing in the gap a galaxy of feelings and meanings that find ways to coexist in a single

multifaced entity. “The volte face”, writes Hecq in her ‘Contexts’ section, “is the experience of making sense of the senseless” (p. 77), and it does so, beautifully and convincingly.

It’s not all high thinking and complex constructions; Hecq’s bright wit emerges across the collection. The poem titled ‘Exclusive’, for example, made me laugh out loud at its account of a remarkable dessert *carte*, loaded with options that are “sugar free” / “gluten free” / “alcohol free” / “sulphate” “fructose free” and (above all) “calorie free” (p. 1). At that final claim, the waiter is quite overcome with ecstasy – the ecstasy of (not) having one’s cake and eating it, but of asserting that the only true joy comes from joyless constraint.

As well as irony and mirth, readers will also encounter deep pleasures of everyday life. In the poem ‘How it is’, a well-known nursery rhyme animates the images: picture “the wheels on the clouds going *round and round, round and round*”; picture “the wind going *swish* and *swish*”; picture a “Jurassic light” animating the poet’s thinking; and the rocking of the bus as we move through “real time”, a real time that we experience in images and wishes (p. 23).

These poems don’t seek meaning, or clarity, but instead honour the instability – the uncertainty – of meaning; and the fluidity of all we experience in a world where a pipe may be not a pipe (“Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (p. 32)). They remind us that everything matters, and simultaneously does not; that the moment is what counts because there are no eternal or universal verities; that we are always “making sense of the senseless” (p. 77); we are continually confronting not just someone else (*volte face*) but also confronting and being confronted by the whole inexplicable impossible universe and all its, and our, history.

The final poem in the book, ‘The Doors’, hauls together a concatenation of imagery and references – Mike Parr flows through to Samuel Beckett, then turns to The Doors, then God, then Dog. The paradoxes of connection, of turning to the unexpected; of coming to realise, finally, that “we are truly fickle matter existing. Already exiting. Rocking the boat to the breadth of time” (p. 76).

This is not bleak; rather it is the fitting last expression in a book that is quilted across its full self with: high feelings; humour; the gymnastic use of language; luscious words; startling imagery. It is what its writer wants it to be: a “fugue of language” (p. 7) that affords “kinetic and kaleidoscopic gestures” (p. 77), and crafts throughout a sense of wonder.

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TEXT review

Light, water and life: the sounds of the world turning

review by Susan Fealy

Judith Beveridge
Tintinnabulum
Giramondo, Sydney NSW 2024
ISBN 9781923106055
Pb 96pp AUD27.00

The Australian poet Judith Beveridge has always been all in. Her lyric poetry invites the reader into the world of each poem without the step back of irony. The forces of feeling, an attentive, close-up gaze, and the sense that something is at stake, all work seamlessly with rhythm, sound music and abundant metaphor to immerse the reader. I am not saying anything that readers who are familiar with her work do not already know. What is new in *Tintinnabulum* (2024) is the strength of forces arising from a shimmering and subtle connectivity.

Connections are omnipresent in *Tintinnabulum*. And there is also something strange going on. Upending the usual is part of the strangeness: the tiny can be powerful, rendering humans helpless, vision turns into sound. Yet, unlike surreal strangeness that wears weird on its sleeve,

this collection makes most its new connections within cycles of daily life close to a natural environment. The connections become ever more intricate and expansive, while holding fragility, vulnerability and a steady ethical framework. Ethics are woven into even her most playful and inventive poems. Her stance, especially towards how to write the world, is interrogated, so too is the way that language, as the mode of meaning-making, can contribute to systems which exploit and harm others.

Metaphor and simile have always been plentiful in Beveridge's poetry. This time, she states that her aim is to open sacred spaces through their new relationships and connections. I did not expect to revisit my honours thesis on Children's Understanding of Metaphor (1984) but it is apposite. The interaction theory of metaphor (Ortony, 1979, 1981) describes the features of metaphor that distinguish it from literal and anomalous statements, and it outlines how metaphoric connections are made. Much research, including mine with Professor Roger Wales, supported Ortony's hypotheses that:

1/ Metaphors (A is a B) where A is the topic of the metaphor and B is the vehicle, rely on salient features of the vehicle to map onto the topic.

2/ Asymmetry of salience is a defining feature of metaphor. For example, in the metaphor "the grass is fur", the softness and density of fur is salient and maps onto this less salient aspect of the topic.

Adult ratings of word imagery and concreteness allow them to be controlled in research design. In line with proposals made by Pavio and Begg (1981), my honours research found that high vehicle imagery predicts that salient features will be transferred to the topic and high topic concreteness (associated with high imagery) assists the receiving of salience from the vehicle to the topic.

Sensory properties of the vehicle can map onto the topic through the same mode (e.g. visual feature of vehicle to visual feature of topic such as "the sea is a table") or by crossing a sensory domain (e.g. sound feature of vehicle to visual feature of topic: "the dress is a trumpet"). Same-mode metaphors are most often mastered by children earlier than cross-mode metaphors but high imagery of vehicle and high concreteness of topic predict which cross-modal metaphors younger children master.

Beveridge's metaphors very often combine vehicles high in imagery with concrete topics. Readers are receiving the buzz of the new cognitive linkage *and* the buzz of sensory information from accessible metaphors. The content often sparks memory of familiar environments. I suspect that these features contribute to why I experience a connection between mind *and* body when I read Beveridge's poetry.

The synaesthesia evoked by her cross-modal metaphors, buzz their connections in two sensory modalities. Synaesthesia often triggers surprise and pleasure for me, even more than new connections opening from same-mode metaphors. It is beyond the scope of this review to

speculate about how metaphor mediates feeling but it seems possible that the jolt of the new combined with buzz of the sensory connections activates our limbic system.

The art of this collection lives in how the connecting forces operate at the minute and vast level where each, in an odd way, become equivalent. Any attempt to break the forces apart to reveal her sleights of mind will break the spell and are bound to fail. But I have to try. Multiplicity, repetition and structure are key. They are abundant in the natural world, in language and in our daily lives and connect beautifully with the meaning of tintinnabulum: the ringing of tiny bells. Temple and church bells call to prayer at dawn and dusk: those liminal zones when humans are waking from sleep, or when the sun beds down ahead of us knowing that we too will settle into sleep and dream. Bells are also rung to register events that carry human significance: birth, marriage and death. Nick Cave has commented that music is organized sound and this seems an apt definition for a deliciously sonic collection which organizes around the music made by many living things. *Tintinnabulum* gathers the life forces of light, water, earth and breath with marvellous range and effect.

It might seem weird to begin a life-affirming collection with a lot of dead and dying animals, and a lot of creatures, who are, to say the least, hard to like: vultures, blue bottles, leeches and thickets of cicadas. The adage from a Gregorian chant "in the midst of life we are in death" goes some way to explain it. Also, the directness of confrontation with death and otherness mobilizes strong feeling and establishes an arc towards increasing joy and celebration.

'Animals' confronts full-on what is painful, revolting, even hateful. Compassion abounds in poems about how creatures (a savage dog, cuttlefish, elephants) are treated cruelly: human blindness to suffering seems hateful and revolting. What seems new is that strong feeling is often encountered when the narrator reflects upon the power of tiny creatures to get under *our* skin, make *us* feel an excess of physical pain, unsafe, helpless, or all three. The teeming of tiny creatures are in the air, on the ground, and in the ocean: they crawl over a dead possum (blowflies and maggots) they invade ears with amped-up excess ('Listening to Cicadas'), they enter "a groin, a bladder, the soft tissue inside an elephant's trunk" (p. 15) in 'The Leech'.

The valencies of this first section spark and crackle, lit by the throb and multitude of creepy-crawly things and flared by the jagged unease it evokes in the reader. 'Listening to Cicadas' imparts the unpleasant excess of shrilling cicadas. The poem's weapons of wit and inventiveness attempt to shape, master and transform what overwhelms. Each sharp sliver carries its own charge, at times ignited by synaesthesia: "the audio equivalent of flash photography and strobe lighting / hitting disco balls and mirror walls" (p. 16), "the sonic equivalent of ant juice" (p. 17). The repeating attempts at definition, thirteen in all, propel the sense of ongoing combat in the face of overwhelm.

There is a full-on encounter with vitality and violence in 'Mountain Goats'. It is not a simple ode nor an elegy: it holds the tension before the arrival of the hunter and the shot of the gun. Beveridge structures the poem in repeating sequences of four lines which progressively shorten. On the page, it looks not unlike a ledge with niches for foothold. The indentations

yoke with the dance of the goat's esprit and agility while the pattern of lines constricting predicts "a bone-breaking tumble to the bottom of an incline" (p. 9).

How do multitude, repetition and structure manifest in section two ('Walking with the Poet')? How does it bridge section one and develop the theme of connection? The obvious bridge is that human animals live in a finite body and human life cycles are shown as linked intimately with the natural environment. Time and its impact upon human relationships is the focus. Even the hard work of grief is lived outside. The materiality of human ash and its temporality is likened to "handfuls of oyster grit, the pale leavings of seabirds" (p. 29).

The cluster of poems written about those with whom she has a loving connection are particularly strong and moving. She names her relationship with those who are living (mother, long-term partner, son) and dedicates a eulogy to the recently departed Robert Adamson. I wondered about the identity of the loved ones who inspired the other eulogies, but, unnamed, these poems open freely into the universal experience of grief.

'A Woman of Flowers' starts in the present with her mother trimming, pruning, mulching and raking. It jolts to the cruel reality that at 96, she can no longer garden, her memory is failing, and her life has lost the rituals that gave her life meaning: "She lies in ungodly / sleep, or just listens to the second hand's passage through another / endless afternoon" (p. 24). The poem carries detailed memories of the mother's doings in the garden, those many acts of care, and it carries the shift where the daughter tends to her mother with "snippets where / joy might root, leaf and bud again, old memories that might / allow her to see all those days she filled with mothering honey" (p. 24). The long tercets look like garden beds and the line breaks impact like the sharp cut of shears. The poem holds the pain of bearing witness to connections being lost with the hope that some can be remade.

'The Breakwall' evokes Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break', but it is more complex than an expression of lament. The intimacy of direct address, and the narrative of a walk towards and onto a breakwall convey the mind's *work* of grief refracted through precise observations from the shoreline. It begins in the present, and as the walk continues, observations freight the absolute break of death: there is no physical return to the past experience of being in that place with the other. It shows how grief shifts the meaning of what memory sees. We don't know how the poet saw the cormorant or sea eagle before this death. That is the point. The memory of the shared walk is now only a rehearsal for the death:

> … I do not yet know that the cormorant
> on a pylon hanging out his wings, standing perfectly still
> as if practicing for a life behind museum glass, mounted,
> stuffed, locked in an eternal vacuum, will become
> another symbol of your absence. (p. 29)

The hard, unforgiving stone of the breakwall yokes with the gritty dissolving of human and creature: "we'll scatter your ashes, / disperse them across the harbour to float into the ocean / like handfuls of oyster grit, the pale leavings of seabirds" (p. 29).

Grief is more resolved in the final poem 'At Flying Fox Bay'. Indented tercets spin the sense of you / me and bringing something into being. The story being spun is the act of taking ashes to the loved one's childhood haunt to bury them at the base of a fig tree. This poem is replete with verbs and light. Light of the mind is twinned with the physical act of climbing: "I think of you climbing trees, looking out at the shoreline, / onto the water, a hidden cove of light-hoarding, / light-gathering gold" (p. 36), "the only play equipment was the bush, the water, / a flying imagination, and a strong climbing hold" (p. 36-37). But even here, after sixteen years, the narrator acknowledges the longing for a physical connection with the person whom she addresses only in memory. The poem ends with an acceptance of a different kind of physical connection but a connection nonetheless:

> Now that the grains have left my hands, my fingers
> will no longer read grief's repeated specks, but
> I'll come here—often—and dig my fingers in the sand. (p. 37)

The weaving of intimate poems with stranger-portraits ('The Waitress', 'To A Garland-maker', 'Washerwomen at the River') conveys that humans are connected to each other through cycles of toil. These poems also explore how being tied to work can limit or exploit. 'To a Garland-maker' makes full use of structure, repetition and sound music to convey how bonds between mothers and daughters can constrain.

The repetition of "daughters" across each of four orderly quatrains braids them like flowers and begins to unravel the meaning of "It must be good to be a garland-maker" (p. 25). The sound music and imagery convey the sensuality of a life lived near flowers *and* an insidious tone of persuasion.

The daughters do not escape the mother: "Daughters / who will adorn you at your funeral with blossoms / picked at dawn" (p. 25) and the reader does not escape the tension held in the poem. There is beauty in "blossoms / picked at dawn" (p. 25) but there is also daily toil. Carrying water? Beginning at dawn? Flower baskets at hips and not children? The reality of toil from dawn to dusk suggests that daughters, like the flowers, become a commodity. Perhaps all are tightly bound by systemic exploitation? Someone is buying the garlands. The poem ends with a binding of the very breath of the daughters to the fragrance of flowers:

> their breath as fresh as jasmine, meadow grass,
> sprays of lavender on an evening breeze. (p. 25)

Inequity and exploitation are overt in 'Washerwomen at the River'. The repeating thump of the washing and the tinkling counterpoint of the "bracelets glassy spills" (p. 31) convey the acts of erasure which not only clean stains from washing, they serve to whitewash exploitation itself. The poem hints that the tourist's romantic gaze can mitigate the reality of toil: "even the air seems/cleansed by starry explosions of water on rock" (p. 31).

The homophonic title of section three ('The Bizarre Bazaar') signals that language is its subject. The rich pleasures of language are celebrated and its potential for misuse is considered.

Experiments with form, sound play and image-making showcase language as substance and device. Multiplicity dances in language, the free play of imagination and the wide variety of poetic forms. Repetition plays out in list poems.

‘The Bizarre Bazaar’ is an intertextual poem which samples from twenty poems by Wallace Stevens. The strong rhyme and discernible fragments from Stevens lay bare its construction, show how a poem is a machine made of words. The connecting tissue of this third section is the fun of pushing sound play and imagination to its edge and looking at what happens when language serves only the desire of its maker.

‘Moon Poem’ is a list of definitions strung together by a column of stars. Each definition runs straight across the page, imparting a confident sprawl while the entire visual effect is a threadbare sky broadcasting its lack. It is an ambivalent portrait. The moon is often seen as a milky, slippery substance; evasive, whitewashing. Some descriptions convey cold if not destructive forces: “You’re the snow-blind eye on frost-bitten space” (p. 41), “You’re a plague sore on darkness” (p. 41) but the moon loves “flowers that night-bloom / and children and old people who befriend their inner lunatic” (p. 41). The poem ends with accepting the magical power of the moon: “You’re the heartland of Witch School” (p. 42), and accepting that the moon is the arbiter of her own mystery, and, like the unknown, will always be beyond, tied to a dark rhythm of time: “You’re an apparition widowed to an unborn ghost” (p. 42).

While ‘Moon Poem’ plays with sensate properties of the moon, and its role as muse, ‘Reading the Clouds’ is a list poem propelled by an absurd anthropomorphism. It flips the human tendency to project into the spotlight, plays with the vagueness of daydream and desire, and gently mocks the quest to be more, far more, than you are.

‘The King Sends a Delegation to Meet a Clan from the South’ is also about human motive and desire but its implications are much darker. It is set in the past, in no particular place. The dramatic monologue exudes omnipotence and contempt. It shows how power and privilege are perpetuated by self-serving superiority, mistrust and isolation: “We’ve heard / their highest cultural achievement / is a poetry that never veers from the subject / of spitting in public places”(p. 44), “Perhaps our sweetmeats can tempt them into trade / though we’ve heard they produce nothing of value / except a liquor made from / cinnamon and snake venom” (p. 45).

Other poems also show how language, as the mode of meaning-making, can exploit or do harm. There is a range of registers. ‘Incense’ is a humorous poem written in the voice of the duped. Part of its pleasure is recognizing the willingness of the buyer to be seduced by an alluring rhetoric. And after all, it is only incense that is at stake.

‘Weather Divinations’ voices a hermetic superstitious belief system while lamenting an inability to communicate peril: “If a flock of crows sits on your roof // there will be a battle of cold and warm fronts and a volcanic / eruption causing crop failure, landslides, and acid rain” (p. 48). It reads as mischievous *and* serious: calling out in the voice of non-science the futility of meaning-making when peril is lamented without a shared version of reality.

With rich imagination, playfulness and wit, ‘The Bizaare Bazaar’ unleashes the lavish, exotic and weird, with almost garish rhyme and abounding homophones. It offers imagination and language as performance with a hawker’s chutzpah: “You can buy the caftan of Chieftain / Iffucan of Azcan who likes havoc, bruhaha, / likes to tic it, tock it, turn it true to the cha-cha, / the rhumba, the pas de deux” (p. 55)

‘The Bizarre Bazaar’ seems like an adult equivalent of the fantasy world at the top of Enid Blyton’s Faraway Tree. But this is an adult world and so it lands on the reality that language cannot undo suffering: “You can buy the homilies of Houyhnhnms, / the hankering hymns of the thin men of Haddam / and all the hullaballoo that will make widows wince” (p. 57).

Multiplicity and repetition shift back to the outer world in the last section. The poems in ‘Choirwood’ draw from the poet’s intimate knowledge of Sydney’s shorelines and bushlands. The poems impart sensitive and nuanced apprehensions only made possible through repeated experience. Descriptions of similar terrain highlight Beveridge’s different positionings as she interrogates *how* to write her subject. The similar but distinctive shorelines and bushlands, voiced by a narrator who is often walking, fold into the book’s overall sense of flow, and its weaving of micro and macro connections.

The opening poem ‘Harbour Park at Dusk’ invites the question ‘what is a park?’ This urban park of postcard beauty offers only partial entry to a non-human world. The poem hints that expectations of entertainment, and states of mind carried from work-a-day lives, can limit further entry. Cinematic details assemble a safe and innocent space where even the hawk, perhaps hovering above its prey, is “a prayer-crafted cross” (p. 61).

Subsequent poems flow towards more intricate and expansive connections. At times there is a sense that Beveridge is in conversation with her own vision: how can I keep the beauty out when it is so overwhelming? Perhaps I can blame the light? ‘Estuary’ claims from the beginning that light generates aesthetics. She risks allowing the visual beauty of the estuary to be her subject and evokes human-made beauty to construct the poem, almost always in other than visual mode. As light transforms into movement and sound it connects aspects of the landscape to each other while expanding the view:

> The light is a moving object, an installation
> filling the river and the large gallery of the sky—
> as if it could be heard as it touches the shallows (p. 63)

A bird of prey circling is seen as a Calder-like mobile: “a piece of kinetic art turning in the wind” (p. 63). Beveridge ends with conjuring light as a kind of music constructed from the possibilities that lie beyond a string piano:

> … the light glimmer on the ocean
> which if it were turned into an act of hearing
> would be the crescendos, the harmonics

the note-shaping and evolving timbres and continuous
pitch blends of a magnetic resonator piano. (p. 63)

'The Light on Marrin Bay' also links light with sound but this time Beveridge ramps up *her* sound music with strong rhyme and evokes metaphors of human-made glitter and plink to impart the sense that light and landscape conspire to produce the 'wow' of theatre. The indented quatrains add dance to its stage. Human and non-human lights and sounds assemble a dazzling display: she revs aesthetics so hard it risks losing contact with the real and seeming artificial, but that seems to be the point: the incandescence of sunlight can make the beauty of Marrin Bay like a Hollywood version of itself.

Her positioning in relation to place is different in 'At the Lake'. Again, the narrator is walking, but engagement with the landscape is so intimate that domestic metaphors are evoked: "a heron drifts, unweighted, / like steam hushed from a teapot's slim spout" (p. 64) and "reflections of trees ironed onto the water" (p. 64). Connections within the landscape are made between small details of the place itself: "this creek running over stones / bubbling, gurgling like a young magpie learning adult songs" (p. 65). The poem ends with a waking up that goes beyond dawn's silence "mixed in with the light" (p. 64). In this landscape too, there are thugs and a ruling elite:

… A few noisy miners
are trying to oust crows from a branch—a separatist clique
endlessly declaring thug rules—the birds don't budge,
they sit like shiny black shoes: ultra-stylish, ultra-supreme. (p. 65)

'On a Forest Trail One Sunday Afternoon' is attentive to the details of the natural environment and attentive to a mind which feels compelled to write about it, acknowledging that it can become a kind of chosen tyranny: "Now the wind gets up—*Sibelius Sibelius* it seems to say—then *Sisyphus Sisyphus* as it pushes / into the reaches of the blue gums" (p. 66). Beveridge seems gently mocking of her tyranny, aware that the landscape does not share it with her, and that her inventiveness can take her beyond Sisyphus: a waterfall is "the gauzy erasure of a rock face" (p. 66). She lands on the reality of her choice: she can let go of her memory, or she can write from it, knowing she will fail to write what "streamed with change" (p. 67):

Perhaps you'll let the day have its simple dissolution
like the storm that's turned down its volume and disappeared. (p. 67)

'Peppertree Bay' weaves the experience of place with a slowed experience of time. It is an ode to the bay, and to the privilege of safety where her body is free to be in tune with the way that "light exalts / the world" (p.71) : "the hours have the rocking / emptiness of a long canoe so I can relax / and feel grateful for the confederacies / of luck and circumstance that bring / me here" (p. 70-71). The long single stanza flows with the sense of going-on-being where consciousness almost merges with the colours and sounds of the landscape: "my thoughts drift / on an undertow into an expanse where / they almost disappear" (p. 71).

'Morning, from the Veranda' is full of the distinctive doings of bush birds and animals. It has the vividness and accuracy of an audio describer to the blind. The poem arrives at how a human

and writer can be other and yet also shorten the distance between her and what is observed: every creature is attentive, alive and full of tiny transactions and connections:

> I think of all the transactions, connections
> I'm witnessing, how everything
> is acutely alert, so many tiny senses sifting data
> into likelihoods, approximations— (p. 75)

In the final poem, 'Choirwood', magpies are "opening the day with bubbly freely given notes" (p. 76) and "light now is loose and yellow like spooned / honey" (p. 76). It is a generous, expansive vision that joins beautifully with dawn's possibilities and with her tone of gratitude and exaltation. This is a choir where *she* listens to "its little hymns" (p. 76), it's where tiny insects and birds contribute to vast underlying forces and processes. The details of how insects and birds relate to each other and to their habitat build the sense of process.

Her sound music combines with precise observations that blend sight, sound and texture: "A currawong's song / shapeshifts through its habitat—entanglements / of branches, leafage, twigs, thickets—before / it settles into a high-pitched whistle, a warning / to the channel-billed cockatoo flying overhead" (p. 77). This vision of nature, unlike a work of art, is never settled or finished:

> … A butcherbird drops one note
> after another into the air, making an acoustic mandala,
> phrases for its mate to copy before the wind
> sweeps the music away. (p. 76-77)

The exquisite attunement to connections *within* the natural environment is also deeply particular to human consciousness and its possibilities. *Tintinnabulum* celebrates our connection to all living things, and our mind's capacity to perceive the forces "zipping through / bodies, asteroids, planets, all the infrasonic / symphonies of the vast and vibrating invisible fields" (p. 77). I am going to read it again. This time, aloud.

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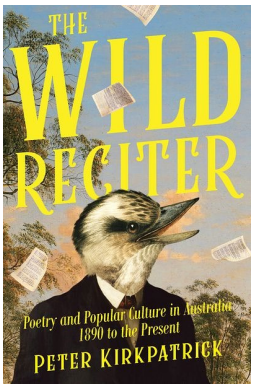
ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

Resuscitating immoral poultry: A case for expanding the Aust Lit canon

review by David Gilbey



Peter Kirkpatrick
The Wild Reciter: Poetry and Popular Culture in Australia 1890 to the Present
Melbourne University Press, Carlton VIC 2024
ISBN 9785022880298
Pb 334pp AUD34.99

This is a wonderful, witty and at times weird book – insightful, entertaining, meticulously researched and continually interlocutory. And, appropriately, I can hear Peter Kirkpatrick's "voice" on every page: wise and mischievous, anecdotal and scholarly. Two of the particular pleasures of *The Wild Reciter* are, first, the new angles and information on different kinds of popular poetry and the way Kirkpatrick opens up new perspectives for interpretation and understanding, and second, the many "close readings" of popular poems (syntax, nuance, structure etc.) as well as their contexts of performance. This is a genuinely engaging and satisfying read – it seems like a book constructed carefully from iconoclastic lectures and

intense conversations: fanboy David wants to croon “unputdownable” but maybe this is a semitone too far …

The cover image, vivisecting a laughing kookaburra head onto a 19th century dinner jacket and flat-tie figure, juxtaposed against bushfire-tinted clouds and serpentine eucalypts of John Glover’s ‘Patterdale Landscape’ (1833) suggests something of the larrikin pitch of the book. And its almost oxymoronic title ironically proposes a performance of both excess and restraint which you might think of as theatrically “antipodean” (constantly comparing the literary scene “down under” with its counterparts in the British Isles, the United States and Europe) in its exploration of *Poetry and Popular Culture in Australia 1890 to the Present*. Kirkpatrick mounts an “up from below” argument, treating what might have been dismissed as ephemeral as entirely worthy of serious scholarly scrutiny.

Kirkpatrick’s semiotic journey begins with a high modernist (bathetic?) epigraph from Ern Malley’s ‘Colloquy with John Keats’: “The emotions are not skilled workers”, foreshadowing the often ironic, multi-layered consciousness that he brings to his “selective social history of poetry in Australia”, negotiating differences in class consciousness (especially workers vs middle) and literary tastes (different kinds of “popular” and “literary”) in his mostly chronological examination of historical and cultural moments. Straight away we’re thrust into a close reading of the phenomenon and lyrics of Taylor Swift in a discussion of some of the connections between poetry and song; pop(ular) lyrics and “on the page” poetry. Kirkpatrick is an astute cultural critic and focuses on the contexts of publication and performance of Swift’s “poems” showing subtleties of rhetorical construction and complexity in the meaning-making of her words.

For Kirkpatrick the “wild reciter” (a term coined by a 1920s reviewer and published in a poem by “Kodak”) is “now an extinct species … a symbol of a time long gone when poetry had mass appeal … a motif for something presumed lost: poetry as a social activity … a form of entertainment” (p. 2), striking an elegiac note lamenting poetry’s “vulgar past” as a truly “demotic art” (p. 2). While it’s true *The Wild Reciter* mourns a decline in a kind of civilized pleasure, despite the many opportunities, diversity and access of current technological democratisation where “poetry is no longer consumed across all ages and classes” (p. 4), Kirkpatrick’s ongoing argument is that “Aust Lit” needs to include popular poetry in its canon as its claims to cultural significance are palpable and compelling.

The first chapter, ‘Hunting the Wild Reciter’, aims to trace and examine “the changing modes of creation, communication and consumption of poetry over the last 135 years … to arrive at a … more capacious notion of what poetry is” (p. 4). It’s a fascinating exploration, beginning with the rise of elocution in the eighteenth century, plus its influence on “public speaking, school education and popular entertainment” (p. 4), in Australia, especially by focussing on the role of “Received Pronunciation” on aspirational middle-class fondness for “performance of verse in private parlours and on popular stages” (p. 5). Kirkpatrick’s analysis of recitation conventions, the influence of music hall verse, Gilbert & Sullivan and vaudeville is a finely-crafted mosaic as he examines many popular and memorable favourites, including

"resuscitating an immoral piece of poultry" ("Mo" on 'The Green Eye of the Yellow God') (p. 30).

Chapter 2, "Horses, Horses, Horses, Horses", focuses on Banjo Paterson's 'The Man From Snowy River' both in terms of its language and the biographical treasure hunt to identify the "Man". Kirkpatrick compares other "bush poets" such as Adam Lindsay Gordon, Will Ogilvie and Henry Lawson and documents the influence of the popular Wild West Shows on the creation of "an heroic rural version of white national identity … the noble frontiersman on his horse" and suggests that maybe Paterson's "Man" was "inspired by a visiting cowboy from the USA" (p. 5) – an international bastard from another bush.

Kirkpatrick then considers the most popular book of Australian poetry ever published, C. J. Dennis' *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, and deconstructs its "dialect verse" (p. 5) and the way this "patois" (p. 67) was adapted to the 1918 film version made by Raymond Longford and Lotttie Lyell. Kirkpatrick's analysis of Dennis' language argues for a subtle mix of registers, vernacular and formal, in the much recited and popular colloquialisms often performed in eisteddfods around Australia.

Next *The Wild Reciter* explores the influence of different styles and conventions of (recorded) music on the neglected poetry of Lesbia Harford, some of which was "written to be sung to her own melodies"; and Kenneth Slessor's "suite of light verses, *Darlinghurst Nights*" (p. 6). With respect to Harford, Kirkpatrick discusses political (especially Marxist), religious and folkloric innuendoes (e.g. in 'Beauty's Fires') challenging the cultural construction of "domestic femininity … and redemptive beauty" (p. 103). In Slessor's poems he deveins the influence of Tin Pan Alley, Broadway and American jazz. Here, too, Kirkpatrick is at pains to show an unacknowledged sophistication and complexity in the writing which has links to wider western cultural movements and tastes, reinforcing his suggestions that immediacy and popularity celebrate rather than ignore cultural significance.

Chapter 6 explores the role of the "working-class readership of the *Railroad* … newspaper of the NSW branch of the Australian Railways Union" and details the editorially significant role of Ernest Arthur Chapman, "one of the less well-known figures in Australian unionism" (p. 131): he fostered "heterogeneity" in workplace culture, including poetry (p. 152). Kirkpatrick notes a "surprising diversity of poetic styles" (p. 6) and registers that challenge class stereotypes. He also, as with Slessor, discusses the influences of journalism as a craft and a profession on the writing of and tastes for poetry. There are interesting links between the *Railroad* and the earlier *Bulletin* as publications written for and by their readers. Again, Kirkpatrick's close reading of working-class poetry, e.g. Jo Evans' "'Your Tool Box Will Be Raffled By and By', raises questions about the nature of class aesthetics" (p. 143).

In the mid twentieth century "radio helped kill off the last of the wild reciters" by "reorienting public taste away from elocutionary histrionics towards the more intimate voice transmitted across the airwaves" (p. 6). Kirkpatrick documents the emergence of new poets in the 1940s and a greater presence of modernism, reinforcing "a new class distinction between poetry and

verse" so that "the classic recital poems … which George Orwell referred to as 'good bad poetry' were seen as embarrassing" (p. 7). John Thompson's role as a poet and presenter – his style of writing and his fostering of particular cultural tastes helped "attract an audience for verse on air" (p. 7).

The role of newspapers in publishing "topical verse" is considered through analysing Ronald McCuaig's prolific output under the pseudonym 'Swilliam' in *The Bulletin* 1949-61. And, noting the way "the materials of history" (MacLeish, p. 9 cited in Kirkpatrick, p. 202) are "the straw from which both poetry and journalism spin their gold" Kirkpatrick considers: "can poetry be journalism and vice versa?" (p. 203). Swinging between poetry by Auden and light verse by 'Bellerive', Kirkpatrick links the decline in "light verse" to a "transition in the dominant custodianship of poetry from journalism to the academy" (p. 204) – as seen in the steady rise of the journals *Southerly* and *Meanjin*.

In the latter 1960s Kirkpatrick turns to Yevgeny Yevtushenko's visit to the Adelaide Festival as "electrifying mass entertainment" (p. 8), and the emergence, under the influence of the American Beat Poets and e.g. Bob Dylan, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, of what John Tranter dubbed the 'Generation of 68'. Two other "celebrity poets", John Laws and Clive James (who, by the way, gets more index citations than Slessor) are compared with respect to their relationships with media, celebrity and the qualities of their writing, taking *The Wild Reciter*'s cultural critique into the 70s and 80s.

Kirkpatrick invokes the context of "grunge" literature to discuss Dorothy Porter's verse novel *The Monkey's Mask*, "a lesbian detective thriller told in imagistic poems that was later turned into a successful film" (p. 8). He explores the dimensions of its popularity and some of the tensions between the tropes of crime writing and experimental poetry.

The final chapter of *The Wild Reciter* negotiates the tricky poetic path winding through slam poetry, possible Laureates (such as Les Murray and Evelyn Araluen), best-selling poetry books in Australia and a concluding sense of poetry's role in both expressing and exploring "community", with reference to W. H. Auden's paradoxical phrase from 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', "poetry makes nothing happen" (p. 299).

It's hard to do justice to the richness, intelligence and generosity of *The Wild Reciter*. Each chapter contains a wealth of research and analysis of Australian poetry that challenges and expands this reader's sense of the complexities of production, influence, context, performance and "reading" of Australian poetry. It's a careful, serious reconsideration of what might be thought of as "canonical", and it's a "long and winding" rather than a "yellow brick" road of discovery (one chapter was first published a quarter of a century ago, in 2000). Maybe a ghost who walks through these pages speaks mellifluously, ironically, from ASAL's famed Parody Nights … Nevertheless, cumulatively, Peter Kirkpatrick counsels readers to think and read and listen carefully: to fully appreciate the fullness of Australian poetry, the figurative and literal importance of the "human mouth" should not be underestimated.

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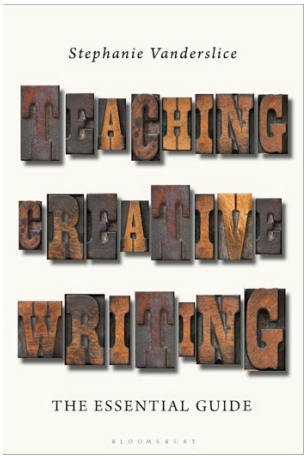
TEXT review

Reminding ourselves of energy and courage

review by Rachel Hennessy



Stephanie Vanderslice
Teaching Creative Writing
Bloomsbury Academic, London 2024
ISBN 9781350276499
Pb 198pp AUD35.99

With the worldwide threat to creative work posed by the theft of AI large language models, the articulation of our methods of creating, the reasoning behind our teaching pedagogies, and the human expertise that we offer inside the university, seems urgent. In *Teaching Creative Writing* Stephanie Vanderslice offers arguments around all these considerations, writing from a position of long experience, both as a teacher and a pedagogical researcher. I first encountered Stephanie's work a decade ago when I had just begun my own creative writing teaching journey, stepping into the academy without formal teaching training but with a strong belief, like all of us (I hope), that the act of writing creatively could, and more importantly, should be

taught in Higher Education. I quoted Vanderslice in my first academic article, published here in TEXT, about the question of voice and authority in the classroom:

> It is a fact universally acknowledged (but hopefully not encouraged) by most teachers of creative writing that the heads of undergraduate or beginning writers virtually teem with the myths they've spent their whole lives absorbing about writers and writing via popular culture including: that writing is easy; that perfect first drafts spring from pens or keyboards fully formed; that writing itself is reserved for crazed, isolated, drug-addicted "geniuses". (Vanderslice 2011: 30)

Vanderslice's naming of the myths surrounding writing resonated back then – and still, unfortunately, hold true for many undergraduates – and in this new book *Teaching Creative Writing* she travels through both myth and reality, taking a practical and pragmatic approach to aspects of being a writer and teacher in the academy. Vanderslice traces the ongoing persistence of the Romantic artist model – "this idea, that creative writing could not be taught, persists as a robust remnant of the 'romantic ideal' of literary art, which insisted that writers were born, not made" (p. 12) and draws attention to the fact that creative writers have often "developed a defensive stance that was, to an extent, anti-theory and anti-pedagogy, clinging to the idea that to examine *how* creative writing happened was to take away the magic and mystique of the work itself" (p. 24). To recognise this is to position her own stance as a writer deeply interested in pedagogy, emphasising the necessity of in-class writing exercises as spaces to teach students the importance of writing the "crappy" first draft and focusing in on process and the arts of re-drafting.

Vanderslice offers a smorgasbord of considerations and each chapter, from 'Revision, Responding, Assessing' to 'The Creative Writing Workshop' provoked two questions for me: (1) what do I do that is the same as Stephanie's teaching practice, and (2) what might I do differently to draw on her strongly articulated and researched advice? The book is now dog-eared on the pages that resonated the most, with quotable considerations that seemingly arise daily in my working life, especially as a writer who oscillates between teaching "literary" and "genre" works. Vanderslice's take on this was particularly welcomed as she encourages teachers away from the false dichotomy that continues to persist in the academy: "[b]y welcoming genres that influenced our students, rather than dismissing them, and then exposing them to lots of other kinds of genres in this great literary world – especially work that depicts the benefits of hybrid genres, we encourage them to stay open to all the genres that will come their way in the years to come" (p. 60).

But perhaps it was the final chapter 'The Sustainable College Teaching-Writing Career' that gave me the most solace. As a relative newbie to the life of a full-time academic – after many years in the precarious world of sessional teaching – the question of how to balance the primary identity one brings into the university as a creative writer, with expectations around service, teaching and "traditional" research, is particularly pertinent. Vanderslice's advice – to "give your first best professional hours to your writing" (p. 121) – often feels hard, but her reminder

that “being creative on the page takes energy and courage” (p. 121) is worth holding close as we navigate the ever-changing landscape of creativity in the university, and the world.

The next edition of *Teaching Creative Writing* will undoubtably include a chapter on how all these ideas must be negotiated in the new AI landscape. The decision to take the easy way out – to assign our thinking and creative practices to a machine that generates language via the theft of centuries of human endeavour and work – is one that many students will, no doubt, take. As creative practitioners we have the capacity to remind them of the reasoning behind creative thought, of the ways in which time, patience and dedicated practice might in themselves be a form of reward, and of the possibilities opened by finishing our own sentences.

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Dr Rachel Hennessy is the award-winning author of five novels: The Quakers *(2008),* The Heaven I Swallowed *(2013),* River Stone *(2019),* Mountain Arrow *(2020) and* City Knife *(2023). She has a building reputation as a critical researcher in climate fiction, posthumanism and creative writing pedagogy. She is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.*

TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

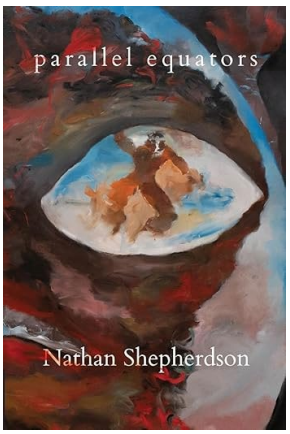
ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

Two recent experiments in Australian poetry

review by Mitchell Welch

Amelia Walker
Alogopoiesis
Gazebo Books, Sydney NSW 2023
ISBN 9780645633788
Pb 340pp AUD39.99



Nathan Shepherdson
parallel equators
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2023
ISBN 9780645651218
Pb 186pp AUD19.95

There are perhaps few words less helpful for describing poetry than "experimental", the obvious problem being that all poetry is, in one way or another, an experiment in language. Even working with established forms generally requires a measure of trial and error that's not entirely devoid of science. In reaching for the term, we might mean to suggest that a particular text has been written to intentionally test one or more hypotheses. In other cases, we might simply mean to say that a text has been written using unique and innovative techniques that set it apart from more traditional forms – experimental in the sense of being an exercise in discovery. Sometimes it's merely a handy euphemism that stops the reviewer just short of admitting a text's immanent indescribability. 2023, as a sample space in the long-running

randomised trial of Australian poetry, yielded myriad examples of each, two of which are discussed herein.

Amelia Walker's *Alogopoiesis* is an experiment of the middle kind. Formally, especially for the obsessional-neurotic, it is a challenging text. Many of the poems have multiple parts, as well as multiple versions, scattered throughout, a choice that sends the conscientious reader flipping back and forth through a spiralling, largely opaque structure to cross-check allusions and assumptions, gathering up lost threads, mopping up ambiguities like spilled milk. Numbered sections and numbered titles (e.g. 'Nameless Love Two / Auto-cento Six') concatenate to hint at a structural significance that remains elusive. Even poems whose standalone titles bear no allusion to their interconnectivity, connect: echoes of Pharaohs, layers of identity and performativity, times of shadow and light. Panic sets in when one realises there is no table of contents, no index of first lines; where page numbers should be, there are none.

The result is mildly schizoaffective. Reducing the text to a mass of dog-ears in a single sitting, a reader might feel at times inadequate, confused, almost subtly – dare I say, structurally – gaslit. And this, I suspect, is the point, for at the level of content Walker traverses a landscape shattered by trauma and subjectivised by a subtle array of power relations – a disinterested official and a hungry woman, for example, or a visitant tortoise and the girl-child it haunts. At the centre of the experiment is an uncertain relationship between the whole and its parts. On one hand, the long view presents a fractured picture; on the other:

> to see through the cracks felt like crawling inside
> a place dark and warm and safe:
> brokenness spoke of ways to fit. (n.p.)

While the unnumbered pages might induce the odd fit of cross-referential fervour, the poems in this lengthy volume are anything but frenetic. The pace of slow-drum hypnosis often prevails. Many of the prose poems feature a "justified" text alignment, opening up a subtle constellation of empty spaces within each line, whereas the lyrics tend to cleave to a clean left margin and ragged right edge, and excursions in free verse spill across the full extent of the page. Others are formally tight and emotionally sparse. Every second page is blank. Midway through the book, there's an intermission. The result is an incredibly unique two-speed reading experience that pairs the fever-dream feeling of reading-out-of-control with understated, unhurried, often heartbreaking poems that bloom into emptiness.

Nathan Shepherdson's *parallel equators* is more like an experimental drug – something unproven and new that positions reader as test subject. Its opening poem, to invert the simile, is perhaps more druggish experiment than experimental drug:

> a life might only be
> as long as the arm
> you paint with
> write with or inject, (p. 6)

The life in this poem, in which the painter Brett Whiteley visits the painter Giorgio Morandi in Bologna, is suitably still. Coincidentally, the very next poem introduces another Aussie Brett to their international contemporary – this time Brett (B.R.) Dionsysius meets Damien Hirst. But two poems of encounter do not a pattern make, and we quickly veer from Brett-meets-world toward a long succession of gestural horizons.

[P]arallel equators is divided into five sections denoted by the five English vowels, subtitled with lines that readers of a certain age might be forgiven for describing as Radiohead-ish indie koans of the early twenty-first century. Elsewhere in the text, "eyes / become opals" (p. 48), "contradiction plants its flower" (p. 119), and "even silence / loses its leaves" (p. 57) as the slow drip of vaguely Dransfieldean narcosis permeates our equatorial progress.

Proceeding through the text, Shepherdson stakes his claim as a fearless punctuator: tildas-as-hyphens introduce shadows of doubt mid-conjunction; the infamous black square (in Unicode) multiplies to divide up space between multi-stanza excursions on and of modern art; directional arrows situate the reader at the pointy end of authorial intent. Blank parentheses invoke the empty set, ellipses cluster in erratic blankenings, and numerals work their way through raw textuality to announce themselves as language. Combined with an e.e.cummings-like fidelity to lowercaseness, Shepherdson creates a slightly disorienting poetic vocabulary that keeps evolving right up to the hundred-and-seventy-sixth page of this lengthy excursion.

In 'the stained glass windows of the world are coming':

> the reader says →
> i am
> but do not want to be
> a tourist in this idea (p. 35)

But the putative reader here is speaking from Shepherdson's equator – one that, by dint of our parallelism, eludes those of us touring along the idea's reciprocal edge. For the *actual* reader, the slow revolution of this text is an impressive longitudinal trial in interpretation; a pitch-drop experiment, of sorts, and every bit as light-absorbing.

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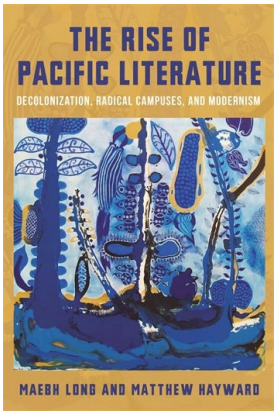
TEXT review

Pacific literature: “walking backwards into the future”

review by Chantelle Bayes



Maebh Long and Matthew Hayward
The Rise of Pacific Literature: decolonization, radical campuses, and modernism
Colombia University Press, New York, 2024
ISBN 9780231561730
Pb 293pp AUD34.99

> he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart
> (Kasaipwalova, in Long & Hayward, 2024, p. 120)

Kasaipwalova’s words seem fitting as we begin 2025, on the brink of a global trade war, where we’re being pushed into division and disunity when we desperately need to come together to face major global challenges such as climate change. The current atmosphere is strung with threads that trace back to war-torn countries, the culmination of a period of intensified European colonisation and exacerbated competition for resources; and back further still to a time when European powers sought to displace and enslave people to grow their economies and resource stores. This is also part of the Pacific story with the rise of a literary movement

that reflects nations trying to shake off colonial systems and logics to create a distinctly regional literary identity. *The Rise of Pacific Literature: Decolonization, radical campuses, and modernism* performs "ka mua ka muri, walking backward into the future" [1] by taking us back to the teachers, writers, activists and students whose influence carries into the contemporary literature of the Pacific (Long & Hayward, 2024, p. 220); a literature which tells of peoples reckoning with trauma and reinventing themselves following the division of the Pacific by colonial rulers, and the displacement of Pacific Islanders and Indians who were black-birded [2] into indentured slavery on islands far from home. However, Pacific narratives are also "acts of poetic unification" (p. 87), and the emergence of a distinctly regional Pacific literature signalled that "beneath the colonial compartments remain shared roots" (p. 169).

This complex story of Pacific literature is told in *The Rise of Pacific Literature* with a tight focus on two of the universities at the heart of the rich literary scene that emerged – the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in Chapters 2-4, and the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Chapters 5-7. Within these chapters, the authors first examine the history of curricula and pedagogies (Chapters 2 and 5) before evaluating the roles of key guiding figures, their teaching and editorial contributions (Chapters 3 and 6) and then focusing in on key writers coming out of these university programs (chapters 4 and 7). *The Rise of Pacific Literature* not only provides a scholarly account of the body of literary works produced in the Pacific in the 1970s, the "golden age of Pacific literature" (p. 3), but also of the broader ecology of Pacific literature which was supported by curricula and pedagogies at USP and UPNG; the rise of Pacific publications such as *Kovave, Mana* and the *Pacific Island Monthly*; the influence of political activists including the Black Power movement; and an emerging community of creative writers and literary studies scholars that spanned the Pacific moving in and out of these spaces to create a cross-fertilisation of literary influence. We see staff and students of USP and UPNG as editors of *Kovave* and *Mana*, engaged with political movements on and off campus, and involved in producing work for publication and plays for performance, as well as many key people attending the 1974 writing workshop [3] along with Albert Wendt, the "'scholarly grandfather' of modern Pacific literature" (p. 1). Two of the key people that guided Pacific literary production during this period are the controversial figure of German-born Ulli Beier discussed in Chapter 3 and the less controversial figure of Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe discussed in Chapter 6. Beier was greatly influential in the creation of the Papua New Guinean literary scene and shaped the direction of work there as teacher, editor, writer and fraudster (role playing as Niuginean authors [4]). Crocombe on the other hand, had a lighter touch at USP and Mana magazine which gave rise to the more grass roots development of a distinctly "regional literary scene" in Fiji (where USP was located) but drew in writers, teaching staff and students from Samoa, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Cook Islands and Aotearoa (p. 142).

The Rise of Pacific Literature emerged from the pedagogical curiosity of Maebh Long and Matthew Hayward, who sought to explain "the place of modernism in the Pacific" after they noted the undercurrent of modernist influences in Pacific literature and the USP curricula. One of the most recognisable influences from modernist writings on the Pacific can be seen in the quote at the start of this review which was written by the influential UPNG writer, John

Kasaipwalova, in his poem 'Reluctant Flame'. Kasaipwalova could be talking about the current zeitgeist however he speaks to us from the early 1970s as a poet and member of the Black Power movement in Papua New Guinea, but his words also echo with Chinua Achebe's 1950s Nigeria on the cusp of independence and WB Yeats' turn of the century Ireland in the midst of revolution. Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart* is named after the prominent line from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' about times of upheaval and Kasaipwalova turns this allusion over in his line. These words bring together three writers living in countries reckoning with British colonisation, all seeking not just a political but a cultural revolution in part through the creation of regional literature and the application of modernist techniques to speak "the right to determine their own destiny" (Kasaipwalova, in Long & Hayward, 2024, p. 113). Long and Hayward (2024) evoke the concept of gafa (genealogy in Samoan) to understand these relationships between modernist writers, Pacific traditions, postcolonial writings and shared experiences. Gafa they explain is not "the genealogy of mere succession, but a fluid, sentient process through which the new is absorbed reflexively into the old" (p. 2). We see this in all of the examples presented where narratives carry histories, memories, words, and writing strategies that are turned over and adapted to speak to contemporary issues.

In addition to Kasaipwalova, two of the other prominent works explored are Russell Soaba's existentialist writings of postcolonial identity and Anurag Subramani's "sugarcane gothic" a genre that emerges from the Indo-Fijian experience of indentured slavery [5]. Soaba repurposes modernist techniques with Long and Hayward tracing the parallels between James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist* with Soaba's novel *Wanpis*, a Bildungsroman journey of a protagonist moving from a "Westernized boarding school to a decolonizing university" (p. 127) and the need to reestablish a sense of self after the "discordance and alienation that follow colonial and independence projects alike" (p. 126). Subramani also adopts modernist techniques in his work which "fuses gothic horror with modernist sensibility—that formal apotheosis of disorientation and alienation – to depict the enduring social and psychological wounds inflicted by indenture upon its victims and their descendants" (p. 192). Long and Hayward trace the influence of Modernism from university curricula to the adaptation of modernist techniques, philosophies and material in Pacific writing alongside the influence of postcolonial texts coming from Africa and "aesthetic traditions of the Pacific" (p. 167). Modernism provided students with "a shared vocabulary" and a "library of images, styles, and forms" (p. 159) as well as the tendency to "dislocate conventional rote learning pedagogies, to reveal the fractures within texts and render themselves susceptible to disassembly and reassembly" (p. 158). As such, teachers and students were afforded new tools to forge a decolonising curriculum and writers to engage in the difficult task of building a regional body of work which fed back into the increasingly Pacific-literature-focused curricula at UPNG and USP.

The book concludes with a Coda examining the body of Pacific literature following this golden age. What some saw to be a slowing down of the literary scene, Long and Hayward argue to be a diversification and dispersal of Pacific Literatures with the rise of many small periodicals and local publications often with writing in the vernacular. UPNG and USP curricula continued to fluctuate from having no Pacific literature assigned to the fully-fledged Pacific curricula of today and universities continue to play a role in nurturing ecologies of Pacific literature. Long

and Hayward show that the key figures they discussed are "nodes in a genealogical network extending back into the Indigenous past and forward into the future to come" (p. 224) and while they concentrate on USP and UPNG, these institutions were part of a broader movement across the Pacific, at other universities and through the writings, teaching and editorial work of a broader collection of people. Since this golden age of Pacific literature, works continue to perform ka mua, ka muri as writers engage with contemporary contexts and challenges including:

> The tightening of colonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal controls; wrangling among world powers for Pacific territory and resources; political instability, inequality, and violence against women and LGBTQIA+ people; the dislocations of diaspora; [and] the increasingly alarming realities on the frontlines of climate change. (p. 219)

This book will appeal to writers, literary scholars and teachers of creative writing and literature, and those interested in Pacific literatures, decolonising of literary ecologies in the Oceanian region, and the history of Pacific literatures.

Notes

[1] "ka mua ka muri" is translated as "walking backward into the future" and means looking to the past even as progress moves forwards interrupting the Western idea of linear progress and instead viewing time through the concept of the vā or spiral time (p. 76).

[2] Black-birding refers to the colonial practice of either kidnapping or coercing people, often from poor communities, in the Pacific and Indian regions to work as indentured slaves. These people were taken to other countries and forced to work with pay so little they could hardly afford essentials and most were not able to return to their countries or see their families again. Some died from the difficult conditions involved in processing sugarcane (for further details of Indo-Fijian indenture see p. 155 of the text under review and the section on sugarcane gothic pp. 197-204).

[3] The 1974 Regional Creative Writing Workshop was sponsored by USP and UNESCO. It was chaired by the Samoan USP director of extension services, and held over two weeks at the main campus. The event brought students together with staff from the university—Wendt, Crocombe, Nacola, Helu Thaman—and other established Pacific writers, including Soaba from PNG and Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, the Aotearoa New Zealand poet of Cook Island Māori descent" (p. 175). Not only did this advance the work of many who attended the workshop but Wendt also published "Towards a New Oceania" (1976) as a report on the workshop, and a call to arms for educators to decolonise the literary curriculum across the Pacific (p. 60).

[4] Ulli Beier adopted Niuginian pseudonyms for some of his publications and while his students knew this was his writing, beyond this local context it was not clear. Often he published this work alongside that of his students sometimes leading critics to praise his work (as an experienced writer masquerading as a Niuginian student) and overshadowing the writing of the actual students (see chapter 3).

[5] Sugarcane Gothic is a genre that emerged in Indo-Fijian communities to discuss the history of indentured slavery primarily in the sugarcane industry. The genre adapts techniques and motifs from the gothic genre including the uninvited guest, ambiguity and alienation.

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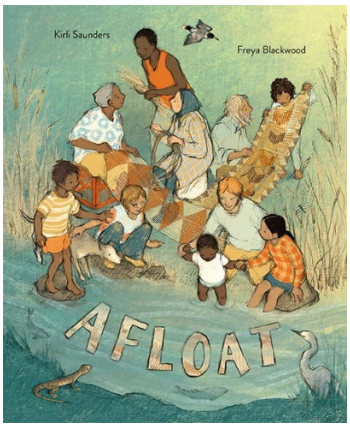
TEXT review

Afloat: A fervent experience of fellowship

review by Mellie Green



Kirli Saunders and Freya Blackwood
Afloat
Little Hare, Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, Melbourne VIC 2024
ISBN 9781646145072
Pb 32pp AUD24.99

Afloat (2024) by Kirli Saunders and Freya Blackwood is a powerful children's picture book that masterfully intertwines the unique expertise of its creators. Kirli Saunders (OAM), a proud Gunai Woman and an award-winning multidisciplinary writer and artist, and Freya Blackwood, an internationally acclaimed Australian illustrator, bring together poetic language and evocative visual storytelling to create a text that is both aesthetically rich and emotionally resonant.

Set during a time of environmental upheaval, the story follows an Elder guiding a young child along the waterways, sharing weaving practices and cultural knowledge. The metaphor of weaving is central – honouring First Nations knowledge and highlighting the unity needed

among all people to flourish and build a brighter future. Blackwood's visual narrative traces the river's path from a pristine bush creek through industrial waterways, culminating in a profoundly spiritual scene that connects past to future. Her illustrations, rendered in pencil, pastel, and watercolour, capture a diverse community of characters and incorporate distinctive ethnic patterns that reinforce the theme of global unity.

The narrative is composed of seven tercets arranged across 14 double-page spreads. This threefold pattern produces a steady, harmonious, and highly satisfying rhythm. Each tercet begins with an imperative – "Roam … Walk … Sit … Take …" – not as a demand, but as gentle invitation to join in an artful practice. These overtures appeal to a sense of personal intimacy: "with me … close with me … next to me… ." The kinship tendered in these welcoming directives is comforting. In a world awash with violence and uncertainty, to read these words aloud feels deeply reassuring. The act of articulating this offer of productive partnership stimulates the brain's pleasure and reward centre – not as a receiver of kindness, but as its giver. This feels eminently powerful.

The middle line of each tercet is a statement of intention. All beginning with "We are here to …", a phrase whose long vowel sounds ("Weee are Heeere") evoke a meditative mantra. The verbs that follow – "learn … , collect …, soak …" – give rhythm and emphasis, threading each line into the next like woven fibres. Most third and final lines begin with "Here …", reinforcing the rhythm and marking a subtle shift from invitation to shared goal. These phrases – "Here to spin wisdom, to grow" – depend on the main clause above, intensifying the intention and reinforcing the communal endeavour.

Saunders' text hums with sound devices that enrich its rhythm and emotional resonance. Alliteration strengthens the connection between meaning making and attention, emphasising each tercet's call and cause – "**f**use the **f**ibres…, **s**oak and **s**pit…" Assonance brings a songlike quality, adding a fluidity and softness. When read aloud, this induces a satisfying lyrical echo and impetus to sway: "W**e** are h**e**re …"; "Walk a l**i**ttle further w**i**th me"; "Sit ben**ea**th this tr**ee** bark with m**e**". Consonance further builds harmony and cohesion: "mel**d** and fol**d**"; "for**m** bonds to **m**ake ties"; "pu**ll** them c**l**ose".

Collectively, these devices enhance meaning, mood and musicality, making the children's picture book a compelling art-object in the Deweyan (1934) sense – a work that invites surrender and reflection. The final line is sublime. Deceptively simple on first read, *Afloat* reveals its depth through repeated engagement. For the discerning primary teacher, it is a gift – an exceptional resource for aesthetic development and literary appreciation. It is a most enjoyable reading experience.

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TEXT review

Living well, leaving *The Museum of Failure*

review by Andrew Leggett

Elisabeth Hanscombe
The Museum of Failure
Hembury Books, Sydney NSW 2025
ISBN 9781763583658
Pb 241pp AUD32.99

Melbourne-based psychologist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and writer, Elisabeth Hanscombe, states her interest in "the underpinnings of all things autobiographical" (Author note) as she offers us this account of her lived experience in *The Museum of Failure*, which follows on from her childhood memoir *The Art of Disappearing*. My interest in reading and reviewing this latest work of Hanscombe's stemmed from my publication of two pieces of her autobiographical writing: one when I was editor of the *Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy*, the other as prose editor for *StylusLit*.

In *The Museum of Failure*, the author takes the reader into her journey from a childhood in Melbourne as the sixth of nine children in a Dutch immigrant family, through Catholic schooling, university studies in social work and psychology, then on to training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy with aspirations to progress, as though to higher order of the priesthood, to three years of candidacy with the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society. By her account, she was ejected, without warning or explanation, from her training with that organisation. At first, she experienced the wound of this expulsion as an internal failure of her person, a failure within herself, rather than considering the politics of such exclusion as within the vicissitudes of a life in flux, an intersubjective failure of goodness of fit, or a failure of the psychoanalytic organisation and its community.

In the process of writing, Hanscombe comes to consider such failure as the portal through which to depart the miserable restraints of such a museum of abjection into a life blessed by freedom of eclectic expression beyond the constraints of familial, religious, academic, theoretical and psychoanalytic institutions. She concludes with a valuation of reading as:

> a way to enter my mind through the minds of others … The nuns taught me the world was black and white, good and bad. The analysts taught me life was complex. Books taught me life could take me anywhere. (p. 234)

Was it her early life that took the author into the clinical life, but also into the collision of the ethical obligations and mores of clinical psychoanalysis with those of autobiographical writing? Was it the wider reading of books beyond her clinical field and the processes of autobiographical writing that brought Hanscombe unexpectedly into an arena of combat within and beyond her clinical community? She presents that community as one that struggles to conceive of the possibility of the clinical practitioner finding voice as a person of lived experience, especially when the authorial voice is competent in its articulation of a challenge to an unspoken injunction against self-disclosure.

Hanscombe's work is a discontinuous narrative account of the disruptively transformational processes that may come in the life of a clinician author, should she dare to risk the impact of such writing on her patients, her colleagues, her family, her community and herself. This work, for the clinician reader, could be experienced as both warning against and an incentive to engage in the processes of autobiographical writing, processes that may disrupt and transform that life from one that is as monochromatic as that taught by Hanscombe's nuns or sanctioned by institutes of psychoanalysis into one as colourfully nuanced as that offered in her memoir.

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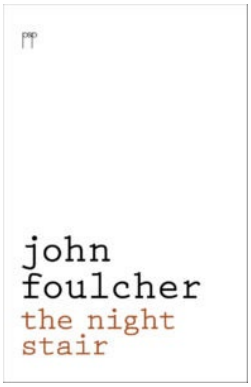
TEXT review

A serious house on a serious earth it is

review by Rebecca Law



John Foulcher
The Night Stair
Pitt Street Poetry, Sydney NSW 2025
ISBN 9781922776204
Pb 96pp AUD28.00

John Foulcher's new poetry collection, *The Night Stair* obsesses over the idea of a church to dispel mysteries and grapple, like Philip Larkin in 'Church Going', with ideas of presence and absence, reverence and relevance [1]. Divided into four sections, the poems explore marriage as a sacrament, chance as the modern world equivalent of free will, the poignancy of joy and sorrow and the tax of enduring losses. Mingling religion with history, experience with love, Foulcher's collection submits that God is impossible, that nature is tempestuous; yet every now and then, we see and know the opposite to be true.

In the first section, 'A Clearer View', things are viewed retrospectively to pay homage to all the many inside and outside moments in which the preciousness of our lives has been inexplicably nurtured. These places, the hallows of contemplation, the chapels of the heart or

the expanse of skies, are where dreams and hopes are, like candlelight, temporal before they are ecstatic. In ‘Portals’, a tidy narrative poem of eight seven-line stanzas, the poet reminisces about a church marriage inside his “littler church, sold unblessed that you prise into a house” (n.p). There is something sinful about God’s “cosiness with suffering”, something sad about windows reduced to “portals for the frost to preach to the absent monks” and something cheap about the “holy place of exit” exhibiting “trinkets, souvenirs, medallions and postcards”. Yet clustered with smaller ideas like “shadows, lamps at the crossing like tiny moons” or “an ashen Christ holding his lantern like a tiny sun”, the sacramental becomes a force to be reckoned with, a “bucolic covenant” that bypasses troubles to bring “the bright day”. The poem ‘Compline’ seemingly steps out of this sentiment to reflect on the histories of an 11th century Swiss chapel, a 12th century English abbey and a 19th century Australian church. As the wind moves through all these corridors, change happens and what was is gone and what is, a ruin remembered by the sun or a new incarnation. In one of these ruins in Cumbria, nature’s presence in the dilapidated abbey functions as its saving grace:

> There’s a scuff of grass
> between the vanished chapel
> and the sunny night stair,
> the monks’ back entrance
> to prayer. Above it, only air,
> a gap no one can cross.

Whereas in Australia, the purchase of an old church then renovated to become “home” is by contrast “so small, beneath the sun”, the view of nature through new, “clear glass” becomes another form of church going. In a later poem ‘Confessional’, it would seem last thoughts before sleep regard moonlight in a bedroom as an iteration of Dylan Thomas’ “Good Night” (Thomas, p. 122). The poet questions the why of things, why it is important that the “grandkids” know “Pop’s in a better place”. The writer sees “there’s comfort” in “the feel of it … rituals and prayers”, that the “shadows begin to pool” and it’s okay, post confession, for night to “slink in”. The concluding poem of the section, ‘Crow Call’ makes a different confession as the bird’s abrasive utterance signifies absence.

‘Then there’s the wind’ shifts the collection significantly towards modern times; history is rewritten, and the world a stage. For each of these poems, there is a greater reverence for naturalism than narrative of any kind as choices are made and lives redirected. ‘The Shepherd who stayed in the fields’, for instance, has little care for the stories told by the returning sheepherders who witnessed Christ’s birth in a barn. Instead, after “weeks wandering wordless and alone with the flock” he finds a greater reassurance in the reliability of “fields, my sheep giving birth”. A despondency not immediately explicable but seemingly related to a developing relationship between self and nature as opposed to labour and wages emerges here. ‘Shifting the car’ is an uneasy poem about a policeman assigned with the unenviable task of retrieving the vehicle of a deceased person and driving it back to “the compound”. Astoundingly nonchalant in the face of the deceased’s past, the policeman “stumbles across a playlist” on his drive back and arrives as though “docking a spaceship … steer[ing] this thing … into its given slot”; only then to be shocked by the silence of the engine turned off and “in the leather, the

form of another man". Enlightenment is also somewhat tardy in 'Wordsworth at Grasmere' as the poet is resituated in a world where people drive, not walk and the stuff of poems is mislaid. The day is seen as "dour" and the shops packed with "tourists". Wordsworth is playing up, Coleridge is not getting out of bed and Mary is carrying on a little about her husband forgetting to get the milk: a suite of romances on the rocks perhaps but certainly, not in the air. Nevertheless, 'Ache' returns the sadness, and it seems that if you long for anything it will eventually return your love:

> My headache has gone, but I'm a bit washed out,
>
> And it's good to sit and search the waves,
> Their burred evanescence, to that cleanly cut thread,
> Which his distinctly now, the horizon. The sky
> Is a pastel bedspread …

'The Wailing Angels' enters the dark world of teenagers. Facades are demolished by freak accidents, disappointed loves, sex, suicide and risky rebellion. At times a teacher, at others a father and lastly, a teenager himself, the poet hovers about in this section recalling memory after memory of events turning awry. 'In the corridor' is a short verse about lines overhead whilst passing secondary school teenagers. With phrases unfinished, the girl reveals a lot in a few seconds, "he's pissed as/ just pissed" and "he's like fuck / you fucken bitch" and "fuck you too dickhead", and further, she wants to take it up with "god", before deciding, in short, that "I want/ a guy who totally understands me you know?". This is the quick talk of a girl trying to come to terms with a depraved boyfriend not meeting her needs and it's the snapshot accuracy that affords the verse its humour. Then there is the starkly contrasting fate of schoolboy Richie whose death by 'The Mystery Train' paints an all too vivid image in the poet's memory. Reminding him of other deaths, namely his father's, the blur of pain merges and the verse ends:

> … That train rattled
> On through the night, filled with the dead
> I had known, sloping towards dawn,
>
> I woke beside my father in the last
> Carriage, standing beside his bed,
> And the world full of sunlight and dust.

The final section is 'Shuffling the Shadows' and the poet is deep in thought – there is sunlight, rain, a farm, a cottage and a question for nature that goes unanswered. 'Pirouette' is a curious assemblage of small, spiralling verses about a friendship, finding life's purpose, art, poetry and loss. With commingling lines such as "I found some stray/ gossip about our second divorce" and "you re-shaped Shelley" the poet moves about in circles remembering a friend who "never came back from the sky". There is sadness and beauty here as "clouds cross the moon" and the past lingers where it can't be relived. 'The Peace of God' ends the collection and we have a sense that this is a poet who can't let go of hope, of the promise life gave him. Whilst there might not be "a calm" in observing nature on the move, "a hawk / with its eye on the sky" and a falling apple, there is providence in the scene's materiality – events that occur as the poet

watches on, signs in themselves that there are things that matter more than this me, myself and I.

Closing John Foulcher's *The Night Stair* is not an occasion for immediate leave as the contents stay awhile in the mind. Those small architectures that served as spaces of temporal retreat and illusionary permanence for the terrible, sad and the beautiful are now just the pages of a thin book. Yet the adventure of the pages, the varying tones of the poems and the shapes of the verses themselves, lend the collection a full and promised life – as the poet would like.

Notes

[1] The title of this review is taken from Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going', see reference below.

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TEXT review

Eternity or infinity: Ergo the poem

review by Rebecca Law

S.K Kelen
The Cult of What Comes Next
Puncher & Wattman, Waratah, NSW 2025
ISBN 9781923099579
Pb 81pp AUD27.00

The title of S.K. Kelen's new poetry collection, *The Cult of What Comes Next* supports the thesis that our encounters with the world are driven by the promise of happiness. Sophisticated, erudite and alive with the new, culture is universal with a home address and the cruder derivative of it is the cult of needing this "new" to find happiness.

The opening section, titled 'Saga' details a history of living in a world that is murderous, forgetful but on occasion, ever so beguiling. Years have past, the memory of what was is hazy and orientating oneself toward tomorrow is a task that is maddeningly elusive. In the prefacing sonnet, 'Falling Down', hell is life on earth. True to form the poem is a love letter desperate to understand why things are the way they are and, in turn, why one is left broken, with the future seeming just yet another wicked seduction:

Soon forgotten when you are bits and pieces
Trying not to fall apart, falling down the blue day
A cartoon character grabbing a ladder made of air –
Far below the future waits disguised as scenery
Meet the sweetest boulder the valley
Has to offer: a home away. (p. 11)

'[L]ines from another draft' addresses different challenges in a what-happened-saga in which climate change takes away an "alive and rampant winter … in the mid-west" and "snow days" are no longer "a majesty" (p. 18). A small, quieter poem of seven lines replete with glaciers of ice, seasons of snow and frozen rivers, it evokes nostalgia with reverence and awe, ending with a self-disparaging plea for forgiveness for our universal stupidity:

The Missouri River was a grinding, gangling god of ice,
Today a frozen coke must suffice. (p. 18)

Then there are poems about ageing. 'Melatonin, Valerian Forte' is a sonnet of a different kind as the poet laments a forgetfulness that takes away the capacity to pair a word to a thought or a name to a friend. Words now "blunder" and names of friends that should be "on the tip of your tongue" have now "vanished beyond reach or care" (p. 21). Older but wiser with age, the narrator moves toward a commonsense reality that promises catharsis:

Till now; should know doesn't cut it and hope
They've forgotten your name too and share a
Laugh at Time's remorseless teasing. (p.21)

'Junior School End of Year Concert and Prize Giving' (p. 30) instils an unexpected but beautiful poignancy to Kelen's first suite as it narrates an award ceremony for young children in years K to 2. There are many awards for academic excellence, good behaviour or learning proficiencies but the truest and most revered is the award to a new student from China who is blind but has a gift for "storytelling" (p. 30). Watching on as part of the "we as parents" cohort, the poet observes the effect of this child's award as it reverberates around the room from the "Principal" to the "teacher and some of his friends offering to guide him" to "the girls" who "tried not to cry" and "every boy [who]watched out for him" (p. 30). He is "the boy who needs no one's help" as he "walked up the steps" and "beaming like a lion received his prize" (p. 30).

The last poem of this section adds an uneasiness to the collection and any semblance of things being right in the world is lost. In 'Love Lockdown', it takes only eight lines to unravel the collection as a whole and leave nerves frayed. There is a contest in the lines, a tug of war between love for the poet's "better half" and his so named "lover" (p. 35). Replaying a phone message at home, the poet listens to his lover's frustrated but not benign poetics on the other end and feels pure and simple guilt:

You spend too much time at home
With our better half, such a waste.

Get out of the house post-haste,
Attend your lover or lose her. (p. 35)

It's not complicated, he laughs, "ha, ha", he has been "chased down by the Love Police" and the only thing new is that they apparently exist.

In the next section, 'The Cult of What Comes Next', getting away from the world's chaos requires one to own one's life almost manically. Coming across a man suffering paranoia over a power pole in the middle of the night, a group of students in 'Guignol' watch his mad puppetry from their car as he darts to and from the pole, "runs in concentric circles, clockwise then anticlockwise" before running directly into it with his head (p. 39). Offering to drive him home only to discover early in the journey that he wishes to return to the pole, the student's happy acceptance and prompt obedience to the man's request pays homage to the right to self-expression. 'Haiku Fever' is a suite of haiku that juxtaposes the same madness with reason. Here, words, free of punctuation, find both sanctum and freedom in their three-line units.

'So What' is the third section of the collection and replaces cultural immersion with wide-eyed passive observation. In 'The Temple of Literature (Van Mieu), Hanoi' (p. 77), the poet experiences a sense of oneness with stone, sculptures and old temples and in this world away from the world:

The adjacent courtyards are alive:
modern students read, sketch, paint,
play guitar, listen through headphones

some recite poems to their sweethearts
or read with shy relish the English
translation of a popular banned novel,

Here we see small, temporary vignettes of the enduring human desire to spontaneously perceive beauty. Soon back in his world, the poet is again, seeking refuge in 'The Spin of the Dice' as he dreams Mallarme in an "ethereal" cloud, becomes "hopeful of poems" and drives a fast car to "Canberra" (p. 84). Taking a sporting chance in hot pursuit of the inner abyss of his mind, it would seem the universe provides and softens the edges of his fabricated vehicle with rain. In this, the third part of the work, we see a brave new world all over again as the narrator hunts down a muse.

Kelen's final section is titled 'Starry Night'. If, according to Coleridge, "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment … constitutes poetic faith" then these nighttime poems wafting through the galaxy seem to suggest that that quiet reverie equals life. Time then, is a collision of expired moments and future moments creating electricity. In 'A Reincarnated Romantic Poet Reminisces' the world is a sensation of "out-of-body thinking and unthinking" or "bright and dark voices and visions". Kelen is a mindful poet, a poet who has been there and seen it all before yet still believes being "kissed by quiet breezes" is a sign of hope (p. 89). This "night of stars" is a galaxy of possibilities, so ask a question and write the story Kelen muses in

‘Googolplex’ – “Ask any question … revisit History’s terrible excitingness … journey through tree’s wisdom” and gain knowledge “every second of your life” (p. 104). This is not an ultimatum, just a suggestion that if one seizes opportunities, maybe, just maybe, one will stop drifting and find one’s home. In the two-part poem, “Reality Check’ (p. 107) the history books are opened at random:

> ii.
> The wind plays on Apollo’s lyre: drunk
> Satyr strutting under the Milky Way
> strums an air guitar, has a great day. (p. 107)

In his text, *The Text, The Word, and The Critic*, Edward Said suggests that it is not culture which builds the poet but the poet who, alongside other practitioners of the mind, builds “events and societies” within it (p. 25). Works like Kelen’s suggest the writer’s task is to seek to understand the experience of living through close observation of not just the ethereal and cerebral but also of the quotidian. The range of poems in Kelen’s new collection, *The Cult of What Comes Next* reminds us that in the twenty first century we can travel wherever and however we like across the planet and beyond; yet underscoring this is a blithe plea to own the individual and seemingly “small” moments – to find and celebrate the poetry of the everyday.

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Rebecca Law holds a PhD from UWS. She has published six collections of poetry with Picaro Press, Interactive Publications, Ginninderra Press and Wipf & Stock. Individual poems, reviews, interviews and articles have been published in numerous journals in Australia and overseas. She works as a freelance writer and private English teacher.

TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

The power of restraint

review by Paul Mitchell

Kate Fagan
Song in the Grass
Giramondo, Sydney NSW 2024
ISBN 9781923106048
PB 96pp AUD27.00

Kate Fagan's *Song in the Grass* is her fourth poetry collection and comes more than a decade after *First Light*, which was short-listed in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and for *The Age* Book of the Year Award. Fagan is also a songwriter of note, her album 'Diamond Wheel' winning the National Film and Sound Archive's Folk Recording Award in 2006. It's therefore not surprising that lyric poetry is one of her strengths.

The lyric poems in 'Notes to a Bird', the book's first section, are often incandescent. Fagan has strong control of line and image, and the poems here don't overplay their hand. Instead, through understatement and precise use of language, emotional depth bubbles up for readers in these calming works. Poems such as 'Shrike Thrush at Castle Head' and 'My breath is a swallow'

are poster children for the value of artistic restraint and, in resisting easy closure, their themes of the intricate connection between humanity and nature resonate the more powerfully. And, though the importance of climate change advocacy in poetry is clear, the celebratory tone in many of Fagan's environmental poems is nonetheless refreshing. What we're losing as a species through environmental degradation is writ large by Fagan's deft and gentle appreciation of the rural environment in which these poems are set:

> The mountain is an average of sight, what can be seen
> Seeing is like breath, falling to some things, rising to meet
> others, restless and hungry
> Hunger drives the swallow upward into sky
> The sky expands so I'm breathing the same air as the bird (p. 9)

Though her meditative lyrics might be considered formally conventional, Fagan is also willing to experiment stylistically. A highlight of this capacity to change up is a suite called 'Portable Craft'. Here, Fagan adroitly blends acute observations of the natural world with language poetry intimations and searing imagery; a poetic seeing – and writing – emerges in the suite, portals into new worlds. Across its six pages, 'Portable Craft' plumbs philosophical depths through attention to language's vitality and an embrace of paradox:

> A poem is a list of everything that happens in the poem. A poem puts a moth in my hand. A poem cares so much it devises things to care about
> One thousand people read one book. One says the book is a hare. One finds it soft as the click of a yellow locust. One dozes and drops the book. It shrugs to the ground. (p. 65)

The book's title, *Song in the Grass*, seemed to this reviewer a hybrid of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* title and the American's poem, 'Song of Myself'. Poems in Fagan's collection often shimmer as a result of Whitmanesque porous borders between observer and observed, but Fagan's poems largely refrain from drawing attention to herself. She is a poet almost without ego and her poems are the stronger for it.

Her work, 'Immigrants', dedicated to Bob Fagan, is an unsentimental and clever tribute to a late relative, making his impossible future actions post-death appear larger than any life. It's a marvel:

> He'd float like spume on Jervis Bay
> and under casuarinas at Sanctuary
> Point and say, now I know paradise. (p. 54)

Likewise, her poetry that celebrates her partner and children, especially her offsprings' budding nature mysticism, resonate emotional depth in equal measure to her lack of emotional descriptions. *Song in the Grass* does, however, have its weaknesses. The long title poem, while technically excellent and not without imagistic wonders, lacks cogency, and several poems in the section 'Letters to Writers' might have become self-contained and more insightful lyrics if divorced from their initial inspirations. 'The Midnight Charter', a repetitive list poem, would

have been better omitted so that the collection could end with the translucent energy and cosmic scale of ‘Future Green’.

But, for all that, *Song in the Grass* is an excellent volume by a poet of clear-eyed restraint who, in pushing her “song of self” to the background, produces work that allows nature and circumstance to almost speak with its own voice.

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Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne-based writer who has published seven books, the most recent of which is his poetry collection, High Spirits *(Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).*

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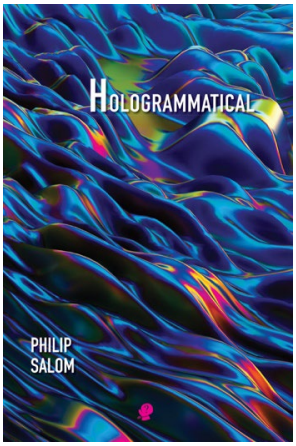
ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

A case of weather

review by Michelle Borzi



Philip Salom
Hologrammatical
Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah NSW 2023
ISBN 9781922571946
Pb 82pp AUD27.00

Philip Salom's fifteenth book of poetry *Hologrammatical* (2023) was mostly written over a period of ten years, 2012-2022. During that decade, Salom published four of his six novels, becoming well-known as a novelist, and two other books of poetry: *Keeping Carter* (2012), the final in his compelling Alan Fish trilogy, and *Alterworld* (2014). The latter assembles three books: *Sky Poems* (1987) and *The Well Mouth* (2005), both slightly revised, and *Alterworld*, new poems that build on and depart from the imaginative worlds and characters in those earlier two verse narratives. In *Hologrammatical*, Salom has written dense, separate poems in diverse poetic styles: experimental and more traditional forms and modes.

Across this book's five unnamed sections, the poems draw upon a horde of commonplace things that the poet has mulled over in daily life, generating a dialogue between personal memories and philosophical, political, and existential urgencies. The perennial matter of our weather is a catalyst in several poems, both point-blank and obliquely. 'Weather Presentation?' explicitly turns on the absurd posture of political climate denial. Here is the full poem:

> Weather comes out of the presenter's finger
> and dies.
> It's dead again the following night.
> It's dead on arrival, this weather.
> This is a mortality reality TV show.
> Weather presenters dress like undertakers
> but try to be characters,
> and jokey:
> Weather, get a life! Or change your friends.
>
> Weather falling on paddocks is agricultural,
> but falling on flood plains is not accidental
> yet politicians deny
> they deny not only the phrase *flood plain*
> they deny that weather is even climate.
> It surprises them in every interview,
> and the weather presenters
> try so hard
> dying every night to tell them. (p. 22)

Folly and irony are energic allies here. From line-to-line, the poem turns upon mimicking a scripted weather broadcast in entertainment mode. If the poet's irony works persuasively to allow space for a reader's, or a politician's, ethical choice, this poem never assumes its missive will be heeded. In fact, the piling up of those laconic snapshots leans to something inexorable in that insight.

Another work, 'The Weather Fugues', is a three-poem sequence in discursive style that disrupts its own relaxed roving with tremendously compressed thought and a series of sudden movements. I will focus on the first poem 'Loss'. Its opening couplets start in the personal past, in memory:

> Blind from the kitchen table where they ate their meals
> it emerges eyes open and unexpected in him forty years
>
> later than the fourteen and a half thousand times the world
> has spun: his father gone his brother gone his old mother
>
> gone his other brother brought close, then let walk back,
> deaf on the water. These. (p. 28)

“These” emotionally presents an attempt to hold a self in stillness, to let in and acknowledge the bewildering resurgence of grief and its ever-presence. It is an all-too-brief steadying of the precipitously enjambed couplets that precede it. These lines have a lovely sensory consonance, a lilting harmony in the repetitions alongside their poignant dissonance. The remaining couplets abruptly shift the bearing to “weather”, wandering with a digressive liveliness, holding firmly to the present while enumerating the past:

> And now the weather watcher
>
> turns the pages down like a tent and checks the internet
> for storms and graphs his favourite site the interpreter
>
> of data. Making slow figures into still graphs that flash
> in his mind. People had thought the clouds and sunlight
>
> work of the will, and were God’s symbols or God’s tricks
> doing their duty. If the seasons stood in fours like elders
>
> weather was sudden history, weather the mess your life
> was strewn by, weather was picky and ferocious. Then
>
> we … brought it in: it was nothing more or less than us.
> Its death is moving back in us, not ours to understand:
>
> tsunamis cyclones flooding fire and the many thousands
> dead we have no words for, but the silence when belief
>
> grinds to standstill. Watching doesn’t help but it returns
> to a child his father tapping the glass of the barometer.
>
> Which gods were they, altering the air and the goodness,
> preceding, being, following, around us as we walked out? (p. 28)

The speaker turns to how we, as humans, have always provisionally ordered weather, including a teaching of that ordering in childhood. These couplets launch into a spirited history through some intensely condensed metaphors. Our weather, as “clouds and sunlight”, was initially thought to be “work of the will, and were God’s symbols or God’s tricks / doing their duty”. From thence, the traditional four “elders”, of spring, summer, autumn, winter, and any other weather “mess your life / was strewn by”. But whatever weather was, “we … brought it in: it was nothing more or less than us. / Its death is moving back in us”. Those bare statements are crucial. The poem starts with private grief and now returns to it communally. Suddenly, weather is demythologised explosively into a line of catastrophes that are already happening in our world, in us: “tsunamis cyclones flooding fire and the many thousands / dead we have no words for”. The death of the weather myths coincides with the death of us. The poem surprisingly quietens in its final couplet to a theological, or an anthropological, question – are the gods good or not? The tone is brilliantly facetious but shining with vulnerability: what can the poem possibly say after “as we walked out”. Salom has always had a splendid brevity of

thought and a physicality in his language. You can hear and feel the rigorous density of a poem like this by speaking it again and again.

'The Longer Earth' is a discursive poem that has an entirely different register. It gives "weather" a more subtle prominence. The speaker thoughtfully thinks his way forward, evoking an intimate dialogue: the poem with itself, the poet with his speaker, the speaker with his partner, the poem with a reader. It opens by immersing a reader in a speaker's pensive navigation through inner city Melbourne suburbs, accompanied by a partner:

> From Carlton North to Carlton walking on Lygon
> between the long dead in their final allocations
> resigned to the sound of braking or accelerating
> trams, and houses facing onto this same pitching
> up and down, I think of the strange ways life
> is magnified and then reduced, the least and most
> magnificent sleep, long considerate of difference.
> We walk between, heading towards the city then
> turn right to skirt the tall spiked cemetery fence
> towards the west, the late sun pretending all is well
> as well it may be. As a fine rain tilting downwards
> grows on our arms like embroidery. We are alive
> and well. If well is what is understood generally,
> of the moment, ignoring all else. (p. 33)

First, this is a solitary dialogue with the self, and it is also within dialogical hearing of its reader – the classic meditative poem. The insertion of "we" unobtrusively incorporates his walking partner, a mutual wayfaring, so too "the long dead", who evoke musings on human impermanence. The second half of the poem, discursively amplifies ephemerality, turning inward to an intimate address to his partner:

> Except it's not true. You are desperate for a
> better future, you live in the gap between living
> and a future of more than any dead can calculate
> knowing: heat shrinks and burns equally soft lives
> and hard earth, if rain is now relentless, its sound
> brings dread. I am not your equal in this. I live on
> my nerves and words, my imaginings in present
> tense, shorter, particular, varieties of more or less.
> Through all the years I have loved the weather
> I have trusted time too much. Now the future
> rips over the tree tops and the past has settled
> in the roots. We walk the longer earth together. (p. 33)

Differing perceptions on what "a better future" might be, are to the fore. Societal and ecological cataclysm set up a dichotomy, the "you" more urgently attuned to human exigencies, the speaker putting trust in hope, and in imagination. How little the speaker reveals of the private and yet how bounteous those spare rhythmic cadences are in giving voice to collective concerns about our earth. Any hint of difference between the two walkers is somewhat resisted by the

penultimate and final lines, which carry in equal parts something of the inescapable and something of hope.

Of the continuities that can be traced across this collection, the idea of dialogue can be highly thought-provoking when Salom's poetry pushes philosophical thought to edges of rationality. 'Hologrammatical', the title poem placed first in the book, is a formidable opening. The challenge of irrationality is writ large, leaping out at a reader. This is the first half of the poem:

> Inside the darkness I waited for years
> underneath the light a cone of awareness
> sits over me and never once moves off
>
> I dreamt this and when it returns it makes
> sense if no matter what I look for in my life
> more remains unseen, more never happens.
>
> Inside the cone of light I feel myself aware
> always of the darkness as I eat and drink
> like any normal person the tunnel lifts to a peak.
>
> As a child I dreamt of a single clenched fist
> moving through space towards me with frightening
> malevolence. I would wake before it reached. (p. 7)

The speaker of these words is enacting a chimerical dialogue, left-to-right, across two short-line parallel stanzas, which are shadowed by a longer-line third stanza. Might it also be possible to read each of the shorter stanzas separately, like haiku? Without doubt, and if read slowly, some surprising synergies are likely to emerge, while the poem's thought becomes even more perplexing. Collectively, the stanzas circle on an apprehension of something boundlessly unknowable concerning a self's temporal and emotional presence, in part or in its entirety. The lines are tangibly musical and mesmerising in layering obscure dimensions of memory and time. This poem seems endlessly calculated to frustrate a reader's grasp of it.

The remaining stanzas of 'Hologrammatical' mostly move beyond self-revery to questions of science, art, and the numinous, buoyed by non-sequiturs:

> Cause and effect may be indolent a union
> taking years decades even changing location
> erratically. Where is it? Can I trust the future?
>
> A peak and a band of light is moving level to vertical
> like a torch beam or a searchlight above a city
> during war or up there in the branches – an owl.
>
> I see Bosch's spiky souls rising like little glassy eels
> to that tunnel of light punctured in the dark
> What happens next? Don't believe them.

> Via Negativa, perhaps. The future is hologrammatical:
> re-arranging its meaning on the mind's thin chain.
> The links, the gaps, the unprovable intuitions. (p. 7)

This speaker does not simply leap but rather bounds kinetically from topic to topic. What does a reader do with a poem that plays so freely and so persuasively with ellipsis? Certainly, one of its key signals is its arcane knowledge. The title draws upon two Ancient Greek words – "holos" meaning *whole* and "gramma" meaning *something written* – and at the same time upon a metaphorical allusion to modern theoretical physics. The "holographic principle" [1], is a mind-bending theory that challenges our notions of space, time and reality. Some physicists seem fascinated by the theory and some still find hard it to fully comprehend. Is the speaker of the poem riffing off disturbances to rationality in science and in human introspection? And if so, why? Is he improvising his own holographic, or hologrammatic, play of surface and depth or of truth and incomprehension? Or of both those contraries? Might the poem's structure be mimicking a hologram? It strikes me that this poem revels in inscrutabilities of that kind, inviting a multitude of dialogical threads that we, as readers, might read into it, and that we might bring to it.

Sudden leaps of thought are often a specialty in Salom. They may well be a signature attribute in his poetry. But always he is inviting a reader to dwell unhurriedly in a poem's thought, to listen attentively to how its verbal utterances, registers and form are in conversation. Salom, an accomplished poet of over forty-five years, talked in a 2024 radio interview about his own dialogical relationship with the poems in *Hologrammatical*:

> One of the things that people don't really talk about very much when they talk about their own work is how the different elements of it are silently speaking to each other within the writer. And so, the more you write … one of the things that is happening is that there is a dialogue which is invisible, and it's going on inside the writer … So my poems have changes which I am aware of … a kind of an accumulative sensibility gathering in them. And when they work – in *my* opinion, when they work – is because of this coming through in them. And they might be quite different poems, but there's just some element which makes them hold together in a way that is also sometimes not always paraphrase-able. (Giannoukos, 2023)

Curiously, by being instructive about his poetic, Salom goes some way to illuminating why a poem might energetically jump around and across subjects. The lacunae and leaps may derive from the poet's subliminal or private knowledge and his own cognitive mode of thought.

Some poems are more dialogical than others, and I want to briefly draw a connection – a trace of a dialogue – between 'Hologrammatical' and 'Time and Motion Study: the Universe', one of five time and motion study poems in this book. It starts with the speaker becoming attuned to an eruption of sound in the background of a day:

> It's the long gentle snoring of a motorbike
> the sound coming through my open window
> like evidence of ordinary life.

Then lost in life's silence.

The suburbs are set out like a calendar,
all the days at once, but I am one blank square
on a blank page. Filling one page is enough. (p. 15)

The scene is of commonplace routine, but it prompts something deeper in the speaker, who unexpectedly segues to paradoxes in multiverse theories, as in the next two stanzas of the poem:

I don't believe a calendar of worm-holes
or multiple universes. Such a waste of time,
literally, to say nothing of resources.

Do I want to hear the sound of a real
or a metaphorical motorbike diminishing
with the universe into another Universe? (p. 15)

Curiosity is piqued briefly in that rhetorical question, but set aside, the speaker refusing quantum-saturated theories about the limits of what can be asked about the universe, what can be known, and what can never be known. It becomes apparent in the subsequent two stanzas that he has bypassed theorising to emphasise his interest is existential, ruminating on uncertainty and "the future":

I can't predict the future. Live the already lived?
Pretending I can or imagining I can is a form
of preparedness, like the Stoics' equanimity.

But it's odd when you think about it: when
about the future we're almost always wrong.
That almost being the gambler's addiction. (p. 15)

The voice in *Hologrammatical* also worried at "the future", evoking metaphorically hellish images which allude to experiential abyss: "Bosch's spiky souls / rising like little glassy eels" (Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights). That image is fugitive and transfixing, pivoting on an axis of lightness and dark, a "tunnel of light / punctured in the dark". Ultimately, the speaker concludes that the future holds to and accepts "its meaning on the mind's thin chain" (p. 15). Across the poems in this book, a wonderful imagistic chain includes the minutiae of human experience (dentistry, tattooing, water, art, music, ants, rope) and the momentous (familial violence, animal protection, illness and death, war, the cosmos, apocalyptic weather), all within the orbit of human evanescence. In the final lines of "Time and Motion Study: the Universe", the speaker imagines the sun vanishing at close of day using a traditional simile of a furnace. The image is filled with power and with the certainty of a cyclical sunset and sunrise, the central ordering of our everyday, of hope:

From the window I can almost see the sun
setting into the ocean like a wind blowing

through the coals of a forge. Then out there

in the universe, diminishing. (p. 15)

Many avid poetry readers have recognised and celebrated Philip Salom's poetry, though he seems to be somewhere in the margins in recent times. This collection is a reminder of the thrill of reading complex, highly intelligent, risky poetry.

Notes

[1] The Holographic Principle https://w.wiki/7pMq

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ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

Longings in London

review by Tarla Kramer

Mira Robertson
Grace and Marigold
Spinifex Press, Mission Beach QLD 2024
ISBN 9781922964045
Pb 272pp AUD32.95

Mira Robertson has drawn on her time in London back in the day for the setting of her second novel, *Grace and Marigold*, which is about a young Australian woman, Grace, who has moved to a London squat in the 1970s to escape her stultifying country parents. One of the endorsements describes the book as "a vivid Sapphic coming-of-age romp", and you can guess most of the rest, with Marigold being the object of Grace's desires.

The book begins like a movie, at a moment of high drama – the squatters have all gathered in Pewsey Street to stand up against the pigs, who are rumoured to be on the way to evict the occupants. Grace, however, passes through the tumult in a dream, more concerned about having ruined her friendship with Marigold a couple of days before – she hasn't faced her since.

The story then goes back four months, to Grace's arrival in London, to her chance meeting with Marigold, who helps her escape from her less-than-ideal accommodation and helps her find refuge with the Beltonians of Belton Road. Living conditions are rather rough, with the broken windows and wrecked furniture, and only the kitchen has running water, but it's still better than the previous place.

There Grace settles into the squatting life, which is a microcosm of communism, with all its hypocrisies. There are characters like Gerald making all the rules but excusing themselves from them. For a community where everyone is supposed to be a leader, Gerald does a lot of bossing around. And while no one has doors on their rooms because privacy is dull and middle class, he and Marigold just happen to have doors that can lock. In Gerald's case so that undercover agents don't go snooping.

The characters are a mix of locals and Europeans and living there for a variety of reasons; "some of the squatters were not as committed to the principles of the Free Republic as others. They'd gone along with it simply because they were desperate for somewhere to live… others like Tina and Dave next door were drug addicts and too busy trying to score" (p. 29). Most of the characters only flit briefly through the story, like poor doomed Vincent, who plays the violin beautifully but doesn't speak except to curse himself. There is a busyness in the first half of the book, with lots of action between the different characters and not much introspection.

Being the 70s, such things as IRA bombings, hallucinogens and group therapy make their appearance. As a Generations Xer, I am frequently horrified by what women of the 1960s and 1970s had to put up with. Creepy men everywhere! At the start of a weekend retreat, the leader Brian instructs everyone to get their gear off, although he and co-leader Paula remain fully clothed. Paula then instructs them to close their eyes. "'Now, I want everyone to slowly circulate,' Brian said, 'and when you touch another person, stop and explore them …'" (p. 118).

Entirely separate from her squatting life is Grace's job at Primo Press, which Marigold helped her get. Reading like a completely different novel, the tone is not at all serious, and a contrast to Grace's private life of longing. Like a character in a sitcom Grace fakes it till she makes it, sits at her desk unsure what to do, makes random squiggles during dictation as she doesn't know shorthand, puts the mail orders that she can't make sense of in the bin, and reads a JG Ballard novel she found in the boss's office when she doesn't have to pretend to look busy. How she remains employed would be a puzzle were the boss not as absorbed in his own stuff such as screwing one of Grace's coworkers, and chasing after the next grandiose scheme. There are many moments when the shit is about to hit the fan but somehow doesn't, and Grace digs herself in even deeper.

Robertson alludes to how difficult it was for young lesbians to exist back then, but what about the heterosexual woman? Novelist and critic AS Byatt, in an interview with Ramona Koval said, "I think in the sixties. when everybody became free and women went on the pill and it became almost *de rigueur*, it became almost mandatory, to do everything you could, sexually

– rather than on the whole not to do things – that did bring with it a kind of trail of fear, a fear of a loss of your own autonomy, particularly for women". Being a lesbian would at least give you a good excuse!

There is a hint of rape culture, which has always been with us, but never as openly as in the seventies, when films such as *A Clockwork Orange* were made. Grace's boss at Primo Press has recently "become obsessed with The Dice Man, a novel about a bored psychiatrist who, in a quest for freedom, begins to make decisions based on the roll of the dice. 'You see, Grace,' Simon explained, 'he gives himself options, for example, whether to rape his neighbour, and if the dice say yes, then that's what he does … Alright it sounds bad, but the neighbour fancied him, so it wasn't really rape'" (p. 166).

In the meantime, Grace and Marigold hang out, or "go flaneuring" but only from time to time. To the endless frustration of Grace, a needy, hopeless romantic, the cynical Marigold is a woman of mystery, very often elsewhere bonking her ex-boyfriend, and of course she knows how Grace feels about her. Marigold is deliciously absent for days on end then suddenly available to do things like see films with Grace. The others are used to Marigold's comings and goings and suspect she's just a rich girl who wants to slum it for a bit.

At some point about two thirds of the way in, we reach the point where the book began, and find out what Grace actually did to Marigold. All this time you have been imagining that Grace has made a pass at her and been rejected, but it turns out to be something worse. Oh, boy, you think, there's no coming back from this …

Things come to a head in many areas for Grace in the next few chapters: a one-night stand confirms that she really is a lesbian and can't hide from it any longer, and at work she loses a manuscript when the neighbouring drug addicts take it and burn it. The squat is due to be demolished although the kindly local council does offer rehousing to the occupants. Poor Gerald's exciting new way of life fizzles out as everyone moves elsewhere.

The book begins to end around then, and the final sixteen pages contain mostly narrative interspersed with a few brief scenes – it's a bit like some Korean TV shows I've seen where the main story has ended but the show goes on for another episode.

I'm not sure why the novel didn't really work for me. Perhaps the book could have done with a little more editorial input, as at times I felt like I was reading someone's manuscript, rather than a final product. There were too many characters that the reader doesn't get to know enough to become invested in, and even Grace has her moments when she appears to be a spoilt brat, revolting against her innocuous parents who don't seem deserving of such hatred. It could also be that my brain is wired for genre, and this book sat awkwardly between literary and plot driven, comic and serious.

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Tarla Kramer lives in rural South Australia. She has had poetry published in InDaily*,* Cordite*,* Borderlands *and* Friendly Street NEW POETS *21. Her chapbook* Poems for the non-compliant *was published by Ginninderra Press in 2022, and her first full length collection,* Tango of the Widow, *was published by Ginninderra Press in 2023.*

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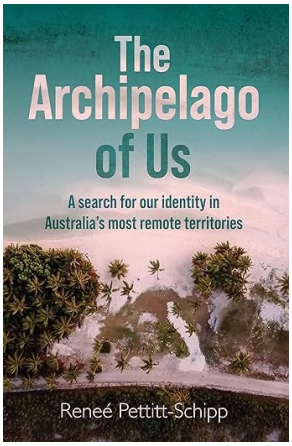
TEXT review

Deeper water

review by Claire Grace Watson



Renee Pettitt-Schipp
The Archipelago of Us: A search for identity in Australia's most remote territories
Fremantle Press, Perth WA 2023
ISBN 9781760992224
Pb 312pp AUD32.99

Renee Pettitt-Schipp has set herself a formidable task: to return alone to a place of weighty memories and seek closure. Equally difficult is her goal to write a travel narrative that weaves together, like a plaited rope: the present moment, historical facts, and her past experiences. The journey takes place over ten days and the book is divided into two parts: the first chronicling her experiences on Christmas Island and the second her return to Cocos Island. Both are places where: "what was incredible and what was beautiful simply sat alongside what was evil and dark, and both things remained true but couldn't speak to each other" (p. 64).

Pettitt-Schipp arrived on the Australian Territory of Christmas Island with her husband and daughter in January 2011 − three weeks after the tragic drowning of fifty asylum seekers off the coast. Yet instead of encountering a community in mourning, she discovers a culture of silence that dominates her life and work as an English teacher at the North West Point Detention Centre. Asylum seekers who arrived by boat, without a valid visa, were detained at the centre in the 2000s and 2010s. It is hard to know how much of this state-sanctioned silence has limited the selection of memories she chose to include in the book. The highlights for me were the descriptions of her encounters with detainees, but these are few and far between.

The pacing of the initial chapters is slow. Pettitt-Schipp eases the reader into island time through long descriptions of lush vegetation and abundant wildlife. Even within nature, however, there is an aura of foreboding: the circling flocks of frigate birds that create shadows thick as clouds are a recurring motif. The freedom that the birds enjoy is a sharp contrast to the locked and secure detention centre. Over the course of a year, Pettitt-Schipp witnesses the corrosive impact of persistent isolation and uncertainty on the detainees, including the children. In time she becomes immersed in the trauma herself: "… I felt myself becoming porous, my future no longer wholly separable from the fate of these young men who shared their lives with me" (p. 131). This is both evidence of her humanity, and her undoing. The trauma, coupled with the loss of Pettitt-Schipp's father, leads to the family's relocation to Cocos (Keeling) Islands for the following two years. I was curious to know more about the impact on her family, but there is scant mention of her husband, Ash, and even less of her daughter.

Interspersed throughout the book are interviews with Islanders from diverse backgrounds. Through these we learn of the segregation and discrimination that the Chinese and Malay residents endured for generations. It is clear that Pettitt-Schipp's profession as a teacher has influenced her writing: chunks of historical information are inserted into these interviews, and into the narrative itself. At times this feels contrived, but it does serve to educate the reader about this important, and largely hidden, aspect of Australia's history. It is also clear from the frequent imagery throughout the book that Petitt-Schipp is a poet. Her first collection, *The sky runs right through us*, was also based around her experiences on the Islands. The collection was shortlisted for the Dorothy Hewett Award for an Unpublished Manuscript and the CHASS Australia Prize, and won the WA Premier's Literary Award for an Emerging Writer.

The most disturbing aspect of her short visit is the confirmation of Pettitt-Schipp's suspicion that, despite the Centre being closed twelve months before she revisited, things have not changed on the Island. On one of her walks, she comes across Australian turn-back boats that have been deliberately fashioned to look like Indonesian fishing vessels to smooth their passage back into foreign waters. She leaves Christmas Island with good memories, but no peace.

The main criticism I have of this work is that its breadth is too wide: in geography and in scope. The second part of the book, set on the Cocos Islands, is connected with the story of asylum seekers because it was the landing point for Tamil asylum seekers when Pettitt-Schipp lived on the Islands. Yet it is an ill-fitting companion to the first half and probably deserving of its own book. The Cocos Islands operated like a feudal economy under the dynasty of the Clunies-Ross

family, and were only acquired by the Australian Government in 1978. While interviewing Malay Islanders who grew up with segregation and exploitation, Pettitt-Schipp is surprised to discover their pragmatic acceptance of the past: their children now enjoy a good quality of life.

The Archipelago of Us is an arranged marriage between a travel memoir and a research paper, and at times the relationship looks and feels awkward. If you are looking for an in-depth exploration of Australia's identity, such as the analysis that Stan Grant provides, you won't find it here. Yet the strength of this book is the author's determination to dive deep to uncover the truth about our country's dark history in our furthest territories. Although Petitt-Schipp's experiences on the Islands date back to 2011, Australia's practice of detaining people who arrive by boat continues, and is largely unspoken of, today. As of January 2025, there are one hundred people detained in Nauru; many of them are minors and recognized refugees. One of the factors that perpetuates this breach of human rights is its very hiddenness. Petitt-Schipp's book shows us the uncomfortable truth, and I hope it breaks your heart.

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Claire Watson lives on Arrernte land, Alice Springs. Her poems have been published by various Australian and overseas journals including The Weekend Australian*,* Meniscus *and* Meanjin*. Her memoir,* Fingerprints of Grace*, was published in 2017.*

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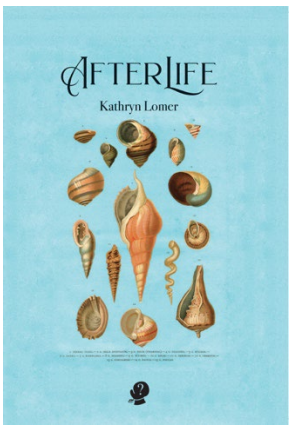
TEXT review

The here and now

review by Paul Mitchell



Kathryn Lomer
AfterLife
Puncher & Wattman, Waratah NSW 2023
ISBN 9781922571700
Pb 136pp AUD25.00

It is surprising that Kathryn Lomer's fourth poetry collection is called *AfterLife*, given how full it is of the here and now, particularly the natural world and more particularly rivers. Short-listed in the 2021 Dorothy Hewett Awards, the collection is almost worth its retail price to read 'Rowing down the Nile'. A long poem in two-line stanzas, it tracks an anonymous woman, age and race unrevealed, "rowing down the Nile alone, because she wants to, and she can" (p. 66). A feminist clarion call, the poem, though long, is taught, thrilling, and utterly engaging – this *every*woman is unafraid, adventurous, and completely, joyously, self-contained:

> She is gliding along the milky way,
> floating out into the universe.

If she never does one other thing in her life,

it won't matter.
She listens to the river water lapping on the hull

and dreams of what this river knows:
its finest self ascending mountain air; (p. 67)

Effortlessly and purposefully flowing from stanza to stanza, edging into its way of meaning, the personal yet universal mindscape of the protagonist is writ large in images that blend inner and outer journeys. Lomer is at her best in the long poem – three pages or more – a form that is difficult to master. Interestingly, many of the long poems in this collection feature rivers and Lomer's longer poems have river-like qualities. They meander and flow; they rush and they stand almost still; and they sometimes encounter barriers that reduce their course to a trickle.

The long poem in four-line stanzas, 'A hummingbird in Italy', is magisterial, comparing and blending the speaker's experience of Europe with that of the hummingbird, a bird the author notes sometimes appears in Europe but arrives having escaped cages elsewhere. The speaker has endured a marriage break up and, now 'free', explores memories through images of present geography and historical references:

I think of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar:

was it love, necessity, compromise?
Or Sheba and Solomon, together for three years
composing riddles to test compatibility.
The hummingbird appears outside the bar window

and hovers, seeing a strange creature
with ultra-violet hair and fingernails
clutching a swirl of light. (p. 15)

Lomer has produced several river-like, long poems that *insist* upon their length. While it is sometimes argued a poet worth their name should nail their subject with the fewest lines possible, many of Lomer's poems, especially those with long lines, reward the reader's journey along her rivers, riding her currents and whitewater, and arriving at a destination that often replicates Rolland's "oceanic feeling", that sense of encountering eternity and being at one with the whole natural world.

'Climbing Bishop and Clerk' is one such poem, perfectly balancing melancholy and celebration as it speaks again of fractured intimate relationship through imagery of the natural world particular to the poet's home state of Tasmania. 'The river tells a story' is another, this time the river image obviously upfront, as Lomer creates another powerful and flowing elegy to lost love:

I make my mind like the river: smooth. Today, the Derwent is a bolt of shantung silk,

charcoal and silver. Four teal ducks flutter down from their driftwood tree,

and settle on the water. They sail along, unzipping the river's silk dress in four places.
My mind unzips like this whenever I think about you. Which is still too often. (p. 37)

One of Lomer's other strengths is poetry in the mode of the nature mystic. Many engaging and thoughtful poems seem unconcerned with some critics' thoughts about how nature should be represented in the Anthropocene, instead bringing to the fore a Hopkins-like liminality of natural world meeting spiritual, whether the latter is considered connected to the human or not:

The glass frog's crimson heart beats
forty times a minute.
And I can see it.
Light shines right through her
and there is the heart beating. ('The glass frog', p. 20)

minute chunks of graded colour form buddhas,
flowers, trees, animals, stars,
all linked within a circle, later swept up

and poured into a river, rejoining the cycle
of erosion, abrasion, suspension, deposition,
the trickle of grains like that in an hourglass

reminding us weeks, months, years will pass
and we will pass with them,
at last coming to rest like sand at a point bar
or the mouth of a rare wild river,
far from home, but home,
beneath our star. ('Shifting sand', p. 23)

There are those rivers again. And there are several long poems in this collection that have snags and barriers that prevent them flowing effectively to their destinations. In works such as 'Lunch break at the museum', 'Vapour trails', and 'The marvellous tree', Lomer meanders and the river trickles rather than flows, on a constant ebb rather than a push into greater depth of meaning or emotional connection. These poems suffer from too many instances of "I think of" or "I'm watching" or "I remember" or even abstract parts of the speaker's brain engaging with subject matter. Because these are long poems, their faults are more jarring and the momentum stalls.

With her strength being the longer poem, it made it clearer the shorter half-page or one-page lyric was Lomer's weakness. She is mostly so effective with the longer poem – especially those with long lines – that her deficiencies are clear in the shorter poem. Many don't get beyond thought bubbles and could easily be cut from this long collection, benefiting its overall strength.

That said, she does occasionally produce searing one to one-and-a-half-page lyrics, straight to the heart and mind without the preamble that many of her poems include, works that had this reader gasping and applauding:

> The sky is full of arrows, swish and whistle
> of wing scythe. It is an onslaught of air,
> a frantic weaving of flightpaths, their stitch
> stiff wingbeats of coal-feathered shearwaters
> home from the sea… (‘Arrows’, p. 98)

It’s a poem I’d love to quote in full. Lomer’s *AfterLife* bubbles with quotable poems and her better works, often the longer ones, are poems of utmost power. Overall, at 132 pages, the collection could lose a third and hit with the force of a river in flood. As it stands, a reader must wade through some reeds to find works that have the lifeforce, flash, and grandeur of a rainbow trout leaping from the water.

Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne-based writer who has published seven books, the most recent of which is his poetry collection, High Spirits *(Puncher & Wattmann, 2024).*

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ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

‘Ah, universe, don’t blank stare me like that’

review by Jason Goroncy

Paul Mitchell
High Spirits
Puncher & Wattmann, Newcastle, NSW 2024
ISBN 9781923099159
Pb 94pp AUD27.00

Poetry in modernity must grapple with what George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, referred to as “the broken contract” between language and reality, working within and against the inadequacy of words to recognise moments of transcendence – instances where language overcomes its own limitations to touch something essential about human experience. We have witnessed how modern atrocities reveal how language itself can be corrupted, how words like “resettlement” and “civilising” can mask genocide. Yet, poetry responds by insisting on the weight of witness. It serves – or at least *can* serve – not as consolation but as a form of severe mercy, maintaining the tension between the failure of language and the irreducible human need for expression, memory, and testimony in an age that has seen both the limits and the terrible power of human speech. This theoretical framework is embodied in contemporary work that refuses both escapist retreat and narcissistic indulgence. The question becomes: how does poetry fulfil this demanding vocation in practice?

In an age when poetry often retreats into the hermetic or dissolves into the merely confessional, Paul Mitchell's *High Spirits* offers something otherwise: a collection that manages to be both deeply personal and universally resonant, both spiritually grounded and artistically sophisticated. This is poetry that takes the ancient responsibility of verse seriously – to make us see the familiar, what we've seen a thousand times before, as if for the first time, to recognise the interminable within the fugacious, and to remind us that wonder remains possible even in the disenchanted worlds we have fashioned for ourselves: "Enlightenment says the world's an illusion," but "enlightenment is the illusion while everything else exists to prove it doesn't" (p. 30).

Mitchell's poems, like his essays, short fiction, and theatrical works, are marked by a terrific humour that never cheapens the gravity of human experience but instead illuminates it from unpredictable *optiques*. His poetry demonstrates a nuanced attunement to the affective dimensions of human experience, particularly in its exploration of how individual emotional states negotiate their relationship to broader ontological frameworks.

The language throughout *High Spirits* possesses a remarkable quality: it makes the profound feel proximate, accessible without being diminished, bringing the transcendent within reach of the ordinary. It is, in other words, deeply religious poetry, but religious in the most generous sense – engaging faith as a dynamic, earthed, and lived phenomenon rather than as codified dogma or systematic belief structure, never allowing religion to become the real thing in a way that would eclipse the vivid particularities of lived experience. Instead, Mitchell achieves that delicate balance where the spiritual illuminates the mundane without overwhelming it, where the sacred emerges from careful attention to the world as it is.

The collection serves multiple functions simultaneously. On one level, it offers intimate portraits of contemporary life: the subtle dynamics of marriage, the bittersweet recognition of limitations, the employment of a cricket lectionary to bespeak the "innings" (p. 21) of one's life, the gift of neighbours who "laugh at the memory / of green shade cloth" (p. 67), the complex negotiations between dreams and waking life that haunt modern existence "as we wrestle til we're ghosts" (p. 12). And on ghosts: "Just because ghosts don't exist / doesn't mean they can't / haunt you" (p. 45). Sometimes disquieted, often whimsical, the poems capture the texture of daily life with remarkable fidelity, finding in ordinary moments – family interactions, the small rituals of domestic existence – the raw material for deeper reflection.

Yet Mitchell's gaze extends beyond the personal to encompass broader cultural, social, and environmental concerns. In poems like 'Sermon on the Institution,' he offers a pointed critique of organised religion's institutional failings – the church is "Somewhere to sleep while the world howls" (p. 18) – while maintaining respect for the spiritual impulse that drives human seeking and creates human communities. His cinematic references and cultural observations generate a kind of surreal montage of contemporary life, capturing both its chaos and its peculiar beauty. In 'The Movie Snatches,' he presents a rapid-fire sequence of film fragments – "Ralph Fiennes flies a single-engine plane above the desert / and there's someone dead in the cockpit / while Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman look haunted walking /

from room to room …" (p. 60) – creating a kaleidoscopic vision of our media-saturated consciousness. 'Weekend Warriors of the Apocalypse' offers a satirical and funny-as-hell portrait of Australian suburban masculinity, a subject of great interest to Mitchell, intersecting with religious manias and millennial anxieties, where conversations about visits to Bunnings blend seamlessly with apocalyptic imagery: "And the winter's turnin to something or other / can't get me tomatoes to grow and the moon's / turned blood red, and I can't get those / scales from the dead fish outta me eyes!" (p. 36). The poem captures a distinctly Australian vernacular – "So, whatta ya been upta?" (p. 35) – while interrogating how ordinary suburban life might contain its own forms of spiritual yearning and cultural critique. An environmental consciousness emerges in 'The Sun Moved to a Supplementary Position,' which presents anthropogenic climate change through the lens of media discourse and institutional responsibility. The poem stages interviews with nature's elements – "The air we breathe, as always, / played to the crowd / said controversy was its in and out, and defining clause" (p. 15) – transforming ecological crisis into a sardonic commentary on how the gravest of issues become politicised spectacle.

The poem 'The Lowest Common Denominator is the View from the Top' operates as a fragmented meditation on personal crisis and the inadequacy of language to quite capture authentic experience. The poem's title suggests a paradox that Mitchell explores through a series of interconnected vignettes that resist linear narrative progression. The poem unveils ways that domestic space can become a site of existential darkness – where one "can't stand the heat can't / stand at all" (p. 22) – and where the vicissitudes of time, distorted by the compressions of memory, make not questioning absurd:

> We waltzed in the early evening garden
> seven days before we married. There were
> fourteen years in raindrop spring petals
> unborn children in our steps
> a house that clutched our waists and a divorce
> to lower our arms. I can't remember
> if the music we danced to
> was any more silent than this. (p. 23)

The confession "I really enjoyed our separated holiday together" (p. 23) captures the paradoxical relief that can accompany relationship dissolution, while "I regret everything. / And more" (p. 24) acknowledges the recognition of culpability without offering an easy resolution. The poem's exploration of masculinity and failure culminates in its treatment of agency and responsibility. The declaration "I never loved you and I always have. / I always loved you from the moment / you walked away and from the first time / I saw you I loved the way you left" (p. 24) speaks to the complexity of emotional ambivalence that resists simple categorisation, while a postscript – "Everyone wants to know who / was to blame for the couple's break up. / No one ever asks who was to blame / for them staying together too long" (p. 24) – reframes the conventional narrative of relationship failure. Here is an example of how Mitchell uses fragmentation not as a postmodern technique but as a psychological necessity, creating a form that can accommodate contradictory emotional states without

demanding their reconciliation.

The collection's engagement with figures like Franz Kafka, who may have imagined "a life without living" (p. 62), suggests Mitchell's awareness of his place within a larger literary tradition, even as he carves out distinctly contemporary – and Australian – territory. His delightful 'Letter to Franz Kafka' operates as both epistolary meditation and meta-literary commentary, revealing Mitchell's sophisticated engagement with questions of artistic legacy and contemporary alienation. The poem's opening gesture – apologising for writing "only a letter" given Kafka's prolific output – immediately establishes the temporal disjunction between literary periods while acknowledging the practical constraints on modern creatives: "I have these Annual Reports to type, so time's an insect, attention spans and shelf-times shorter" (p. 62).

Mitchell's treatment of the 'Digital Age,' which "makes burning manuscripts impossible" (p. 62), transforms Kafka's famous deathbed instruction to his friend Max Brod into a meditation on permanence and erasure in an era of apparent infinite storage. The question "What would you say to Brod now? Dismantle my hard drive?" (p. 62) updates the original dilemma while suggesting that our contemporary relationship to literary destruction has fundamentally shifted – we can no longer achieve the romantic gesture of flames consuming pages. The poem's central conceit – a bureaucrat writing to literature's supreme bureaucratic visionary, resonating with Kafka's oft-cited observation that 'Every revolution evaporates, leaving behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy' – allows Mitchell to explore the continuity between Kafka's Prague and our corporate present. The repeated references to Annual Reports function as both a practical constraint and a symbolic parallel to Kafka's own insurance work, suggesting that the fundamental tension between artistic calling and institutional obligation persists across centuries, set against the backdrop of the timeless now:

> We sweat, we die, we make ourselves eat our meals, we work, we die, we write and die and cough and forget our manuscripts. Seagulls bay for blood, insects smile in beds, and both dream of albatrosses, carrying stones to lands where no one writes Annual Reports, chips are spat on and children munch bugs for fun and don't exist, where even existence does not exist. And I, the I you left me with, takes strange comfort in the blank eyes of servants and maids in gold-plated suits and ties, insured against future losses, stock market crash test dummies, they're safe in the idea they're here, not in the Otherworld that both refuses them and to be. (pp. 62–63)

Mitchell's speculation about Kafka's potential survival ("you'd have lived – medical science, etc." (p. 62)) and subsequent career choices reveal a deeper engagement with questions of artistic authenticity in a media-saturated age. The imagined scenario of Kafka refusing "interviews, no Writers' Festivals, just the dip and scrape of fountain pen in place of celebrity soundbytes" (p. 62) establishes a dialectical tension between aesthetic autonomy and the institutional mechanisms of literary production, while concurrently recognising the material conditions that necessitate authorial engagement with funding structures and market-driven cultural apparati. And then there's the poem's confession – "So I write and write, dismantling myself, the Other, significance and sense" (p. 62) – which positions Mitchell as both Kafkaesque protagonist and meta-commentator on the act of writing itself.

What emerges most powerfully from *High Spirits* is Mitchell's fundamental conviction that the world is enough and that "it's a surprise to find / what's needed is all you've been" (p. 33). These themes resonate throughout the collection, perhaps most explicitly in his long, Tennyson-meets-Bono, experimental piece, 'Song in the Key of Beginner's Mind,' where he declares "All this and death too" (p. 72). And warns: "If death can get my grandma it can get you too" (p. 79). And later:

> And I don't want to go. I want to stay. I want to be here with everyone forever. Even the bad ones. Even if I'm one of them. I want to stay and eat and sleep and read. I don't want endless nothing with nobody and no one. I want all the myths and dreams and hopes and theologies and fairytales to be true. I want happy ever hereafter and I don't care who's there and I'm happy to have the broom closet in one of the many mansions' servant quarters with the smell of cat poo so long as there's someone to talk to, a loaf of bread and the faintest memory of love. This other thing, endless dark with nothing to do?
>
> It can go to hell. (p. 80)

This is not the complacency of easy satisfaction but the hard-won wisdom of someone who has looked closely at the world's stark and dark facts and still found reasons for gratitude. Mitchell's work consistently invites those who live in "the golden age of indifference" (p. 80) to stay alive to the possibility of seeing epiphanies of simple grace amid chaos, joy in simple moments – and joy in imagined moments ("like / Shakespeare riding a wheelie bin" (p. 90)) – and to both embrace existence fully and be "someone [who] holds up a lantern" (p. 80), despite, or perhaps because of, life's transient nature.

Whether observing the mundane rituals of morning or contemplating the larger questions of existence and mortality, Mitchell's poems consistently achieve this transformation of the familiar into the revelatory. His conversational tone serves this purpose well. His poems feel like overheard conversations with a particularly thoughtful friend – accessible without being casual, profound without being pretentious. This accessibility is not a limitation but a strength, suggesting an understanding of poetry's calling as not to impress but to connect, not to obscure but to unveil, not to brutalise but to humanise.

In *High Spirits*, Mitchell has gathered poems that are at once situated within the immediacies of the present and oriented toward the perennial concerns that define us, grounding themselves in the particularities of the suburban ordinary while gesturing toward what may be timeless. This is poetry that trusts its readers and rewards that trust with candid insight. In a cultural moment very often characterised by cynicism and fragmentation, *High Spirits* offers something otherwise, even hopeful: the suggestion that careful attention to the world as it is might reveal it to be, if not perfect, then at least sufficient – and perhaps, in its sufficiency, sacred.

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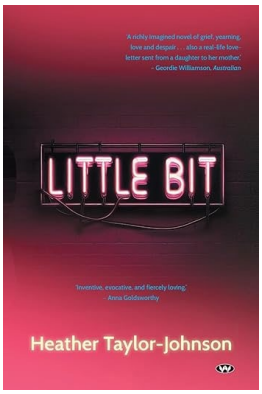
TEXT review

The stories we inherit

review by Jenny Hedley



Heather Taylor-Johnson
Little Bit
Wakefield Press, Mile End SA 2024
ISBN 9781923042537
Pb 323pp AUD32.95

At a recent workshop on death and the afterlife, one participant expressed a wish to leave no trace of their legacy: they would rather be forgotten than idealised. “What about archiving your less-than-ideal memories?” I asked, thinking how my late mother’s papers omitted truths that would have offered a more nuanced portrait of self. Before giving me all of her journals and creative writing, she had destroyed a manuscript which detailed her relationship with a philandering author. Now, even as I have drafted a collaborative memoir that draws from each our 2005–2007 diaries, I am still figuring out what to make of our relationship and the stories bequeathed me. I am prone to idealising my mother while finding flaws in others, myself. This enduring mother–daughter enmeshment makes it difficult to land a true, balanced portrayal.

Adrienne Rich argues that the greatest gift a mother can give a daughter is "to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim:* and then to go on from there" (2021, p. 8). Heather Taylor-Johnson's mother Debbie Johnson could easily have fallen victim to the circumstances of her neglect-filled childhood, and yet she consciously curated a fulfilling life. Taylor-Johnson's autofictional novel *Little Bit* (2024) offers a complex maternal family portrait in which the cycle of intergenerational trauma is broken but not forgotten. The seeds for *Little Bit* were planted when Taylor-Johnson gave her mother's stories to a fictional character she began writing during her PhD candidature; the book opens fourteen years later at a writers residency at the Anderson Centre in her birth state of Minnesota. Taylor-Johnson had asked her mother Debbie to record "as many memories as you can" about her mother Stella and her life growing up (p. 15), which Taylor-Johnson used when drafting *Little Bit*. The real and manufactured perspectives of Debbie and her mother "Stella" are woven together across time, interpellated by Taylor-Johnson's telling of "the story of the story" (Eakin, 2019, p. 58). While *Little Bit* succeeds as an exploration of intergenerational trauma, Taylor-Johnson's reluctance to apply the same scrutiny to herself as she directs toward Stella constrains the work's emotional potential. The book's strength lies in its innovative approach to collaborative memoir; its weakness lies in the author's failure to fully inhabit the vulnerability she demands from her subjects.

Each Debbie and Stella's chatterbox voices play out in singsong Minnesotan accents which bring a sense of lyricism to the page. Unusually, only Stella's chapters are in first person; Heather Taylor-Johnson and her mother Debbie's stories are told in third person. As chapters alternate between these three generations of women, a compelling thread arises which tussles with the idea of whose book this is: "Heather asks herself again: *Whose story am I writing?* Is it her mother's or hers? She calls it her mother's but maybe it's Stella's" (p. 31). When Taylor-Johnson's reformed-bad-boy father's story threatens to hijack the storytelling, her "Heather" persona realises that "she doesn't want to shake the foundations with her dad while she's here to focus on her mom. She needs to stick to one parent at a time, and this is Debbie's book" (p. 108). The trouble with my own draft manuscript is that, like Taylor-Johnson, I keep thinking of the book as my mother's. I wonder how much this is due to the writing being a gift or an homage to my mother, and how much is an abdication of personal responsibility, an unwillingness to be agential when representing the self.

Michael Sprinker notes the inherent instability of the autobiographical act, where "concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (1980, p. 342). Taylor-Johnson's storying across generations demonstrates a shifting "I" which is relational and multiple. This aligns with Paul John Eakin's argument that the autobiographical first person "is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation" (2019, p. 43). The distancing of what one might assume to be the authorial "I" (that is, Taylor-Johnson's point-of-view) reminds us that what seems to be a communal memoir, is actually a fictional construct. "Heather" the writer is transcribing the digital records of Debbie's oral storytelling and has been working at ways to do this since the creative practice research that resulted in her 2006 PhD dissertation plus creative work; this seems true enough. The fiction lies with the internal monologuing of the wretched Stella, a speculative incarnation of the alcoholic maternal grandmother who

Taylor-Johnson loathes, and who therefore reads as unlikable. From the first page, Tayor-Johnson tells us that "[s]he's about to examine the 'bad mother' in writing about her grandmother". Later, in a scene at the writers residency, Taylor-Johnson tells a memoirist that with each "random story my mother told me about her life with her mother, the woman became *less* knowable, *more* of a mystery, and one I didn't like" (p. 69). Taylor-Johnson is aware that the reader will lack reason to empathise with Stella: "I don't like her, so why should my readers care about her?" (p. 223). To this end, Taylor-Johnson manufactures a bit to elicit sympathy from the reader:

> Since Heather's yet to find any redeeming qualities that'll balance the difficult grandmother she's writing, she's also decided Stella will refer to Debbie as "Little Bit" in her private and internal monologues, because maybe it'll be endearing enough to show the woman cared. (p. 28)

The unmediated raw awfulness of Stella comes across in passages where she "prepare[s] for [her] child's imminent neglect" (p. 8); reflects on herself as "haggard and sitting in that sorry apartment" filled with cockroaches (p. 61); or slumps like a barfly thinking, "This isn't a place for a lady, so I guess I'm no lady" (p. 10).

Having Stella use the term of endearment "Little Bit" for her daughter Debbie creates tension between authorial intention and reader response when Stella acts abhorrently time and again: allowing a strange man to pass out drunk beside Debbie; "dragging her out of places like it was some sort of profession" (p. 77); saying, "You're loose and you're a whore" (p. 215); and admitting, "I'm jealous of Little Bit" (p. 264). Stella makes excuses for treating Debbie so awfully: "Maybe I'm afraid Debbie will leave, […] and I'm trying to prepare myself" (p. 63). Instances of profound cruelty and neglect create a disconnect with the author's intention to create sympathy. The following scene demonstrates how Taylor-Johnson's "Little Bit" gambit serves in practice:

> "Mom, Jeff and I are getting married." [Debbie] braced herself for a blow.
>
> "Married? That's a laugh." Stella took a swig from the bottle before putting it back under the sink. "You know I never thought my Little Bit would grow up to be a whore, but there you are," and those words tore at Debbie's heart, as she knew they would, but it wasn't so much being called a whore; it was hearing her mom call her Little Bit. (p. 238)

This scene illustrates how the author's visible hand works against her stated intention of cultivating empathy for Stella by combining insult with endearment. In another scene which spotlights despicable parenting, Stella announces Debbie's hidden pregnancy on her wedding day by telling everyone, "She has her red light on, all that time, you all know it, don't say you don't" (p. 255).

The calculated effort to elicit sympathy for a problematic character invites cognitive disconnect in this reader; I felt inclined to skip over the Stella chapters when I first read this book. Perhaps

the portrayal serves for Taylor-Johnson as a sort of therapeutic ventriloquism, one that forces the reader to hold conflicting emotions. Taylor-Johnson weighs up her motivations when speaking to Debbie: "I had to make [Stella] tender even though you can't work out a time she was tender with you. […] Maybe I'm doing it for my hypothetical readers or maybe I'm kidding myself and the made-up scenes are really for me" (p. 224). It is generally expected that when an author takes a hatchet to a character drawn from real life, that author must be equally prepared to scrutinise their own failings; this prevents a work from being read as sanctimonious. Taylor-Johnson wonders "if she's inherited anything from her grandmother" – whom she had never known – but all she can see of Stella's personality is "booze and neglect" (p. 126).

Thomas G. Couser writes that "collaborative autobiography is inherently ventriloquistic" (2018, p. 48). *Little Bit* extends beyond collaboration, however, into sheer speculation. Some of this speculation does invite compassion, for example, where Stella's "I" recounts the circumstances of her father molesting her, and her own mother's failure to protect her: "We were some triangle of misery – the daddy with his sick deeds, the mother with her bed-soaked sobbing, the daughter trying to make sense of it all" (p. 72). Another sympathetic thread portrays Stella as "Debbie's guardian angel", one who has "got no wings" or halo (p. 64). Perhaps the sweetest scene of tenderness is where Stella tells Debbie to never trust a man, before inwardly reflecting: "I should be lashing myself for teaching that child about fear and hate then forgetting to add in the love" (p. 61) – and yet the reader cannot forget that this moment of self-reproach is puppeted by the author herself. This tension between authorial manipulation and authentic empathy reflects a broader challenge in life writing: how do we ethically represent those we find morally reprehensible? My own struggle with similar material illuminates why Taylor-Johnson's approach both fascinates and frustrates.

I wonder if every writer has a real-life character they loathe so much that others find them difficult to read. As with Taylor-Johnson's mother, my own mother suffered cruelly at the hands of another. Each attempt to bring this cruel other onto the page meets resistance from my beta readers; no one wants to read what looks like literary vengeance triggered by (vicarious) trauma. I raised this topic with a writer friend who also has a relative whom readers cannot stand to read about. My friend suggested that what is probably lacking for each of us is a lightness of touch. In the absence of humour, our enduring woundedness repels potential readers. I wonder whether hatred needs to be tempered with equal parts love, and what part forgiveness plays.

One thread Taylor-Johnson writes that is funny in a morbid sense – almost gleefully so – concerns Stella's death. Stella's death is foreshadowed via an internal monologue which locates Judy Garland as a kindred spirit – "our problem with pills, alcohol, too many men, […] but *heavens to Betsy, don't let me go out like her!*" (p. 242). Later in this act of histrionic ventriloquising, Stella thinks: "Maybe what I need is a good old overdose, only not in the bathroom. Maybe one more pill will do it" (p. 243). When Stella is indeed found dead on the toilet like Judy Garland, it comes almost as a relief after her many late-night calls to Debbie

while “completely liquefied: bubbles of snot, streams of tears, end-of-the-night beer spilling down the gullet, stray sprays of spittle landing on the receiver” (p. 282).

Thomas G. Couser argues that writing about vulnerable subjects is both “*mimetic,* insofar as it speaks *about* its subject, and *political,* insofar as it speaks *for* its subject” (2018, p. xx). Taylor-Johnson’s mother Debbie can be seen as such a vulnerable subject, due to the unprocessed nature of childhood trauma. Cathy Caruth writes that

> trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on (1996, p. 4).

Although initially Debbie tells her daughter that her memories of Stella are not so bad, Taylor-Johnson presses Debbie to dig deeper into her memory bank for evidence of maternal neglect and harm. The following scene considers the cost of Debbie’s reckoning with trauma:

> [Debbie:] “You know, I’m not doing well.”
>
> [Heather:] “What do you mean? The heart palpitations?”
>
> “They’re still there. But you know, I never had any therapy. I never talked about my mom to anyone. This has been really hard for me.”
>
> “I’m so sorry, Mom”
>
> “I used to say she was a good person when she wasn’t drinking but you know what? She was never not drinking. She was a drunk. And it’s hard to come to that realisation.” (p. 225)

Although Taylor-Johnson is aware that she has no right to cause her mother pain for the sake of a book, Taylor-Johnson maintains an ethics of care towards her mother by continually seeking approval of draft chapters. I want to understand Taylor-Johnson’s desperate desire for Debbie to reckon with her victimisation, to dredge up what Eakin classifies as “unfinished business” – that is, “a disruption, distortion, or omission in the family narrative that must be repaired” (2019, p. 7). Clearly, there is so much love between Taylor-Johnson and Debbie, to whom the book is dedicated. Of the collaborative experience, Debbie tells her daughter, “I wouldn’t trade this for anything in the world” (p. 225). The project, at times, draws mother and daughter closer, however, the protracted length of the project sees the quality of their bond shift over time due also to life changes. In Taylor-Johnson’s 2006 dissertation, she describes tensions between mother and daughter which do not make it into *Little Bit*: Debbie’s criticisms of Taylor-Johnson’s clothing growing up (p. 32), her discomfort with Taylor-Johnson breastfeeding in public (p. 35-36) and criticism of her weight (p. 36).

I am curious about the mother-daughter enmeshment which leads Taylor-Johnson to spend all day “thinking about writing her mom” (p. 88), despite the distance between Florida, where

Debbie lives, and Adelaide. Like Taylor-Johnson, I crossed the Pacific Ocean to find myself at home in another country. As close as I was to my mother – my connection with her was like an umbilical cord snapping me back "home" again and again – our relationship functioned better when we were apart. Our mother–daughter entanglement was so overwhelming – our identities so overlapping – that geographical distancing did us good. Adrienne Rich tells us that within the mother-daughter cathexis, the "materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement" (2021, p. 229). I keep hoping for deeper interrogation of motherhood and self by Taylor-Johnson – a payoff for her line on page one expressing hope that by examining her "bad mother" grandmother, "it'll put her own guilt into perspective". There is an acknowledgement of guilt over leaving her three children with her partner in Adelaide for a month to write the book, but what else? There is a brief foray into feminism which is represented by a list of character profiles on "The Laundry Ladies" (p. 199) – that is, the women Debbie did her laundry with at the laundromat – however, this detours us from the mother-daughter relationships at the heart of this story. While Debbie continually revisits and reckons with her understanding of her mother, many of Taylor-Johnson's reflections tend to prioritise metaphorical exploration over psychological excavation, as in the following passage, which ideally would have been followed up with deeper self-interrogation:

> Everything Heather thought she understood about her mother is changing. Her mother is a present wrapped and wrapped and wrapped, and Heather's working toward throwing aside all that paper so she can hold the present – her mother – in her hand. (p. 198)

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore draws upon Foucault's concept of the Panopticon to view autobiography "as a discipline, a self-study in surveillance" (2018, p. 20):

> If you are an autobiographer, then you stand in the place of the representative person. Your position there enables the kind of identification that characterizes autobiography. If you act, then, as the mirror of the self (for me), then in my identification with you I substitute myself for you, the other. If I am barred from doing that by your nonrepresentativeness, I withdraw my identification and, quite likely, the sympathy that flows from it. (p. 22)

I take Gilmore's argument to mean that where the author puts up barriers to representation by withholding or disallowing self-scrutiny through disciplined self-surveillance, a reader is less likely to be sympathetic to the author. My initial reservations about *Little Bit* come from me weighing each authorial decision against my own protracted, perhaps lifelong project of writing my mother. I am looking for myself in Taylor-Johnson's mirror, afraid that nothing I attempt will satisfy my artistic intentions while remaining faithful to my mother's memory. Reading *Little Bit* triggers big feelings: I have skin in the mother–daughter storytelling game. My mother bequeathed me all of her writing and journals before she died in 2008 and I have been considering my filial obligation to her ever since. Both my Honours and PhD research has seen me grappling with modes of maternal representation across formats and genres. I understand so deeply Taylor-Johnson's compulsion to speak up on behalf of her mother, to name injustices,

to highlight resilience. I admire the scope and rigour of Taylor-Johnson's intergenerational literary project, which has changed shape and grown at the same time as she has raised children of her own. Reading *Little Bit* a second time, I came to understand how the spectral resurrection of Stella allows Taylor-Johnson a fuller understanding of her mother's story. The "Little Bit" gambit via Stella's co-opted voice allows the author both to visit sites of trauma that contributed to Stella's downtroddenness, not excusing so much as illustrating maternal neglect as an intergenerational inheritance. Ultimately, *Little Bit* raises crucial questions about the ethics and aesthetics of writing difficult family members. While Taylor-Johnson's project may not fully address the tensions of mother–daughter cathexis, it offers a compelling framework for understanding how to approach such fraught familial material. *Little Bit*'s value is found in Taylor-Johnson's willingness to grapple publicly with questions which haunt many writers working with personal and inherited stories.

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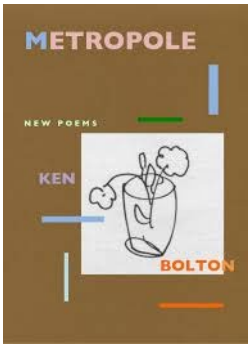
TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

TEXT review

Night thoughts in the metropole

review by Corey Wakeling



Ken Bolton
Metropole: New Poems
Puncher & Wattmann, Waratah, NSW 2024
ISBN 9781923099425
Pb 154pp AUD27.00

A book like Ken Bolton's *Metropole* reminds us that the singularity of poetry is rhythm. But I don't mean prosody-as-rhythm. Musicality isn't what I mean. Nor is rhythm what some like to call evidence of a poet's "ear". I probably just mean Aristotelian *poiesis* in the ways Marjorie Perloff, Giorgio Agamben, and others have discussed it. Bear with me for a moment at least – I mean rhythm as a way to explain a dynamic experience of a relationality of parts. Ah. So I have nothing more to say about poetry than Hölderlin already has. Sorry, Ken – the last thing you would want is to be compared with one of the capital P poets. Then again, I can see you agreeing with Giorgio Agamben's reflection after Hölderlin that "art will not simply be able to leap beyond its shadow to climb over its destiny" (p. 103), just as I could imagine Agamben using Laurie Duggan's final image in 'Letter to John Forbes' to portray the gambit: "poetry, spotlit / on a tiny stage" (p. 10). Let's keep going with this trope of rhythm, then, since

Metropole is what compelled me to it. It could be that Bolton is pushing poetry even further into the shadows of its rhythmic *poiesis*.

Once upon a time, prosody was the crux of rhythm, the rhythm, say, found in Alan Wearne's favourite poet, Robert Browning, as for so many Victorian-era poets. Prosody remains somewhere in the vicinity of rhythm still now, to be sure. The phonetic calculus of AJ Carruthers' columns of single words, Ania Walwicz's spat staccato, and PiO's (il)logically sequenced diatribes are twenty-first century prosodic examples of rhythm too.

However, as Bolton's poetic evolution shows, rhythm is ultimately irreducible to prosody, style, or even tone. Rhythm can be identified as the active crystallization of all the textual elements steering the occasion of its being read. Hence, when reading Bolton, it feels inappropriate to reduce it merely to tone, or style, or prosody (the poet himself discusses the second, style, frequently, mind you). Bolton, for all his droll, Ted Berrigan-esque returns to the poet *in situ*, presents a spectacularly thorough experience of rhythmic possibility, of the many aspects shaping the rhythm of a reading experience.

To this end, readers of Bolton's poetry will be glad to know that the Bolton em dash – one tonal, visual, *and* prosodic signature of the poet – has been employed so determinedly, the reader might think that some sort of morse code has been absorbed into the poet's practice.

> tall & blue—dark blue—& the format a little big
> so I have always to find a place for it
> or forget
> —search—
> & think, "Must've lent it to someone"
> "And I know
> *just whom.*"
> (p. 63)

He's talking about *Midwinter Day* by Bernadette Mayer, and look how much of a dance takes place in regards to content of little importance, and indeed, with little promise of closure. The Bolton em dash and the rhythm it signals proves less of a visual affectation than a semantic and sonic beat. Like the marker of a pulse, this aspect of Bolton's rhythm modifies itself throughout *Metropole* in tune with a dizzying amount of registers of emotional apprehension or articulation, some with images attached, others sounds, concepts, and notable lexemes or objects. Like the episode here wondering where a book went, *Metropole* produces – not simply represents – a way of thinking that at the same time resists cohering into unified narrative or monologue – a Philip Whalen inheritance, to be sure, but really a *poiesis* containing various documentary and linguistic attitudes that Bolton shares in some ways with Laurie Duggan and Pam Brown.

How do we review it? On Bolton's terms, we might talk about *Metropole* like a jazz enthusiast reviews albums, connecting the dots between this phrase and that reference in a song, this proper noun and those accompanying players gathered in the social assembly a work gives rise to, which together represent some pre-examined situation the recording has thrown up that we then use to explore the kinetics of association the constellation of sounds might cohere in the mind as. Such a practice wouldn't be such a bad idea for a poetics like Bolton's. However, our poet presents so much memorabilia for us to collect along the way in the meantime, memorabilia impervious to review, or at least less interesting once we do it – who cares if *I* like the artists and thinkers, and their references? – one wonders whether we should be reviewing what is documented in it all. But if a Bolton poem is about the memorabilia, then indexing it in a review would take as much time and involve as much dispirited collating as any stock-take would. And that wouldn't convey anything of the feel of a Bolton poem anyway.

The attitude to writing is certainly interesting, and singularly Bolton's, even as it has figures of influence and allies for endorsing it. As the poet-self exhorts of himself in a poem from a pre-Covid book, *Salute* (2019), '2/12/2008—A Poem for Philip Whalen', the production of a certain kind of documentation may be his most urgent concern: "Leave a record, like Whalen did, of clear perceptions" (p. 15). A project destined for the limitations and failures of the I-voice which is party to the "clear perceptions", then. We know Bolton is, among his talents, also a poet of collaborative comic verse (e.g. *The Elsewhere Variations*, with Peter Bakowski, (2019)) and game poetry (e.g. *A Pirate Life*, (2023)), so it would be rather dubious to make assumptions about the ends of a poetic practice like his expressly without a manifesto for poetry or perception. *Metropole* asks us, instead, to sustain a seemingly constant scrutiny of rhythm and document *in tandem* – though I feel like Bolton would use an Americanism like "in cahoots".

The meaning of *poiesis* in cahoots with documentation or recording has become rather more urgent for Bolton at this point in his life. *Metropole* is a collection whose longest poems are launchpads occasioned by the events of poets' deaths. 'Kate' is a poem expressly written after the death of Kate Jennings in May 2021; 'Midwinter Day' after the death of Bernadette Mayer in November 2022; and a suite of three poems, entitled 'The Metropole Poems', reflect on the death of John Tranter.

Fear not, though: the deaths of three significant personages and bodies of work in Bolton's life, to differing degrees, draws him only to double-down on that well-known resistance to lyric sentiment the poet is known for – though the poet is not so egotistical as to claim that the expressions and viewpoints developed in these poems lack their own sentimentality, their own I-voice performances, or their own romantic quests. But, the long poems comprising Metropole are expressed in tempo and angles of temporality that refuse closure by their own quest-ioning intorsion. Writing about the deaths of old associates becomes a particularly tricky aspect of Bolton's textual presence and present-affirming mode, always dominated as it is by the extempore, a matter ultimately a problem for elegy's presumptions to immortalise. Bolton's uncompromising self-awareness also ensures that he himself often can provide the best

suggestions of how to deal with the stakes of an open mode conducted toward ostensibly closed things such as death.

Bolton's poetic is so often pitched on anecdotal knowledge – it's important; how many tidbits of lesser-known Australian and international art and literary history, not to mention episodes in the poet's own stimulating but always re-vised life-in-writing, would go unmentioned if it were not for Bolton's lust for penning quickly forgotten and *temporary* things. Here, the attitude allows for unique perspectives on the embarrassingly quickly forgotten in the contemporary: the recent deaths of Anglophone poets of importance to Bolton and his generation. Public knowledge and its gaps are part of this drive to remember, but more so for Bolton, as it has been in earlier collections, writing to remember here involves the essential deviance of the personal from the public record.

Bolton is unafraid, for example, of stepping into the domain of old disputes. This is especially the case in 'Kate', when Bolton quotes the gist of Jennings's complaint expressed in her poem 'Without Preamble' about what she perceived as Australian culture's role in abetting poet Martin Johnston's death from the effects of alcoholism, a complaint that some friends of Johnston still living in Australia at the time found insulting and presumptuous:

> […] I like her poem
> for Martin Johnston—a lot—tho its play
> for the high ground is funny.
> (p. 54)
>
> […]
>
> *Australia killed Martin Johnston, because we're*
> *all alcoholics.*
>
> #
> Tho I never bought Martin a drink,
> while Kate may have. Anyway. (p. 55)

Bolton's poetic allows the range of associations Jennings' death elicits to express themselves in this poem with a minimum of judgement alongside casual commentary, a braid of anecdotes, literary references, non sequiturs, and asides, generating a kind of mental archive of the constellation that thought on the topic of Jennings has given rise to. However, in an uncharacteristic move, unlike the poem the note to it does seek closure to any sense of ambiguity about his own feelings about a posthumous Jennings:

> *Kate*—a poem that began with no focus—until my friend's phone brought the news of Kate Jennings' having died. This is not a balanced appraisal. She was great. (p. 151)

Dedicated to the unpredictable intelligence of association and lateral thinking, to the government of the temporary in a liberated, less hierarchical field of cultural memory, Bolton appears to seek a language for a discomfort with these milestones of finitude in a self-archivist's life which the deaths of fellow writers mark:

> Do I want to talk about any of these
> things? —Death, fragility, ageing,
> failure;
> insights, suicide? (Jazz?)—
> or do I just want to talk,
> late morning / early-arvo style
> because, 'aeolian', I seem
> 'open to suggestion'? (p. 55)

The "early-arvo" style of talk that Bolton takes in part from his longtime friend and correspondent Brown revealed earlier in the poem, means that even in the company of death the digressive launchpads, free associations, and jokes that are his preferred textual media seem even more cherished than before, given the shadows cast by mortality. The recent dead who have touched Bolton's life never tempt his poetic into final takes, closed memoirs, or monuments, but instead a doubling-down on the more immediate modes of textual memorialization he has been honing for decades. He still wants to talk, of course. A candid sense of human time's finitude appears to have been excited in him, toward a more evaluative mode of self-critical reflection toward this manner of documentation also:

> […] My friend,
> terminally ill: there is
> that to think about—tho I have
> put it off for as long as possible … so long foreshadowed.
>
> 'Ends'. Like Tranter's. My own, … that can't be
> far off. Well, it can:
> but is it? The Great Night
> Worrier. Guston might be the
> poster boy or talisman—that lonely worried head (p. 115-16)

It is noteworthy that 'Night Thoughts' makes its return to Earth from its flights of fancy, wild associative leaps, and some of his funniest remarks – I particularly liked "(The minor triumph / or satisfaction, of pronouncing / *Rooshay* for Ruscha—*Skyler* for Schuyler … whom I'd called

// *Shyler* for a while—& then *Shooler* for still longer.)" – by landing with the figure of painter Philip Guston (p. 112). It is no surprise that Guston is one of the most influential painters on Bolton and the source of his own model of self-apprehension: the combination of cartoonish exaggeration, allegorical but good-humoured critique of mainstream culture, a vast array of embedded references, historical depth, surreal effects achieved through psychic self-surveillance, and, perhaps most of all, a commitment to a complete and distinct figurative style, have textual parallels in Bolton's craft. Bolton writes that "[l]ike a Guston character— // awake, staring down the barrel, thinking / am I going to end my days critiquing Tranter?"—one reason among many Bolton does not write an elegy, as well as refuses to instruct a reader how to remember the figure (p. 112). Bolton insists that he never would write such a poem, the true authority on these unanswerable matters being mortality itself: "He's dead, he's gone" (p. 112).

Later, the whole effort to chase down what, if anything of these legacies that once mattered so much to Australian poetry matters to him becomes a delightfully cartoonish thought experiment involving Les Murray as one of those Patricia Piccinini "dirigible" artworks, with the rest of Bolton's generation left staring at up at it as the only big reputation to float so high:

> Reputations. I suppose it's
> mine I care about. But I 'don't have
> much leverage there',
> do I? The Bobfish, Tranter, the dirigible Les— what will be
>
> made of them? An enormous Murray figure, a Piccinini.
> I see it, floating, looking down
> on the suburb of Balmain—numerous
> Generation-of-68ers come out of
> terraces, out of pubs & cafes, to stare at it—mouths tight—among
> them
>
> Tranter, his life blighted. Things have changed of course— (p. 119)

Tranter is "blighted" by being superseded – literally overhead in this imagining – by Murray, of course. The overall poem is a sincerely felt and candid account of the strangeness of artistic legacy in Australia channelled through Tranter, a figure Bolton knew for such a long time, but always, as his many reflections instruct us, with significant personal distance.

Bolton remains a poet of the contemporary and the extempore. Indeed, as recent deaths generate new forms of self-reflection intimately shaping the poet's future, Bolton appears to be even more preoccupied with an attribute Jennifer Soong in *Slips of the Mind* calls "poetic forgetting" (p. 1), a quality which she observes in the "to-do" poems of John Ashbery, James Schuyler,

Ted Berrigan, and many others in which memorial and social poetic practices present an irreverent affirmation of the trivial and the immediate for an inevitably forgetful future.

At the same time, in poem 'Cath & Pontoon At Horseshoe Bay', an arc shaping *Metropole* emerges in which a lucid present that might lend itself to a more curated, dare I say, in its own way, sentimental, mnemonic logic also emerges. Does Bolton's style lie somewhere between the portrait and the "to-do"? I'm undecided. The final poem is uncommonly imagistic with a portrait aspect that, uncommonly light on reference, takes stock of a sighting of his partner, Cath Kenneally, on the beach at Horseshoe Bay in South Australia. Here, the Bolton poetic is again self-reflexively scrutinized in another typically witty remark involving a scene featuring Cath that begs, with its subject among a certain light and nearby rocks, to become a painting. The Bolton wit surmises: "Sort of thing / a bad painter would love // But great in real life" (p. 147). The aesthetic reasoning comes at a slant, which Bolton follows with "The little un-romantic pontoon / floats / like a lozenge" (p. 147). Bolton suggests that the poet's concern is less in making a statement about romanticism – Bolton long stopped caring about genre categorization and aesthetic periodization – but instead to witness what really proves arresting: the useless, unpainterly scene – which is to say, the Real.

There is always something undocumented adjacent centre-stage, speaking volumes, we discover. Bolton names the poem 'Cath & Pontoon At Horseshoe Bay' – a lesser poet, or at least a less Boltonian one, would call it 'Cath' and make it a genre poem. The pontoon provides the real lens, the real antenna, for the rendering of a more immediate quilt-work of perception. The pontoon interrupts the poem from becoming a conventional love poem, or a portrait. Such multilayered quilt-works nourish a form of more sincere self-awareness of a real experience and, perhaps, joy – and if not joy, since Bolton wouldn't spoil it for the reader by telling them how to feel about it, a melancholy of the evanescent percept written down by someone with their senses and intelligence fully engaged. *Metropole* shows Australia's most self-aware wit at his sharpest, and – strangely enough, despite his refusal to give readers their satisfaction with elegies or portraits in his signature irreverent mode – most reflective and dignified.

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