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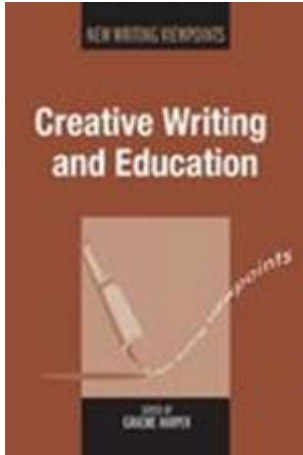
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TEXT review

Stimulating viewpoints and future directions

review by Marcelle Freiman



Creative Writing and Education

Graeme Harper (ed)

New Writing Viewpoints 11

Multilingual Matters, Bristol UK 2015

ISBN 9781783093526

Pb 201pp GBP89.95

For the eleventh volume in the New Writing Viewpoints series, Graeme Harper invited a wide range of creative writing teachers, academics and practitioners to contribute essays and commentaries addressing the major theme of 'Creative Writing and Education'. The conjunction 'and' allows for some openness towards the concept, resulting in contributor essays on learning and teaching in a great variety of educational and national contexts, and on implications of assessment, as well as future directions and technological impacts on writing. There are also reflections by 'writers who teach', essays on the institutional 'pipeline' of schools, tertiary and higher degree research, and a number of innovative case study practices brought by teachers to fields of teaching practice. Where individual teaching practice is related, what is most notable is the reflective responsiveness of these teachers to the needs of students and to the ethics of teaching and learning creative writing.

But this is not really a 'how to teach' book – we have many of those already. Rather, this volume is an attempt to engage conversations about the relationships between education and creative writing, and it amply shows the readiness of the discipline to self-transform in response to change and increasingly culturally and technologically varied contexts. Some of the most interesting contributions show interventions by teachers who think in great depth about their educative role. North American poet Katharine Coles' commentary 'Against Carefulness', for instance, addresses the need to encourage risk-taking in writing – in response to the often good, but not 'white knuckle' excellent workshop writing produced by university students. As most creative writing teachers recognise, with

the established institutionalisation of creative writing, hierarchies of teacher / student and assessment requirements exacerbate this problem. Coles posits some confronting ideas for shifting the focus towards maximising the chances of real creativity in her students, which involves teachers taking risks as well.

This kind of responsiveness is indicative of the variety of individual voices in the collection. Philip Gross' wonderful Twitter poem 'Accounting for the Unaccountable: A Forward in 42 Tweets' sets the tone for the collection by speaking to the complexities, paradoxes and ambiguities of creative writing in education that are borne out in what follows. This poem should be read by all teachers of creative writing.

Essays from teachers and academics in Israel, China, Pakistan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom confirm the growing international reach of creative writing as an academic discipline (sometimes in its infancy). From these contributions it is clear that creative writing education is underpinned by the decades of work done in establishing the discipline in Australasia, the UK and the US. While the North American approaches have often differed from those in Australasia and the UK, mainly due to institutional differences, there is evidence in this collection of a dialogic engagement between these 'major players', which I think is new and for which we should thank the editor. I was also very interested in the experience Fan Dai brings to creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University in China. Introducing Chinese language and bilingual studies to English language writing is innovative, as is the use of the workshop method within a traditionally regimented, hierarchical education system. Students respond to the first time they are permitted to bring their own subjectivity and life experience to their writing studies. Teaching between cultures and languages can produce unique creative results, as we see in Asma Mansoor's commentary from Pakistan, 'Tracing Roots in a Foreign Language', which relates teaching students writing in the 'in-between spaces' of multilingual experience. The internationalisation of creative writing is a welcome development that I anticipate will continue to the point where it can emerge beyond the excellent frameworks established by the 'major players'. While PhD candidates completing at Western universities expand the discipline globally when they find work or return to these centres, local teachers and academics are also emerging from the programs and from other disciplines to become future teachers.

This book is organised in what seems a slightly haphazard way, brought about as Harper himself notes in his 'Introduction', by the project's somewhat open (and complicated) conceptual premise. Reading it from cover to cover though, one encounters a mosaic – a clamour of voices and passions as well as some unevenness. With chapters and dialogues interspersed with less formal individual commentaries that speak outside the strictures of essay format, the tone shifts, lifts, settles and disrupts in often pleasing ways. Beginning on a disruptive note (Gross' Twitter poem) certainly makes one want to read on, but at times the experience can be disappointing. This occurs mainly with the dialogues, where several contributors bring thoughts and ideas to quite loosely-defined topics. While the individual statements here are of depth and interest, they are hard to put together because the overall structure of these pieces seem to lack focus.

At other times, one is definitely uplifted. An exciting contribution on interdisciplinary collaboration is Toby Emert and Maureen Hall's essay

‘Greater Satisfaction from the Labor: Creative Writing as a Text Response Strategy in the Teacher Education Classroom’, which theorises and illustrates the use of creative writing tasks to stimulate critical thinking in the analysis of critical material. This approach would, I think, enable creativity to be brought to learning critical thinking in any discipline. In this case, students write ‘found’ poems on slivers of text they have highlighted in their reading of a set critical chapter. The process and outcome becomes an enabler that leads the authors to ‘recognize the potential of creative writing, when used as a teaching strategy, to amplify the act of learning’ (59).

Another intervention is Paul Munden’s commentary ‘Poetry by Heart’, on a National Association of Writers in Education project (re)introducing the memorization of poetry in British schools to enhance learning. Memorization requires close attention to language and structure, and Munden emphasises how this project can extend ‘our sense of match between memorization and comprehension, a match that suffered a temporary split at the time of Britain’s postwar education reforms’ (70). This also highlights the recognition of creative writing as part of English curriculum in A Level secondary education in the UK. Maggie Butt in ‘Taking Creative Writing Seriously in Schools’ outlines her design of the British A Level Creative Writing curriculum, including strategies to include some aspects of creative writing into exam conditions. This will be of interest to those involved in secondary and tertiary creative writing assessment.

Nigel Krauth’s ‘The Radical Future of Teaching Creative Writing’ notes the differences that new and multimodal media are making to reading and the production of stories – the incorporation of visual media and ‘apps’ as integral parts of some published creative texts. Clearly, creative writing needs to engage more closely with other media. While the industry word at this point is that e-publishing is ‘stabilising’, print output is definitely experiencing change and Krauth’s suggestion that new media and creative writing should be taught together is one call to a future vision – even if English academics and creative writing teachers might find this a scary prospect, as Krauth acknowledges. Looking to the future in terms of both textual production and learning and teaching, is nonetheless necessary. Kevin Brophy and Elizabeth MacFarlane explore the need to respond to the increase in online learning environments and the currency of the ‘flipped classroom’ in ‘Redesigning the Lecture in a Cyber World: A Creative Writing Case Study’. While the demands for these changes come from universities, the fact is that most students now engage with their textual worlds and learning predominantly in digital formats and encounters.

Jeri Kroll’s measured and very informative contribution, ‘Originality and Research: Knowledge Production in Creative Writing Doctoral Degrees’ grounds education as practice and research. This is a perfect essay to pass on to doctoral creative writing students and their supervisors. Overall, this book will be of great interest to all involved with creative writing and education as it moves into a future of very rapid change. While its tendency is to sometimes lose focus, it offers a great deal that is new.

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poetry. She has published articles in TEXT, in New Writing: The International Journal of Creative Writing and contributed chapters to Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice (eds Brady and Krauth) and The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet (eds Cousins and Howarth). Her poetry publications are Monkey's Wedding (1995) and White Lines (Vertical) (2010) and she has published numerous poems in literary journals including Antipodes, Southerly, Westerly, Mascara Literary Journal and Cordite.

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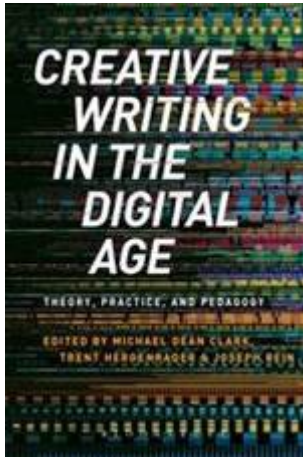
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TEXT review

Beyond fear: Teaching creative writing with digital technologies

review by Susan Taylor Suchy



Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy

Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader and Joseph Rein (eds)

Bloomsbury Academic, London UK 2015

ISBN 9781472574084

Pb 208pp USD37.95

According to Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader and Joseph Rein, the editors of *Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*, while recent creative writing scholarship examines the purpose and effectiveness of teaching models and methods, it is yet to examine the impact of digital technology on the discipline. The editors seek to remedy this gap.

The book's main aims are to help teachers of creative writing engage with digital technology, utilise collaboration, and become more interdisciplinary in pedagogy and practice. These outcomes would help creative writing fulfill a vital role in the university, because digital technology has inherent artistic, creative and communicative qualities, the editors argue. However, they elaborate, such outcomes cannot be realised as long as the field lingers in a print culture that fails to utilise digital tools and doesn't embrace the vast array of digital genres. [1]

Engaging with the digital age is no small challenge as the current state of creative writing programs can still be described as 'rather low-tech and quaintly humanistic' (McGurl 21). To address the subject and try to persuade teachers to move forward, the editors have included essays from preeminent scholars in the field of creative writing studies including Graeme Harper, Anna Leahy, and Adam Koehler. Timothy Mayers and Stephanie Vanderslice provide endorsements for the book. To enhance the discussion, the book also includes essays by researchers who approach creative writing and digital studies from a range of other perspectives

including game-based learning, computer science, composition, library science, and graphic design.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section, 'Digital influences on creative writing studies' provides various contexts for examination: envisioning creative writing from the perspective of 'synaptic' response (Harper); post human theory (Koehler) craft principles (Leahy and Dechow); gaming (Hergenrader); skill training for marketability (Clark); and aesthetics (Amato and Fleisher). The second section 'Using digital tools as creative practice', considers pedagogical applications such as online teaching (Rein); social media for identity construction and authorship (Adsit); and social media microblogging (Scheg). Additional essays afford insight into Creative Writing's relationship to computer code (Brown); programming language (Reed); Netprov (Networked Improvisational Language) (Wittig and Marino); digital storytelling platforms (Clancy); and new media (Letter).

To open the discussion, Harper, in 'Creative writing in the age of synapses', challenges creative writing teachers and practitioners, as he so often does, to consider what it means to be a creative writer, asking us to re-see ourselves, re-imagine our creative writer selves in the context of new circumstances, new environments, and to consider what the opportunities are that come with the situation.

Koehler's essay, 'Screening subjects: Workshop pedagogy, media ecologies, and (new) student subjectivities', follows and reminds us of the field's history, and validates the importance of that history as we move into the digital age. Koehler seeks to frame a digital creative writing pedagogy, and to understand the potential contributions of creative writing programs.

An understanding of the boundaries that differentiate creative writing from other disciplines and the goals of its pedagogy are also recognised by others such as Joe Amato and Kass Fleisher in 'Two creative writers look askance at digital composition (crayon on paper)' and Anna Leahy and Douglas Dechow in 'Concentration, form, and ways of (digitally) seeing'. This awareness is important for persuading the audience to embrace digital tools as other essays challenge the discipline's borders.

Helpfully, a number of the essays directly address the fears and concerns of those who are resistant to a move. For example, Leahy and Dechow express concern about the dangers of distraction, of the multi-tasking, non-linear challenges of the digital environment. Initially unsure of how to accommodate the digital in pedagogical practice, the authors lead the reader on a journey: to embrace the play and enjoyment of the digital, and to examine a greater significance for creative writing within the university. In 'The text is where it's at', Christina Clancy describes her own concerns and lack of confidence before describing how and why she took the plunge and some of the lessons she learned in a training workshop and applied in the classroom.

There are many other useful examples of how to proceed. For example Abigail G Scheg, in 'Reconsidering the online writing workshop with #25wordstory', explains working with Twitter and short form story writing. Joseph Rein, in 'Lost in digital translations: Navigating the online creative writing classroom', mentors the uninitiated about teaching online and draws from a careful analysis of his own experiences. The essay

alternates between identifying problems and offering solutions and provides clear, concise directions of how to best engage students.

While all the essays encourage more engagement with the digital world, some push harder at the boundaries of traditional creative writing, for example, Rob Wittig and Mark C Marino's 'Acting Out: Netprov in the classroom' is played out in an Advanced Writing course at University of Southern California. The improvisational and performance aspects are interesting but not typical. Likewise, the idea of engaging with video games is not traditionally found in creative writing but rather in Media Studies. Trent Hergenrader, an Assistant Professor of English at Rochester Institute of Technology, researches digital pedagogy, creative writing pedagogy, and game studies (182). His 'Game spaces: Videogames as story-generating systems for creative writers' challenges such assumptions as how we define 'literary', and what it might mean to work more collaboratively. James J Brown Jr's 'Writing with machines: Data and process in Taroko Gorge' is a fascinating exploration of Nick Montfort's 'poetry generator' to consider how programming might extend what we consider to be creative writing and even challenge romantic authorship notions about solitary genius (134).

Many of the authors are able to convincingly present parallels and similarities that align creative writing and computer programming, digital technology and new media (for example, Leahy and Dechow, Brown, Letter, Reed). The issue of multimodality looms large, but the focus of the articles is to attend to the benefits. For instance, Clancy argues that digital and multimodal forms are useful in engaging students and ultimately serve to bring them back to traditional narrative.

Several essays address the issue of the teacher's role, how we teach and how we lead. For example, Amato and Fleisher debate teaching expertise when considering multimodal forms; Amy Letter, in 'Creative writing for new media', argues that the role of the teacher is to 'inspire' (188) the students, 'coaching and supporting students emotionally' (186). The goal seems to be to learn how to 'task-switch and derive creative energy from the technologies' (188). This, Letter argues, means no hand-holding and, she continues, this is no different than what is done in creative writing traditionally. Michael Dean Clark, in 'The marketable creative: using technology and broader notions of skill in the fiction course', argues that collaboration and communication skills are what all students need and that creative writing programs can provide that training, although they have not traditionally done so. His hybrid classes serve as a model for how that outcome might be approached.

While all of the essays are interesting, not all the suggestions are realistic for many classrooms or perhaps for the discipline. One problem is implementation (Amato and Fleisher). Another issue is that creative writing is an intense training in itself (Letter). New media training introduces more demands. Aaron A Reed's 'Telling Stories with Maps and rules: Using the interactive fiction language "Inform 7" in a creative writing workshop' is a fascinating study and reveals similarities between programming and writing. However, as Reed points out, the time needed to learn the computer language is prohibitive (150). Additionally, the issue of pedagogical borders is not easily resolved. This is evident when Janelle Adsit proposes, in 'Giving an account of oneself: Teaching identity construction and authorship in creative nonfiction and social media', that in the digital age 'marketing should be a subject of analysis in the creative writing classroom' (110). Adsit's comment indicates two important issues

for the field: (1) there is a different kind of marketplace, and (2) there are barriers to that space. The marketplace relationship needs further examining.

Can creative writing teachers move beyond fear to create a vital discipline by using digital technology? *Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy* certainly offers a starting place and is a valuable resource for pedagogy and practice toward that end. A website provides additional tips for teaching. The concerns mentioned above represent an important part of the discussion that the authors have initiated. The book offers a strong starting place from which to consider how creative writing might be vibrant within the university and fulfill its role in educating students from all fields – to effectively and creatively communicate ideas through training in both creative writing and digital experiences.

Notes

[1] Those genres include ‘multimodal presentations, fan fiction, social media posts, digital narratives, wikis, and blogs, just to name a few’ (Clark, Hergenrader & Rein 2).
return to text

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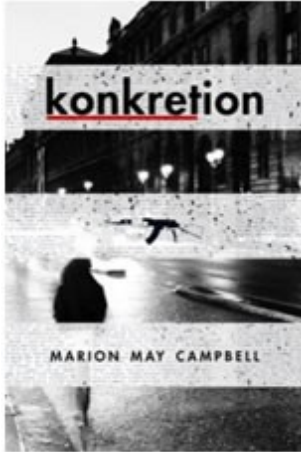
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TEXT review

A jouissant relay of writing

review by Moya Costello



Marion May Campbell
konkretion

University of Western Australia Press, Perth WA 2013
ISBN 9781742584911
Pb 148 pp AUD24.99



Marion May Campbell
Poetic Revolutionaries: Intertextuality and Subversion
Rodopi, Amsterdam 2014
ISBN 9789042037861
Pb 324 pp AUD94.00

‘[A]mong the most intellectually challenging and inventive of contemporary Australian novelists ... a writer of truly international stature’: thus reads Michael Ackland’s preface to *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail* (Ackland 2012: 2). One could – very easily – substitute ‘Marion May Campbell’ for ‘Murray Bail’. Campbell is ‘[i]rrepressibly virtuosic, a “writers’ writer” ... ‘a true innovator’ in

‘writing given to risk and deterritorialization ... a major Australian writer’ states Gail Jones in her ‘Preface’ to a Campbell compendium, *Fragments from a Paper Witch* (Jones 2008: ix-x). Margaret Henderson, reviewing *Poetic Revolutionaries*, a companion critical text to the novella, *konkretion*, concurs: ‘Campbell has long been one of Australia’s leading experimental writers, and one of the most innovative feminist writers to have emerged in the 1980s when Australian women’s writing became a significant presence in Australian publishing’ (Henderson 2014: 1).

Poetic Revolutionaries is an exemplary textbook study on leading Australian and international experimental fiction writers. It is a scholarly work of broad, encompassing literary theory and criticism. Campbell attributes her regard for the mutual imbrication of theory and practice to ‘Tel Quel’s projects in the 1960s and early 1970s’ (Campbell 2014: 14). *Poetic Revolutionaries* examines texts by Kathleen Mary Fallon, Kathy Acker, Jean Genet, Angela Carter, Brian Castro and Kim Scott: writers ‘who use transformations of other texts for subversive purposes’ (Campbell 2014: 26). Andrew McCann notes of the protagonist of *konkretion*, Monique Piquet, in his review of the novella, that ‘[w]e are clearly in the company of a character who looks outside of Australia for her intellectual sustenance and inspiration’, with her mentions of Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Artaud, Irigaray, Wittig et al (McCann 2013).

Campbell is an incommensurable risk-taker. She risks everything. Always. Risks. Everything. Always. *konkretion* is a disrupted, polyvocal, punning, intertextual and hybrid text. We move in and out of layered texts, in and out of genres (novella, prose / poetry, monologue / script), in and out of the protagonist’s episodic life, in and out of subjectivities, in and out of spaces.

To write through radical textual practice in Australia is a particularly risky strategy. In France, radical philosophers – ‘maverick intellectuals’, Andrew McCann (2013) calls them – get their name on the front page of national newspapers. Among the many spaces one can see clearly the overwhelming conservative leaning of Australia is in its literary industry – what gets published and by who, what gets reviewed and how, what gets short-listed in literary prizes and what wins those prizes. Campbell notes that what we might think of the “‘well-made” story’ is marked by the violence of representation and claims for a ‘universality of the sovereign patriarchal subject’ (Campbell 2013b). As narrated in *konkretion*, ‘[r]ealist illusionism, with all its connective tissue between nicely narrated episodes and its chopper-in-the-sky assurances that all is seen and glossed, make [Monique] sick at heart’ (Campbell 2013a: 28). Jones writes of Campbell as condemning ‘the glamour industry of publishing, its mean duplicities’ (2008: xiv). Campbell herself writes in *Poetic Revolutionaries* that in contemporary Australia, ‘cultural workers need to fight institutionally to sustain debate about literary works that ... write disruptively back to power’ (288). McCann sees Campbell’s novella as:

an intense meditation on the abjection of authorship, but it also explores the fate of the avant-garde (both literary and political) in circumstances in which, as Slavoj Žižek suggested in his 2011 speech at Liberty Plaza, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. (McCann 2013)

Another reviewer of *konkretion*, Patrick Allington, notes its absence from prize lists, specifically the Stella Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award (Allington 2014). Allington congratulates *konkretion*'s publisher, the small-to-middle-size independent University of Western Australia Press, which, under Terri-Ann White, has joined similar presses such as Giramondo, Brandl & Schlesinger and Spineless Wonders in doing the most interesting things in Australian and international publishing. In the novella, too, through the gaze of Piquet, we view the fate of a radical politics romanticised: it becomes commodified, its hero/ines emblazoned on everything from t-shirts to coffee mugs.

Campbell's novels are challenging, fierce, funny, a fair-ground's high rides in the air – lines of flight, 'new creative departures'; terms Campbell (2013b) herself deploys, and which McCann echoes:

The sense of flight that dominates the opening of the novel[la] also points back to the provincialism of an Australian intellectual scene characterized by the commercialisation of literary publishing and the instrumentalisation of higher education. (McCann 2013)

Campbell has noted that the 'market-driven nature of the so-called Australian literary "industry"' had caused her to lose 'quite a bit of ... experimental verve' (2013b). Indeed, in the novella, Piquet is in double trouble: as a writer with publishing and as an academic with higher education. Piquet's literary agent – think of two television harridans: Joey's chain-smoking agent, Estelle, in *Friends*, or Frasier's mendacious agent, Bebe, in *Frasier* – says to her that readers 'want it *told*, not condensed, in ... inscrutable fragments. They want *proper characters* and ... explanation' (Campbell 2013a: 4-5). Readers who have followed Campbell's work will recognise here the similarity with her memorable essay in that ground-breaking anthology edited by Kerr and Nettelbeck (1998), *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*, in which Campbell wrote that '[c]haracter and story are troubled categories': 'Do you want to be buoyed by the ... current... Do you want continuities ... I reckon flow sucks' (Campbell 1998: 271-81). So Piquet writes, or tries to write, or imagines writing – one of several embedded texts in the novella – lesbian young-adult romance, apparently to no avail. Further, in late career, she has an embarrassing moment in a lecture where she forgets what she was to lecture on and drops her folio of lecture papers; this endgame comes after a heraldic career as a radical lecturer inciting young women to revolution – it is a career in which there is also an imperative to publish.

konkretion performs the strategies discussed and the thesis proposed in *Poetic Revolutionaries*, through its stylistic and genre-boundary-crossing tactics. The novella begins and ends with the idea of a draft which is text as 'all aperture', open to other texts (Campbell 2013b). A second embedding of text is the romance manuscript by Piquet; a third is Angel Beigesang's (Piquet's former student) text about the Baader-Meinhof gang. (These latter two are formatted by font changes.) Such a move is not uncommon in fiction and is about the fictiveness of fiction, its artifice. Another process in the making of texts is their making by / from other texts, or intertextuality. Intertextuality, if made overt, is an avant-garde strategy, enabling a 'disruptive, critical purchase on [the] host culture' (Campbell 2013b).

These strategies are part of Campbell's cultivation of 'loiterature' (2013b), or polyamorous ventriloquy or receptivity, an idea she attributes to Ross Chambers. *Poetic Revolutionaries* (Campbell 2014: 24) also praises Linda Hutcheon for her work on metafiction, a pointing towards a text's own artifice, a pointing that forgoes immersion in mimesis for the normally 'sure poultice for your wounds' (Campbell 1998: 217), a willingness to bear the wounds open as Piquet herself does with her varicose veins, the result of too much smoking.

In *Poetic Revolutionaries*, Campbell itemises the textual strategies of innovation, which include 'radical montage', 'parataxis' (no subordinating based on sentence style), 'syntactical jumpcuts', 'radical textual interruption' / 'non sequitur[s]', voice shifts (and 'narratorial switching of grammatical persona and tense'), 'font changes', use of graphics, 'intersplicing of parodied and "plagiarised" texts', laying bare the devices of the text, use of puns and intertextuality – many of which feature in *konkretion* (Campbell 2014: 285-7). Campbell also notes ironic transcontextualisation (via Hutcheon and her work on historiographic metafiction's parody and intertextuality), and transgressive scenography for purposes of parody (2014: 24). For an example, Campbell looks to Genet's 'inversions of classical tragedy' (26), his anti-realism and the tensions he established between performance and audience. Acker, Carter, Fallon, Scott and Castro deploy parody or radical revisionism, and/or use intertextuality (27).

One of Campbell's many strategies in *konkretion* is the frequent use of word puns. 'Beigesang', for instance, according to McCann, 'is a literal rendering into German of the word *parody*' (McCann 2013). Francesca Sasnaitis says it reminds her of 'Der Gesang' ... German for singing and 'Beigesang' might, at a pinch, be interpreted as 'singing together', an allusion to Piquet and Beigesang ... or indeed, to Meinhof and Esslin, whom Beigesang's book is about (Sasnaitis 2013). I thought, playfully, that it might also signify beige singing or a beige song, as Piquet is critical of Angel Beigesang's text, seeing it as potentially romanticising Baader-Meinhof, and of Beigesang herself, a lover, according to Piquet, of the same dressage as Baader and Esslin: 'Monique sees again the acolyte's mimicry, straddling the seminar chairs in her crumpled gunmetal linen pants-suit and apricot Indian shirt' (Campbell 2013a: 56). Both Andreas Baader and his lover Gundrun Esslin are themselves immersed in an aestheticised (anaesthetised?) radical chic, through dress/age. Baader memorably makes his own skin-tight jeans and Esslin shops in a Paris boutique for a short mohair pink jumper and potentially a Chanel skirt.

At the core of the novella and the textbook is the question of avant-garde practices in writing and their potential for radical socio-political change. The question that both books ask is 'how textual innovation can be articulated with effective socio-political critique' (Campbell 2014: 14-15). The novella acknowledges a number of problems, not the least of which is violence and murderousness, specifically by the Baader-Meinhof gang, later known as the Red Army Faction (RAF). Campbell (2013b) selected the gang for focus 'because the first RAF generation coincided with the rise of Tel Quel and shared the same intellectual climate', and because the two women, Meinhof and Esslin, 'were initially driven by high political passion and ethical ardour'. Baader is in fact a minor character in the novella, and I've more than once wondered why it was that Esslin did not have her name included in the gang's moniker. Mixed up in the revolution were gender and sexual politics still left warped by it. Motherhood is now infamous victim of radical feminist politics. And Piquet, Meinhof and

Esslin are all evidence of that bullying: for the three women, something has gone wrong with childrearing; it has mixed outcomes or has been utterly abandoned.

Were Baader-Meinhof's activities pointless, self-obsessed and selfish? One of the saddest affairs in the novella is Meinhof's continual attempts to prove herself to Esslin in particular, who equally continued, according to Beigesang's text, to appraise Meinhof negatively. It is as if, significantly, and ironically, Esslin never got over the rejection of her poetry by Meinhof, in their early association, as 'too hysterical'.

Baader-Meinhof failed, not only because they converted from 'resistance to terror' (Campbell 2013a: 88), but because the language of Meinhof, the prolific writer of the three, was not poetic, was not of *poesis*. Her language was 'sloganeering' (Campbell 2013a: 45). Beigesang wonders 'how things might have been different if Meinhof had found, beyond journalism and polemics, a kind of writing to run its festive way ... in a more *jouissant* relay' (Campbell 2013a: 44). For Campbell, the writers she examines in *Poetic Revolutionaries* are models against the unthinkable: a failure of imagination. Jones (2008) says of Campbell that she 'is a writer preoccupied ... by the profundity of what literature as a category of experience might mean, by what intimacies and revelations attend acts of reading and writing' (x). Campbell herself concludes: 'textual practices that counter the teleological imperative of the well-made story ... can still deliver potent and critical parodies of oppressive modes of representation ... [and] radical textual practice can fuel critique and empower resistance' (2014: 287-8).

Amid early twenty-first century crises – climate change and global warming, peak oil, widespread poverty and injustice, mass migration and species extinction – I think of Campbell's texts, creative and critical, as lifeboats, hovercraft with air-borne capacity, passenger-full and powering-up for a new creative departure.

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TEXT

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TEXT review

Stigmatext

review by Jessica Gildersleeve



Quinn Eades

all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body

Tantanoola, North Melbourne VIC 2015

ISBN 9781925333299

Pb 274 pp AUD24.95

Stigmata, the wound, the trace, is, Hélène Cixous has said, something ‘I want... I do not want the stigmata to disappear. I am attached to my engravings, to the stings in my flesh and my mental parchment... [T]he literature in me wants to maintain and reanimate traces’ (Cixous 2005: 12-13). It is the ‘literature in me’ that Quinn Eades ‘traces’ in this first book, *all the beginnings*. Words, wounds, remains, and scars are gathered in this work which celebrates the fragmentary and the ordinary, the past and the present, but above all, the body, in all its forms: the body sick, in pain, tortured, strong, queered, working, labouring, recovering. Importantly, Eades writes, this is not a work about ‘every body. This is my body, written, not every woman’s, or every queer’s, or every mother’s: one body, attempting to answer and extend Cixous, to speak’ (2015: 37). *all the beginnings*, then, is autobiography in its purest sense: self-body-writing. Writing the body of this self, writing the self that is this body.

all the beginnings sets out to complicate Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine* by proposing something new: *écriture matière*, ‘a vast root system ... that spawns all bodies, writing’ (25). As such, it writes the beginning(s) of Eades’ body, Eades’ children’s bodies, and of the other bodies and lives with whom they come in contact. We might read *all the beginnings*, then, as the story of a body becoming mother, of performing an ‘incongruent’ motherhood, of ‘boy clothes and boots and breasts’ (165), of fertility ended: ‘*I can’t have another baby. / I don’t want another baby*’ (218); and of the body shared by infants, lovers, even doctors. But it is also a story of coming to writing, of training the body to labour, to (re)produce – of beginning each sentence, each page, each narrative fragment. The mother, then, is also the literary foremother, the ‘m(other)’

and the ‘double’: ‘We are looping, we are writers, we are text, we are linkages and tears’ (217). Like mother and child, the writers simultaneously bring one another into being in this reminder of the dialogic model of reading and writing.

In many ways, *all the beginnings* is structured by the principles of trauma – the ways in which trauma returns, unbidden, causing anachrony and fragmentation in the narrative, a series of beginnings. Each chapter explores a central theme or series of events (the birth of a child, finding the courage to write, recovering from surgery), but is divided into shorter subchapters which form individual vignettes or meditations, moving between past and present in a probing search for the body as coherent, settled self. But then again, as Cixous says, ‘[a]ll literature is scary’ (2005: 11). Perhaps for this reason, then, *all the beginnings* is a work which is as much poetry and literary theory as it is narrative. It stitches together the narrative prose of memoir, Eades’ own poetry, and the literary theory of Cixous, of course, but also other feminist and poststructuralist writers reflecting on motherhood, the body, and the law. In this sense, the work is a kind of contemporary feminist ‘Waste Land’, calling up and recalling and remembering the collective voices of those who came before, those who comment on and work through and about the body. Many of these citations are referenced, per Eliot, with commentary and bibliographic details contained at the back of the book, but many simply rely on a reader familiar with the words of those theorists, their triggers for thought. It is a ‘poetics of the abject’ (2015: 123), an abjection where it is difficult to tell where Eades stops and these works begin, where this body writing stops and those bodies writing begin, but that is the point. They are all beginning(s). And just as Eliot’s poem finishes with a call for peace – *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih* – so too Eades ultimately works through those corporeal and psychological traumas to find the peace of the ordinary in a ‘golden room’ of ‘Dirt. Tea. Banana. Sun. Toast’ (243).

One of Eades’ tattoos embellishes the cover of *all the beginnings*, and throughout the narrative tattoos become a way to literally write the self. ‘This tattoo that strikes down from shoulder to wrist’, Eades says, ‘that caresses the crease on the inside of my elbow, ...this becoming-ink, is a doing; not a freeing, or even a meaning. This tattoo ... is desire and *jouissance*... It is an insistence on alive-ness, on being, on love that is writing and reading; that is ink’ (13). Eades has many tattoos, and they each tell a story, together they tell the story of that body. I have one tattoo. It is a single word, delicate script on the inside of my right wrist (I am right-handed). It reads, it writes: *jouissance*, the bliss of reading, of *écriture féminine*, perhaps even *écriture matière*, the beginning of writing.

At the end of *all the beginnings*, Eades meets literary (m)other, Hélène Cixous, who inscribes Eades’ copy of *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* to ‘her wonderful “crew” of life’ (254). It is a pun, Eades eventually decides, on short hair, and love of family – the ‘crew’ who gather around Eades now, those who follow Eades’ ideas as Eades follows Cixous’s. I hold her (in)script(ion) in my own inscribed hand, she reads, she writes, I read, I write, and thus the *jouissance* circulates and builds in the matrilineage of women’s writing. In this way, *all the beginnings* is always beginning, always the beginning, in a *jouissance* without end.

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TEXT

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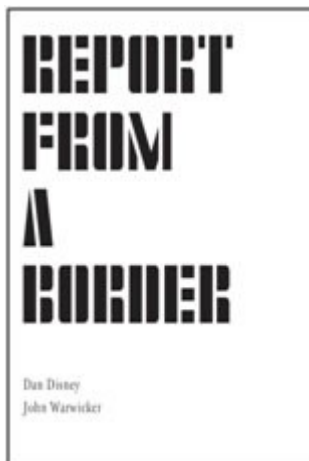
TEXT review

Disney's poetics of inhabited impermanence

review by Dominique Hecq



Dan Disney
either, Orpheus
University of Western Australia Press, Crawley WA 2016
ISBN 9781742588193
Pb 88pp unnumbered AUD25.00



Dan Disney and John Warwicker
Report from a Border
light-trap press, Maleny QLD 2016
ISBN 9780980486360
Standard edn/Deluxe edn 128pp unnumbered AUD65.00 / AUD300.00

Through some weird chance encounter, the year Charles Darwin's famous study *On the Origins of Species* appeared in print – 1859 – Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay 'Quotation and Originality' was also penned (Emerson 1946). In it, he challenged the very notion of originality by arguing that as speakers and writers we are inescapably involved in a constant process of quotation. As Freud later demonstrated, the human psyche is a kind of

quotation machine (Freud 2001 [1895]). It is indeed the case that the use of words involves quotation and that the past, as experience and as record, inhabits, and sometimes inhibits, the present. Despite any changes we might wish to make to Emerson's text in order to account for the technological developments that have occurred in excess of one hundred and fifty years, we have to concede that the tension and interrelatedness between quotation and originality endures. Indeed, writer and theorist Mark Amerika has given us a creative method for perfecting the art of quotation and working with found material: surf, sample, manipulate: 'Surf the culture, sample data and then change that data to meet the specific needs of the narrative' (Amerika 1995).

Dan Disney's new books of poetry, *either, Orpheus* and *Report from a Border*, are about weird chance encounters and perfecting the art of quotation through contrivance. Poems in these two collections are all elaborate 'tissue[s] of quotations' (Barthes 1977: 146) or deconstructions of existing tissues of quotations. Nothing is ever explicit, culturally, poetically, or ethically. And yet all the previously invoked fields are explored, especially for the paradoxes they uncover. Relentlessly. For example, while hills and valleys and mountains and the lack of boundaries are key motifs in *either, Orpheus*, especially in part one, perhaps because life on the edge is in some ways exhilarating, *Report* scrutinises the borders against which the book's protagonists and speakers abut. Both *either, Orpheus* and *Report from a Border* trigger meditations on impermanence and inhabitation and the chance encounter between these two works invites the reader to confront avatars of utopia and dystopia.

The complexity of *either, Orpheus* and *Report from a Border* is alluring. Both are syntactically and typographically inventive. The former is a ludic book engaging with other texts in self-reflexive fashion. And yet it is never narcissistic. Through utilising shifting personas and modes of poetic diction, it achieves some kind of exclusive inclusiveness which resonates with its subject matter: what it means to be human in the maze of (post)modernity. Through perfecting the art of quotation, both *either, Orpheus* and *Report from a Border* are tributes to the richness, value, inescapability of language in its spoken and written forms, books and ideas. And despite their tackling very different themes, both gesture towards what might be called an ethics of poetry.

The unifying principle at the heart of the maze is a concern with poetic forms and forms of exile. *either, Orpheus* tells of the burdens of history and the ruins of memory. It speaks of the erasure of consciousness, the decolonisation of affects, and it speaks of death without any touch of nostalgia for origins from a variety of viewpoints. The poems speak in and through themselves while showing the reader the many approaches that gain purchase in Disney's poetic world. In this world, spectral characters appear, and like Jorge Luis Borges' metaphysicians of Tlön they 'do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for astonishment' (Borges 1964: 34. Translation modified). And what do they find? Among many astonishing things in *either, Orpheus*, they discover:

a frisson of hello raging aloud
waving theatrically at the terminus of
each hell... (John Berryman)

Report from a Border is also concerned with poetic forms and forms of exile firmly embedded in the present moment and orality, however

Disney's protagonists encounter something of 'THE KINETICS OF PURGE' (*sic*), and before that:

'... END OF THE LINE
NICK.' we are
denizens OF
EMPTY TIME, A
PACK CALLING
FROM OUR SIDE
OF THE FENCE.
'LOCKED OUT'

Here, I will pause briefly to bemoan the absence of page numbers in both books. If this was intentional (and I've tried to come up with some plausible reasons), it's not making my job easy, nor yours, dear reader.

$$(1+x)^n = 1 + \frac{nx}{1!} + \frac{n(n-1)x^2}{2!} + \dots$$

OR

$$f(x) = a_0 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left(a_n \cos \frac{n\pi x}{L} + b_n \sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} \right)$$

Disney's poetic world is formal, historical, etymological, and to a lesser extent, political, biographical, and eco-critical in its postmodern sense of play, satire, and suspicion, and the concurrent romantic vision of the redemptive possibilities of art. The reader who seeks modernist seriousness in *either, Orpheus* will soon be frustrated with the hiccups of villanelles that morph into *villaknelles* where repetition and quotation are often used to great ironic effect. It is especially evident in poems such as those from 'accelerations and inertias' which won first place in the 2015 Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize. In these poems, the connections between works, ideas, figures and patterns are amazingly intricate and illuminating, particularly upon discovering their textual sources:

These texts engage with a range of textual sources: (i) originates after reading the interview with Charles Wright in *The Paris Review* (No. 113, Winter 1989); (ii) originates after reading "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin against the grain of "Always On" by Sherry Turkle; (iii) originates after reading "Cultural Pedigree" by Pierre Bourdieu alongside "Income and Output" by Thomas Piketty; (iv) originates after reading the interview with A.R. Ammons in *The Paris Review* (No 139, Summer 1986); (v) originates after reading the interview with Jorge Luis Borges in *The Paris Review* (No 40, Winter-Spring 1967). (Disney 2015: 108)

On the other hand, the reader who wants only postmodern indeterminacy and scepticism inspired by the writings of John Cage and OULIPO aficionados will stumble over the recurring lines from mystic poet Rainer Maria Rilke in the epigraphs to part one and three, and the echoes of Rilke texts throughout the collection. There is cause not for despair here, but for fascination and excitement in the possibilities of exploding the diachronic and transnational fields of poetic language.

Thus, *either, Orpheus* foregrounds the influences of philosophers, social theorists and other poets. Disney's work, shows (off) how he responds and re-reads such figures as Kierkegaard and Rilke, Jorge Luis Borges, Ted Hughes, Charles Wright, Paul Muldoon, John Ashbery, George Seferis, Jean-Paul Sartre, Czesław Miłosz, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Gary Snyder, William Wordsworth, Pierre Bourdieu, Elizabeth Bishop, Yves Bonnefoy, Joseph Brodsky, John Cage (a favourite), Anne Carson, Robert Graves, Immanuel Kant, Walter Benjamin, Alain Badiou and many others – named or not (I read a reference to Lacan in the swarm of bees first invoked in relation to Rilke).

Conspicuously absent are references to Australian thinkers and poets; the exception is Les Murray, in a rather ambivalent piece. Why this is the case is a good question. My guess is that Dan Disney may think of himself as a self-imposed exile. And I suspect that he is closer to Paul Muldoon, whom he quotes at some length, than any other living poet he engages with in virtual conversation, apart from Dante, another exile, whose influence is felt from the start of the prologue onwards. In fact, the word 'exile' recurs as a mantra in *either, Orpheus*, and although absent in *Report from a Border*, it is exile which is this work's subject matter. In Disney's poetic world, '[t]he exile ... exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments' (Said 1996: 49). However in this world, the exile is divested from 'nostalgic and sentimental' attributes (49). Disney's exilic figure could be said to be a latent exile. Aesthetically and ethically, then, Disney joins the company of Dante, Baudelaire and Muldoon.

Like these poets, Disney strives to bring forth the contradictions at the heart of his human and poetic heritage. Yet the word 'heart' is not frequently called upon in Disney's poetry. Nor are overt instances of an autobiographical nature. Disney and Muldoon share an interest in writing the poetical and experiential landscapes of poetry, but Disney, like Dante, and unlike Baudelaire and Muldoon, shies away from any family history and emotional terrain that might partake of a work's 'hidden architecture' to cite Valéry translated by Muldoon (Muldoon 2004: 25). Nonetheless, what they all strive to convey is that 'very little is as it seems' (Muldoon 25), or to put it in imagist mode, that 'truth is a ship bound for utopia' (Disney 2016a). Although both are reluctant to support any claims for art's importance and near-sacred status, both affirm their faith at least in art's power to express ideas, feelings and affects, especially despair. Muldoon does so in elegies written upon the death of family and friends; Disney does so in elegies for the unknown and often unnamed of (post)modernity. This testifies to a common understanding of aesthetic illumination as well as redemptive drive.

While *either, Orpheus* is universal in significance and intertextual engagement, *Report from a Border*, co-devised with graphic artist John Warwicker, is more local in character. It shares similar formal and thematic concerns with *either, Orpheus*, but its topos is not *the tortuous road to modernity*; rather, it is *the torturous backdrop* of a colonised 'cove' (emphasis ed. otherwise Disney 2016b: 74). Here, the typographical experiments enhance the social critique rather than the formal and philosophical possibilities of poetry. Almost every page in the book deliberately offers multiple ways of being read and therefore foregrounds multiple points of views. Here inclusive exclusiveness often excludes the reader by questioning her values, which is disconcerting at times, but no doubt intended as a provocation. Indeed, any attempt to 'analyse' *Report*

from a Border through thematic dissection, is an exercise in futility; it is like attempting to grasp the intricacies of a puzzle by examining each individual piece.

In these more overtly politicised poems, Disney displays his penchant for satire of a Swiftian mode by making use of the whole gamut of possibilities typography offers, especially in conveying the violence *of/and inflicted by* language. Thus whereas *either, Orpheus* creates a fable of social and political and aesthetic experience that uncovers truths about what it means to be human, *Report from a Border* translates vignettes of social and political experiences that discover and uncover hidden truths about human nature. And what is hidden is often hideous. In this work, ‘we are all exiles’, as the Canadian novelist Robert Kroetsch put it wryly in a postcolonial context (Kroetsch 1977), and it is unclear whether redemption is possible, especially for Australians, who are irrevocably caught in the mesh of postcolonialism and its neo-colonial fibre.

A recurring word in both volumes is ‘thus’. Because I’ve always thought this adverb rather ponderous, I find its recurrence intriguing. And I wonder if, perhaps there is a connection to be made here with the absence of intertextual engagement with Australian poets. Neither versed in Korean or Korean poetry, though interested in Japanese verse through my reading of Lacan’s later writings, I wonder if I have missed that Disney also incorporates Asian aesthetics into his poems, especially in the *either, Orpheus* ones with their elliptic devices and increasing absence in structure, image, and syntax that makes me recall the Mahayana Buddhist doctrines of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *tathatā* (thusness). The noun ‘mind’ only appears once in *either, Orpheus* and *Report* – and in this instance, it is beyond its usual meaning, consciousness, and so may refer to ‘emptiness’ – the condition of the ‘mind’ expressed in its ‘thusness’ à la Buddhist philosophy.

If this interpretation is too far-fetched, one recalls William Blake’s incitation of ‘melting apparent surfaces away’ (Blake 1978: 88). Inert hills, mountains, and their ‘groundwork’ with human waste are all undergoing energy transformation. Equally, there is no essential ‘individual self’, but creatures ‘exiled as mystics from the glossy pictures of lakeside slums’ (88). I don’t mean to suggest that Dan Disney is either seer or prophet, but a poet spiritually and philosophically roaming across fields and pointing to the fundamental philosophy of emptiness and impermanence. In this, he is, like Gary Snyder whose work he cites, countering the sorts of ideology that expose human and non-human nature to suffering on a catastrophic scale. He does so ‘from the zone of a [Oulipian] *User’s Guide*’.

Dan Disney is a rare pyro-technician who dazzles with his poetic acumen and depth of reflection. He matches the complexity and uncertainty of the twenty-first century with a poetic project that is enthrallingly uncertain, yet nevertheless vibrant and generative in its wit, wisdom and ongoing effort to find meanings in the world. His poetry suggests that language is only a means of uncovering the grain of things because it uncovers the chaos of structures that actually permeate Western capitalism and its associated ideologies. It lays bare processes of perception, thinking and feeling, and yet paradoxically shows that language negates its own assertions by making unexpected connections across ‘syntaxing surfaces’.

It remains to offer Disney the following homage:

Weaving her way
through
the woods the city the maze
of slums on the outskirts
where the abject poor seethe
like a rising storm
& nodding to herself the exiled reviewer
stumbles
like a poet testing
the cadences & shifting lines
towards a light less
truth
is a ship bound for utopia
(Baudelaire vs Disney)
WHOSE
villanelles rev-
O! luce ion eyes
the form
in parodic conversation
with the philosophers & the poets
bound for utopia
Immanuel Can't & Charles Seem Hic
but [yes] mostly Kierkegaard & Rilke
(Hecq vs Lacan)

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Dominique Hecq's first publication, The Book of Elsa, a mythically inflected novel, was published in 2000. Since then she has published three collections of short fiction, five books of poetry, and one CD with libretto, Thirst, with the assistance of sound artist Catherine Clover. Two of her plays have been performed in Australia, Belgium and Germany. Her recent work increasingly pursues polygeneric concerns – see Out of Bounds and Stretchmarks of Sun (Re.press). Hush, in progress, pushes this formal concern even further.

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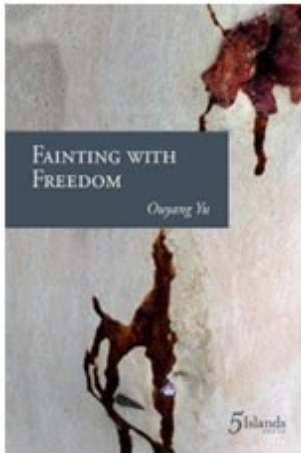
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TEXT review

Not the mirror image but the reverse side of the mirror

review by Tse Hao Guang



Ouyang Yu
Fainting with Freedom
Five Islands Press, Parkville VIC 2015
ISBN 9780734050250
Pb 96pp AUD25.00

Ouyang Yu's *Fainting with Freedom* is soap-bubble language. It lives halfway between being and becoming, full of conversational breath, reflective of the mind that created it, bilingual and annoyed, bored and shocked at its own boredom. It asks pointed questions of itself, which this review will attempt to dig into: which is the audience? who is speaking? what's going on?

Poetry and identity politics seem to live together easily, especially in contemporary work. The poems of *Fainting*, however, resist this easiness, complicating any readerly attempt to grasp a stable poetic self. Here are lines from '50', echoing both Ashbery's and Parmigianino's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror':

...in your language, alter-ego
is the opposite of the alter-ego, not the mirror
image but the reverse side
of the mirror. it requires a strange translation to
make sense: know-heart
hence the alter-ego that knows the heart. not
true. (11)

Whereas in English alter ego means second self, know-heart (知心) suggests the opposite, assumes that a person has a whole heart which is known by another. And so Yu in his opening poem attempts to bring two different conceptions of the self together.

This collision of selfhoods results in linguistic complexity. The pieces in *Fainting* delight in such difficulty – specifically, awkward syntax and tense, incomplete sentences, seemingly unnecessary repetitions, painfully absent punctuation, indecorous line breaks. This nod to ‘English’, ‘translationese’ and other forms of English as a second language is one obvious way of bringing two kinds of selves – one ‘Western’, the other ‘Eastern’ – together. Beyond that, many poems read like internal conversations, passionately idiosyncratic, where the speaker talks past or over different versions of itself:

a reader finds poetry in his shit that takes years
to come much is
committed and committed to in waiting as little
is happening the rich kid is
now offering to buy a new dad... (‘Waiting’ 43)

On the one hand, difficulty and idiosyncrasy is sometimes mistaken as hostility, where the poet ignores the reader and writes to and for himself only. On the other, it seems Caliban lives within Yu’s speakers, who learn a colonial language in order to engage in its creative abuse. The hostility to the reader is reflective of a history of hostilities between races and cultures, played out here in the realm of language.

Even though readers without knowledge of Chinese languages or culture might miss many of Yu’s references, in other ways *Fainting* seems receptive to a non-Chinese speaking audience. ‘You only need 人 (man) to make it heaven’, from ‘Talking about —’, stumbles the bilingual reader with the extra syllable in brackets; elsewhere, italicised, romanised Chinese characters mark them as uneasily integrated into the text (68). In that vexed space where Chineseness is sometimes confidently assumed and sometimes demarcated as foreign to the text, Yu’s speakers curse the Anglophone world they are also irrevocably a part of.

The internal conversations of *Fainting*, when not about being Chinese in Australia (as in ‘The Boat Project’ or ‘20 Yuan’) or Poetry Itself (‘Self Publishing’, perhaps ‘Volcanoes’), seem to be about a kind of existential boredom. The effect is the opposite of boring. ‘Banality’, instead of employing the usual tactic of elevating the everyday, records shampoo and semen and salted fish to show ‘how close the bin is to my brain’ (19). As in some kinds of contemporary assemblage, trash is turned into art; the banal becomes another creative refuge.

This existentialism, which manifests in recycling the cast-off parts of language, explains why Yu’s poetry is both fascinated with and afraid of ending. ‘I want to disappear into creative / banality’, the speaker in ‘Banality’ says. In ‘Philosophy’, facts about Heidegger and Kierkegaard are declaimed flatly, and the poem is abandoned after these words:

To be polished is to be finished, for a second
time. Readers of this poem, unite and trash it
(29)

Yu’s poetry uses trash and becomes trash, but is left unfinished so that it may not be finished off, emerging in the tension between existence and process. A stable concept of self, paradoxically, also means the foreclosing of possibilities, is ‘to be finished’.

Possibly the most important aspect of *Fainting*, however, is Yu's ability to integrate these somewhat postmodern approaches to identity with the specificity of Chinese language and culture. In 'A Report on *Feicheng Wurao*', Yu describes the popular Chinese dating game show as an arena where cultural values bump up against each other in surprising ways:

And an American lady, of 24 or 25, I also
remember

Ended up rupturing the heart of a Canadian
man
After many gorgeous Chinese guys failed her

Tonight, though, belongs to Australia and
Africa... (52)

The distinction between high and low art, poetry and reality television, is flattened in a perhaps predictable moment. Yet even as these global citizens vie for love, this remains a Chinese show: participants speak Mandarin, the audience is Chinese. The postmodern, although seemingly a culturally neutral phenomenon, can and does have specific strands, each with their own distinct concerns.

Yu's poetics follows the same principle. The avant-garde or experimental need not be turn-of-the-century Anglo-European modernism or deracinated contemporary post-anything. In 'Translation, half or complete', Yu presents several Chinese sayings in literal translation: 'A mountain and sea of people', 'not know death, how know life?', 'wind wind fire fire' (42). Instead of sounding awkward, these phrases become, in context, invested with linguistic allure. Through poetry, they seem to suggest, the space in between cultures can be a fascinating place to be.

For every poem that speaks of bridging the 'East-West' divide, there is another that insists such an act is impossible. 'The Great Chinese Loneliness', which in this reviewer's opinion deserves to be the book title, is Yu's personae at their most cynical. Hong Kong is not Taiwan is not Melbourne, and the Chinese diaspora can only share a sense of loneliness, 'Of one / Being no one / Else' (78). Perhaps we need to be more specific when talking about self and culture. 'Digging', for example, meditates upon the history of the Chinese in Australia, digging for gold, 'smoking and whoring by day and night' (34). It is that history, that chance to situate oneself, that Yu's personae actually dig for:

Digging is a beautiful thing
But not for gold
Not for me

Fainting with Freedom explores the potential and limits of language to express the self, but a divided self, just as Yu is divided. This kind of self-expression is suspicious of lyricism and sentimentality. It is also suspicious of selfhood, which opens the poems up to all kinds of experiment and playfulness. Here are poems-in-process which question the self-in-process. Just as the psychologist in the closing poem 'He said' gets all the lines, these poems really reveal more about us readers than about the poet. Yu's personae become our 知心。

Assembled in Singapore with parts from Hong Kong and Malaysia, Tse

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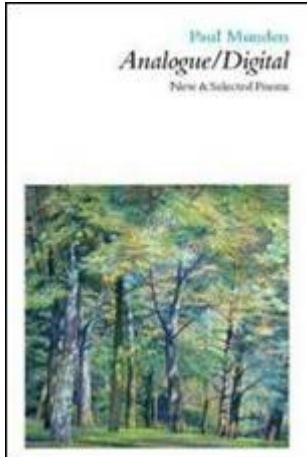
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TEXT review

Fidelity lost

review by Ben Kunkler



Paul Munden
Analogue / Digital
Smith / Doorstop Books, Sheffield UK 2015
ISBN 9781910367377
Pb 104pp AUD32.99

Fans of vinyl records and audio recording purists will well-recognise the anxiety to which the title of Paul Munden's *Analogue / Digital* points. In making recording technology more efficient and cheaper, what *fidelity*, all puns intended, has been lost? Aesthetically, this may stake out a conservative position toward (post)modernity. And there are indeed a few looks of dismay, in these poems, cast at a present that is permanently collapsible to a future. But Munden's title also serves a – more ambivalent – architectural purpose: the 'collected' (1986-2011) and the 'new' (2013-2014) of this new and collected might be columned under this (metaphorical) technological shift. 'Analogue / Digital' may at first strike the reader as something of a petty commonplace. But Munden loads the vehicle of 'fidelity' with so many resonances as to resuscitate a 'dying' metaphor.

'Fidelity' is apt for the book's central theme: loss. To 'lose fidelity' is both a failure of the medium to fully carry the message, but it is also a loss of that past itself and hence our faithfulness to it. Of course, that a representation is the full presence of what it represents is a tricky ruse. Reviewing faulty media, whether analogue, digital or human (as memory) becomes a way for Munden to 'give loss a contour or form that makes the actual experience of loss bearable', as Mark Strand put it (Strand 2005-2014). It is obviously a heavy burden of loss that is to be borne – the death of the poet's father, who appears throughout the 1984 to 2014 collection.

Typical is 'Home Movies' (from the 'Analogue' section), one of the more personal poems. An original ekphrasis of old home movies – ekphrasis, another layer to the 'fidelity' trope – becomes a pretext for a brief and

poignant lyric on the event of the death of the poet's father. Munden is faithful to the movie's frames: 'A slice of oak announces where we lived' (25). But the joyfully preserved 'disconnected, wobbly moments / when a camera was at hand' quickly become vehicles for sadness.

*The vicar was called.
We gathered round
while he said a prayer
and I went rigid
as Dad's eyes opened
in panic, believing
this was it. He hung on
for days after that.
I was holding his hand
when suddenly I knew
he wasn't there* (26, italics original)

The loss becomes a touch embittered in a finely wrought (if also poetically convenient) ekphrastic conclusion.

I'm on my bike, concentrating hard
on the curve around the lawn.
I swerve, with the briefest of smiles,
and here's Dad, waiting to step in
to deal with my gravel-rashed knees.
The reel's used up on a weekend visitor
backing her car down the drive.
White dots perforate the last few frames.
Then there's the slap of film spinning
freely on the take-up spool. (26)

The medium fails fidelity; the loss remains. Indeed, in the poem 'This and That' (in the 'Digital' section) the narrator is in the backyard shed 'sorting things out', and the reader wonders if this filial loss is not something the poet would like to rid himself of, along with useless clutter. (This is also where we glean something, comically, of the poet as Luddite, modernist curmudgeon).

I'm clearing out the shed, as more of this
and that is still making its way in: hard drives
with no memory, clad in see-through plastic
curves that say look I'm still pretty;
so much cobwebbed state of the art.
An intercom is strung along the landing
To my parents, who don't answer. (26)

Fetching paradoxes on this theme reappear, this time in more hopeful poems. Indeed, it is the motif of filial loss inverted – a parent poet's loss of their child, growing, grown into an adult – that carries the burden of hope in grief. We are left in no doubt as to the poet's being deliberate here. The mirrored kinds of loss are mirrored by two poems ('Analogue' and 'Digital', respectively). These follow one another in the collection, so mirror each other by the layout. And the two poems, brief and short-breathed, allude to birth and death, respectively:

My daughter's heartbeat
peaks as a beam of light
onscreen, transcribed

by a jiggling pen –

My father's hand shaking
like a teleprinter
ready for the final score. ('Analogue' 52)

*

The sat-nav takes us
to the cemetery gate, beyond which
I'm hard-wired to identify

The headstone: the deleted
Dates and names my daughter
Retrieves, cleaning them
With her bare finders. ('Digital' 53)

To invert TS Eliot's quote on Swinburne, does this suggest the poet's 'orderliness of mind'? [1] This is the old humbling mirror of literature – 'They give birth astride the grave' (Beckett 2006: 82) – but shown through the jarringly new – and improved? – vanities of technology. In any case, in this fastidious paralleling, there is a risk of sentimentality that Munden does not quite avoid.

Perhaps the poet's ambivalence toward technology is better understood as the collection draws to a close. Here a particularly strong suite of poems emerges, on the Australian natural world. Reading these, it would not be inaccurate (nor be meant pejoratively) to call Munden a Nature Poet, comfortable in the mode of Wordsworthian awe, transported to the Antipodes. The Great Barrier Reef, for example, is gorgeously figured as a 'submerged cathedral'.

Sunlight
filters down through the drift
of grainy bubbles as I glide
into a silent realm of stained glass.
(‘Submerged Cathedral’ 98)

Diving down into this holy place, the poet discovers a shoal of fish 'like a choir / conducted by the sea' (98). The strong poem 'Fire' recycles the symbol of a gutted cathedral as apocalypse, however here contextualised by extreme Australian bushfires, here consuming the Blue Mountains. Sublimely, the scorched Mountains are compared to the burning cathedral, thereby sanctifying the bush.

A shock of flame breaks from the Cathedral roof. Lead melts and pieces of coloured glass fall ...	
	And now it's
about fighting fire	with fire,
blocking its rampage	from one transept of
the mountains into the length of the nave.	
('Fire' 93-4)	

Of course, we have not departed from the ‘fidelity’ theme totally, if one meaning of nature poetry is the great loss of human fidelity to its original, ‘natural’ world. Part of the holy awe of bushfire is that the burning of the landscape is somehow primordial, purifying even. The ‘fluted bark’ of gum trees are ‘flammable skin / shed by self-preserving trees’ (94). But what is absent, just as the poetry is at its most ‘natural’, is precisely the *human* – for example, *character*, which, except for archetypal family types, is not often in Munden’s poetic vocabulary. There are some pleasing standout exceptions, for example in the ‘Practice Room’, where an alcoholic piano teacher with ‘yellow ivory’ fingers teaches the boy poet to play. Here, metonym and sharply alliterative language makes the character sharper – the fingers are ‘exacting hammers / that taught me Hindemith’ (24).

In *Analogue / Digital* a poetics confronts a world whose aesthetics – the Sat-Navs, USBs, etc. – are powerfully indifferent to it. But of course, despite the dooming, poetry survives. Indeed, from the millennial flames a nature poetics is renewed. But with their gadgets, perhaps metonymic of foibles, now purged, where are the human characters?

Notes

[1] Eliot refers to elements in Swinburne’s critical essays as ‘the index ... to ... a disorderly mind’ (Eliot 1920: 15). return to text

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TEXT review

Tripping through, tuning to, a different sounding life

review by Ann Vickery



Jessica L Wilkinson

Suite for Percy Grainger: A Biography

Vagabond Press, Sydney NSW 2014

ISBN 9781922181206

Pb 136pp AUD25.00

Suite for Percy Grainger: A Biography is the second full-length book of Jessica L Wilkinson. Like her first book, *marionette: a biography of miss marion davies* (Vagabond Press, 2012), it undertakes the task of poetic biography. While biography has traditionally been informed by presumptions of objectivity, control, and distance, poetic biography shifts the focus to the subjective, the partial, interpretation, and imagination. And whereas biography is traditionally about containing or reducing a life to a chronological, cohesive narrative, poetic biography foregrounds the problems and gaps in narrating a life. It questions what might be valued about a life and how we might know a person. Often escaping the chronological progression of traditional biography, poetic biography is adventurous, focusing attention on trivial or marginal elements that tend not to appear into the pages of a more traditional biography. The everyday, the ordinary, and the mundane begins to engender value. Poetic biography also enables the biographer to take what might seem like detours or to circle back over parts of an individual's life. A relatively new form, it was pioneered by poets like Susan Howe in the 1980s, who turned her attention to marginal historical figures like Jonathan Swift's lover Hester 'Stella' Johnson (*The Liberties*, 1980) and American Minister Hope Atherton (*Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, 1987). Howe's study, *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), also saw a paradigmatic shift in literary criticism that focused attention on the paratexts of poetry, such as letters, diaries, or ephemeral scraps of writing. Howe remains a key influence for Wilkinson. For both, the relationship between the archives and a life is incredibly complex. In the work of Howe and Wilkinson, the role of the biographer comes more to the fore and is in a highly conscious dynamic with her subject.

In her previous book, *marionette: a biography of miss marion davies*, Wilkinson focused on a figure who was marginal to a famous man (Marion Davies was the lover of American newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst). Less is known about Davies' own career as an actress, which was cut short by Hearst's controlling demands. Wilkinson's biography explores Davies' domestic or private selves as much as her more public face. It simultaneously stages the patriarchal diminution of Davies (this is emphasised by having the book's title in lower case) while resurrecting her as a figure with a voice and agency. Importantly, Wilkinson explores a further manipulation of Davies, this being at the level of biographer and her subject, and how there might be versions of Davies that exceed the biographical pen.

Wilkinson also focuses on the technology of film in subject-formation and reception. As Walter Benjamin notes in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', film enables new perceptions of a subject: 'Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye' (Benjamin 1936: 236-7). Capturing aspects of human behaviour that other media cannot, Benjamin argued that 'a movie can be analysed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage' (235-6). Different points of view are explored materially on the page, as poems, words and letters are fragmented and come from all angles across the page. As with Howe's work, Wilkinson's bursts away from the constraints of poetic form, particularly that of the line. Using Davies' acting career as a springboard, Wilkinson's poststructural feminist approach foregrounds how the identity of a subject is constructed through performance and its reiteration. Like being a woman, the writing of a poem becomes a conceptual challenge, to be stretched and played with, while mindful of its cultural encoding and limitations.

With her second book, Jessica L. Wilkinson has changed focus in both medium and the cultural stature of her subject. *Suite for Percy Grainger* focuses on possibly Australia's best-known composer and pianist. Meticulously researched over a six year period, Wilkinson traced his 'Free Music experiment snippets (loaded onto a very old iPod) while walking to and from work, along streams, [and] through the Blue Mountains' (129). A Felix Meyer Scholarship enabled her to visit the Grainger House in White Plains, New York (where Grainger spent the last forty years of his life). While a key challenge of a poetic biography on Marion Davies was the lack or obscuring of material, the sheer amount relating to Percy Grainger's career and life provided a new set of challenges. During his long career, Grainger's output ranged widely between the experimental to the popular. Deeply invested in documenting, Grainger collected British folk song via the phonograph which led to its revival in the early twentieth century. Grainger himself saw such activity as the stuff of biography. His friend and sometime travel companion, HG Wells would note: 'You are trying to do a more difficult thing than record folk-songs; you are trying to record life' (quoted in Freeman 2011: 418). As Graham Freeman suggests, Grainger saw the 'song itself [as] organically connected to the life of the singer' or, alternatively, 'the art of the song was a metaphor for the art of the singer's life' (418). Besides British folk song, Grainger was interested in documenting his own life. An auto-archivist, he established the Grainger Museum in Melbourne which now houses over 100,000 artifacts. Based in Melbourne, Wilkinson was able to immerse herself in its vast sea of material.

As a suite, Wilkinson's volume is divided into five sections. The middle section takes its cue from Jacques Derrida and is titled 'Archive Fever' (cf Derrida 1995). Its leading poem 'Hoard House' draws attention to the power of the archive in housing, organising and selecting material. As Wilkinson notes, Grainger was unusual in constructing his own archive, although she suggests that the order his archive was to instil is undone by the '*glorious chaos* in the bedroom piles [such that] you were outlived outcreated by the hidden things & hoardings of another' (92). These are the acts of his wife, Ella, as much as the objects left behind and defined by Wilkinson as 'scrap-liberties' (97). Wilkinson, too, feels at times an intruder, like a squirrel that she spies on the ground. Focusing on portraiture of Grainger as states of being (81), she explores the challenges of interpretation; the role of manias, compulsions, and secrets against the desire for control and need to evidence a life. 'On a Glacier with Mr. Grainger' directly invokes a relationship between herself and her subject, and reads his stance in a photograph as an unwillingness to give up meaning to the camera. In 'Letter to Myself, July 12, 2014', Wilkinson turns the gaze back to herself and the stamina of working through both an archive and a poetry volume: 'I am becoming tired and bored with looking / at you' (88). Wilkinson italicises the 'dead lines' and the 'distractions' and 'swerves': 'Bursts of activity followed by years / of fiddling' (88).

The first section is about the difficulty of beginning a work and the paratextual frames through which a work is cast, including a prologue, preamble, preface, and gloss. The preface, however, is a '[w]reckage' (20), overtly draft-like with its gaps and notes in brackets as additional thoughts. This gives the sense of the process behind writing biography, whereas traditional biographies present themselves as polished end-products. In this opening section, Wilkinson also muses on where and how to start a biography, whether it starts with birth or death. The difficulty of separating or compartmentalising works is also explored with '1961: lightly scored in three parts' (24). This poetic sub-suite foregrounds the uncanny intersection that Wilkinson discovered between Grainger and her previous poetic subject, Marion Davies, with both dying in the same year. As the poem's epigraph by Susan Howe remarks, 'Connections between unconnected things are the unreal reality of Poetry' (24). There is a sense of both bodies as 'deviant score[s]' that demand 'more than one conductor' and which move 'slowly / flowingly / flowingly / flowingly / feelingly / hugely to the fore' (28).

Wilkinson begins to explore alignments between poetic and musical composition and movement more fully in the second section of the *Suite*. This section focuses on the minor music that Grainger was interested in, such as British folksongs but also 'humlet[s]', walking tunes, gumleaf marches, train music, and occasional songs such as 'Colonial Song' which is '[c]omposed as yule-gift for mother, 1911'. Just as Grainger was interested in experimenting with form, so too is Wilkinson. 'Lincolnshire Posy' is an example of a concrete poem, first seeking to capture the movement of a two-step and then, in a further iteration, visually capturing a small floral bunch. 'Folk Song Arrangements' and 'In Dahomey (Cakewalk Smasher)' are examples of collage. 'Nr 1 Arrival Platform Humlet' captures the sound of a train approaching and the rise of excitement at the arrival of a 'sweetheart' (32). And 'Marching Song of Democracy' scripts an imagined exchange between Grainger, Walt Whitman, and Wilkinson herself as an 'Exercise in Historical Absurdism' (62). This reflects some of Grainger's compositions like 'The Warriors', which requires three conductors. As with many of the poems, there is a focus on the embodied aspect of poetic and music composition. Just as

Whitman was interested in the spirit of American working man, Grainger wants a ‘tone-art’ of the yeoman. Wilkinson, on the other hand, suggests ‘a feminine typography’ might be opened and added to their masculinist vision.

The fourth section, ‘Loves & the Lash’, focuses on Grainger’s psychosexual life, with particular attention to his sadomasochism and to his close ties with his mother. His yearning for Karen Holten (and to whip her flesh), expressed through numerous letters, is condensed into ‘Cream, Jam & Dizziness’. As Wilkinson notes:

Separated

from lovers you
 would *pull, hit, cut, whip, tear, burn, some pain*
 into yourself to
 stave off the hunger Your corresponding
 pen held high for
 archival prospects: I read your letters for the
 first time—and
here is a sewing needle stitched through mybreast—
 masochism
 documented in photographs and letters and
 blood painted
 carelessly on the reverse side... (106)

This brings an additional layer of meaning to the musical term ‘score’, and, indeed, one of Wilkinson’s poems consists simply of lines marked across the blank page, imitating scores ‘self-beaten’ on the skin (108). In ‘The Rose-Bearer’, Wilkinson’s poem explores the letters between Grainger and his mother Rose around the period that she suicided off a New York building. The poem appears as a note that has been ripped up but then pieced together. While Wilkinson includes some of Grainger’s neologistic instructions like ‘louden lots’ (106) in section four, the final short section of the volume extends this more fully in considering his wordplay and experiments. In ‘Percy Aldridge Grainger’s Blue-Eyed Word-Book’, she catalogues them, including ‘on-draw-some ((attractive))’, ‘word-chains (sentences)’, ‘*kødfolk*: meat-mate’, and ‘*parapara*: semen’ (121).

The opening epigraph by Ralph Waldo Emerson declares: ‘Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests and mines and stone-quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors’ (10). Set out in wavy lines, Wilkinson enacts the ripple-effects of the past. Yet, as she notes in the detailed notes, she is interested in moving ‘beyond the biographical account which documents “something happened”, and towards an account which prompts something *to happen*’ (131). *Suite for Percy Grainger* entertains the restless energy of Grainger and of Wilkinson herself, but also asks, even demands, that the reader enter into a collaborative composition of meaning. While highly selective in its arrangement, Wilkinson offers a life of Grainger that remains open-ended and deliberately *in process*. As with the folk song which Grainger saw as embodying the life of a people, *Suite for Percy Grainger* creatively re-envisions biography into something which is both of, but beyond, the limits of the page.

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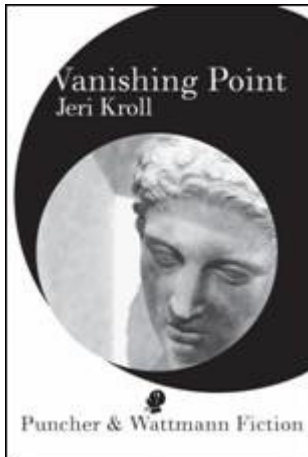
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TEXT review

YA verse novels: No chance of vanishing

review by Linda Weste



Jeri Kroll
Vanishing Point
Puncher & Wattmann, Glebe NSW 2015
ISBN 9781922186584
Pb 284pp AUD 24.95

Imagine a journey; perhaps a drive on an outback road; a single lane in either direction and double yellow lines that reach as far as the eye can see – where lies the horizon; there the lines end at a vanishing point. It is a young woman's journey, and her future lies ahead, though she cannot envision it – her home situation is challenging, and for several years she's battled an eating disorder – but she's on the road to recovery, or hopes to be. *Vanishing Point* is the narrative of this journey, convincingly written in poetry that is richly metaphorical – an exemplary verse novel in the 'YA-crossover' category.

Vanishing Point has three parts, and is, in the main, a narrative of loss. Indeed, for the nineteen-year-old protagonist, Diana, who suffers from anorexia, 'losing is the most demanding art' (10). But despite this ironic aphorism – which brings to mind Sylvia Plath's 'Dying / Is an art' (Plath 1965: 17) – the protagonist's struggle remains 'real'. In *Vanishing*, idealisation of all kinds meets a tight rein – Diana's recovery is not a *given*; the story pivots on this point of tension up until part three, when loss starts to turn into gain.

Life is the journey but Diana has a more immediate quest: she needs a stronger sense of self; why she seeks wisdom from powerful females of the mythic past. In *Vanishing*, Diana (heavenly or divine) invokes her goddess namesake, and her thoughts reference the mythological, the mystical. In these poems the use of language becomes most lyrical:

Diana, lover of woods and beasts,
above all, the deer to you is sacred –

with its graceful spring – and the evergreen
 cypress.
 By day, slender as your arrows,
 by night you swell, filling up the sky,
 absorb the stars and give birth to chaste light.
 Help me. Keep me constant in my quest. (35)

It is by returning to her childhood love of horses, that Diana's quest begins in earnest. Diana reflects, '[o]nly at Gran's I had the chance to learn / how to be at home in my own skin' (43). It was there, on a neighbouring property, she first enjoyed the 'flight' of horseriding. The poem 'Astral Bodies' recalls Diana and her Gran staring at the Centaur in the star constellation: 'pawing stardust near the Southern Cross' (40) 'reined in ... ///... straining at the bit' (40); a shackle to which Diana relates, and thus she imagines herself: '[s]wept up on the wind / from his swishing tail, I'd untie his lead. / He'd toss me on his back and we'd escape, /galloping out of our proper forms / into a truer astral shape' (40). Diana meets Conor, an Irish racing horse trainer, and starts to envisage a future.

Early in the journey, we view Diana through the lens of her mother, Lacey and father Robert and from this construe the dynamics of their family. Still other perspectives of Diana – from Conor, Diana's brother Philip, and Diana's psychiatrist – enable composite constructions of Diana as 'subject'. The story is kept energised by the shifts between minds and the choice of multiple narrators – rather than characters whose perspectives are filtered through Diana's sensibilities.

Kroll chose to convey Diana's interior world in first-person monologues – a poetic form 'suited to her psychology' (Kroll & Jacobson 2014: 185). The lines, loose in structure, are nonetheless honed, and strike a good balance between vernacular and poetic phrasing. The fifty-eight poems which present Diana's inner conflicts predominate in the collection, as you would expect, exposing her attitudes toward her family members: her parents – 'God creates all cuisines, great and small. / My mother's body shows she loves them all (26); 'My sceptic father' (13); her brother – 'I feel the truth of his eager heart / that tries to love the world' (19); and gran – 'Now that she is leaving / my insides feel like a nightmare sky / emptied of its lights, / and hunger for her brand of honesty' (53). By this, Kroll subtly suggests 'how [Diana's] outer life – family and environment – ha[s] brought her to ... emotional and physical extremes' (2014: 185).

In addition to lyric and narrative poems, *Vanishing* contains sections of prose; these amount to approximately thirty pages and exact an imposing presence. There are twenty-nine prose responses from Conor, a half-page of epistolary prose from Gran, and six prose entries in the voice of Philip, Diana's Down Syndrome brother. The inclusion of prose prompts the question – *couldn't poetry alone deliver?* It's a question Kroll perhaps anticipates: in a practice-as-research essay she states that each of the 'characters ... demanded their own voice' (Kroll & Jacobson 2014: 186). The affordance of prose is clear with Philip's voice: for this Kroll employs a shift in language use: the speech becomes literal, stripped of the devices of imagery and metaphor; idiom is removed, and verbs of cognition are modified. With Conor's character it seems less to do with voice, than a means to tell his considerable back-story – without making it *the* story. By keeping poetry in the majority, Kroll ensures *Vanishing* remains indisputably a verse novel. *Vanishing* is also resolutely poetic; its poetry *does* deliver.

Another particularity of this verse novel is that its contents page lists main sections, notes and acknowledgements, yet eschews individual poem titles. This decision foregrounds a teleological imperative – to propel the reader, without delay, to the narrative’s end – though it inhibits reading selectively, by poem-title, or the re-reading of favourite poems.

Vanishing Point was shortlisted for the Griffith University Young Adult Book Award category in the 2015 Queensland Literary Awards. Kroll’s considerable record of publication – which includes over twenty books for adults and young people, poetry, picture books and novels – is brought to bear in *Vanishing*, and the outcome is assured.

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TEXT

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TEXT review

Sticky ink

review by Chloe Wilson



Cassandra Atherton

Exhumed

Grand Parade Poets, Wollongong NSW 2015

ISBN 9780987129192

Pb 86pp AUD24.95



Cassandra Atherton

Trace

Finlay Lloyd, Braidwood NSW 2015

ISBN 9780987592996

Pb 64pp AUD10.00

Throughout *Exhumed* and *Trace*, two collections comprised almost exclusively of prose poems, Cassandra Atherton explores what can occur in a poem when several disparate elements – experiences, memories, intertextual allusions, pop culture references, the imagery of dream-logic – are enmeshed. The effect of the poems is produced by this jamming of the high and low, the domestic and the glamorous, the literary and the tabloid;

the pleasure of the poems, and the questions they raise, are found in the arrangement of fragments in unpredictable sequences; in the sparks that are struck when one thought finds itself colliding strangely with another.

Given this, it is unsurprising that images of glue, or stickiness, appear consistently within these poems. This glue is sometimes literal, as in the 'hobby glue' which adheres shards of mirror to a pair of satin shoes in 'Fairest of Them All' (*Exhumed* 38); and sometimes physical, like the 'sticky lips' of 'Doll's House' (*Exhumed* 41), or the memory of 'sticky fingers' in 'Pineapple' (*Exhumed* 54). Often, the figurative possibilities of glue as an image are foregrounded, as in the first poem in *Exhumed*, 'Bonds' (11), where the speaker's sweat becomes a 'glue' to 'bond you to me one last time', or in 'Yellow' where the speaker tells her lover:

That I was stuck on him. That we were bonded
together like superglue. That there was no /
solvent that would separate us. (*Trace* np)

In each case, the 'glue' is visceral, evoking the fluids which bodies produce, and which make apparent the porousness of the boundary between bodies and the outside world; this is suggested in the 'sticky stillness' of a sick room, in 'Blue Nights' (*Exhumed* 51), or the child's thighs sticking to a slippery dip in 'Playground' (*Exhumed* 43). Most often and most emphatically, however, it is related to the emergence or expression of feminine sexuality.

Indeed, though the poems function as discrete works, when they are read collectively, a narrative of sorts – based around a passionate romantic relationship – begins to emerge. Many of the poems are addressed to a 'you'; a man who is the speaker's lover, and with whom she shares both the thrilling and mundane experiences of romantic love – everything from excursions to a 'Hello Kitty love hotel' in Japan ('Shinjuku Morning', *Exhumed* 74; 'Neon Love', *Trace* np) to supermarket shopping ('More', *Exhumed* 34; 'Or', *Trace* np) and a discussion about the desire to possess a red Smeg fridge ('Plum(b)', *Exhumed* 12; *Trace* np). It is a relationship of considerable physical and emotional intensity, one in which the desire for the lover runs against the fear of imminent loss, as expressed in 'Stella':

Me with my Hurricane box watching Treme on
HBO. You drinking Hurricanes at Old /
Absinthe House in the Vieux Carré. Toulouse
St. La Blanchisseuse. 'Don't worry', you /
told me once, 'it's only a paper moon.' Both
knowing it is only you who sails over the /
cardboard sea. I'm just papier-mâché. You
chew me up and spit me out. Pulp. /
Palpitations. So I paste myself onto you.
Moulding myself into your curves. But you're /
not waiting for the glue to dry. We rot from the
inside out. (*Exhumed* 13)

This passage demonstrates the way in which Atherton's poems are constructed; a situation, narrative, or expression of feeling emerges both against and through a web of allusions. These allusions are most often literary (A Streetcar Named Desire, evidently, in the above), and range from 'Wilkie Collins' (*Exhumed* 26) to Nabokov ('Butterfly Hunter', *Exhumed* 26; 'Lepidopterist', *Trace* np), Plath and Hughes ('St Valentine's Day Massacre' *Exhumed* 17; 'Valentine's Day Massacre' *Trace* np) to Sei

Shōnagon ('Wilkie Collins', *Exhumed* 26). However, there are also, as the above excerpt demonstrates, other types of allusions; song titles, artworks, television shows, films, even specifically Australian cultural references – Passiona (and Pasito) ('Yellow', *Trace* np), Gai and Robbie Waterhouse ('Cox', *Exhumed* 69; 'Corner of the Sky', *Trace* np) White Wings Cake Mix ('More', *Exhumed* 34; 'Or', *Trace* np), and Chux superwipes ('Yellow', *Trace* np).

The following lines occur near the beginning of 'White Noise' (*Exhumed* 24; 'White', *Trace* np):

We only ever go to Smorgy's, the Ramada Inn
or the Laundrette on Buckley Street – the /
one with the big tumble dryer for doonas. I
initial your earlobe with my saliva. Nuzzling /
your carotid pulse with the tip of my nose. You
tug on the ends of my hair, your pointy /
hip bones burrowing into me. Urging me to
reach for my blue biro. I scrawl the first /
sentence of Rebecca on your back. You guess
it's Du Maurier by the time I get to the /
capital 'M' for Manderley.

Such references – the geographic specificity of Buckley Street, the tackiness of Smorgy's, the grandeur of DuMaurier's classic gothic mystery – might seem to clash, at first. Yet placing such references in such close proximity produces the inherent humour which exists in incongruity. It also illustrates the context of the speaker's experiences; art, like love, does not exist in a pure, rarefied space, but is rather intertwined with the demands, routines and sights of daily life. Hence the speaker blurts the name of a John Fowles character through a mouthful of 'cheesy toast' and Proust is scrawled on the skin in biro.

The prose poem seems a particularly apt form in which to explore such entanglements. The blocks of text in *Exhumed* and *Trace* suggest impenetrability, and there is an insularity to the poems which echoes the exclusivity (and potential for claustrophobia) in an intimate relationship. Moreover, the absence of line and stanza breaks – the lack of pause for thought or breath – adds to the sense that these poems are working to recreate the pathways of thought which are often inscrutable. This is most emphatic in the chains of alliterative words which occasionally appear, such as 'Solitary. Solitaire. Solipsist' ('Bonds', *Exhumed* 11) or 'Dedicate. Dessicate. Desecrate' ('Entitled', *Exhumed* 58; *Trace* np). Throughout each collection, the next idea or image is as likely to arrive in the form of an association suggested by the sound or alternate meaning of a word, or by a further cultural reference it conjures up, as by linear storytelling, or logic.

The title of *Exhumed* is taken from an epigraph, in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti describes exhuming his wife's body in order to retrieve a book of poems. 'The matter', Rossetti writes, 'was of a less dreadful nature than might have seemed possible' (*Exhumed* 7), with the poems recoverable, and the body intact. *Exhumed* is split into two sections, 'Inter' and 'Disinter', and this structure seems linked to the overarching concern in the poems; love in art, against love in what might be called 'real life' – the placement of one alongside, or perhaps within the other; how the writing of a poem can be an act of preservation, or resurrection, but perhaps also

an act of exposure, or even betrayal. This is suggested in 'P.R.B' where the moment in which Rossetti exhumes his wife is imagined:

Dig me up Dante! Exhume me. Consume me.
Shift the soil between us and gather me in /
your arms. Chase your journal of poems around
my coffin with your fingertips as you /
hold me. Let me hear your mew of pleasure
when you have it. At last. My copper hair /
fills the empty space. But the worm's hole in
your journal eats away at your heart. (*Exhumed*
32)

Here, the artist's loyalty is to the work, and not the beloved; it is the damage to the journal which 'eats away' at him, and not any act of treachery he has committed against his lover. There is an added layer of tension, too, in that the speaker in this poem is not the artist, but the artist's lover; this is one of many instances in Atherton's work in which a playful engagement with other texts allows for the expression of a complex, original idea.

Finally, it is interesting to note that fourteen of the twenty-three poems contained in the smaller of these collections, *Trace*, also appear in *Exhumed*, most often in the same form, but with a title that differs to a greater or lesser degree; 'Chlorophyll' (*Exhumed* 59) for example, becomes 'Danse Macabre' (*Trace* np), and 'Cox' (*Exhumed* 69) becomes 'Corner of the Sky' (*Trace* np). It is difficult to know whether this duplication of material in collections published so closely in time is deliberate. Taking into consideration the content of the poems and their concern with the resurrection of texts, there is the possibility that this concurrent publication is a further comment on the re-appropriation and retrieval of material. This seems echoed in the line drawings which accompany the poems in *Trace*, where each shape is drawn twice, with one outline nearly – but not entirely – juxtaposed over the other, suggesting that, even in repetition, there is difference. Then again, it may be the result of accident, or sheer coincidence. Given the pre-occupations of the poems, it is a productive coincidence nonetheless.

In *Exhumed* and *Trace*, Cassandra Atherton presents a series of poems which, in their wit and intricate webs of allusion, may appear lighthearted on a first reading, even satirical. However, the further one is willing to engage, the more fragility, intensity, and complexity is revealed. They are works in which the speaker, moving back and forth between text and experience, continually asks an unanswerable question: 'How do I write the space between my heart and my pen?' ('A Room of One's Own', *Exhumed* 28).

Chloe Wilson is the author of two poetry collections, The Mermaid Problem and Not Fox Nor Axe. She has been awarded the John Marsden Prize for Young Australian Writers, the (Melbourne) Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award for Poetry, the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, the Fish Publishing Flash Fiction Prize and the Arts Queensland Val Vallis Award. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne.

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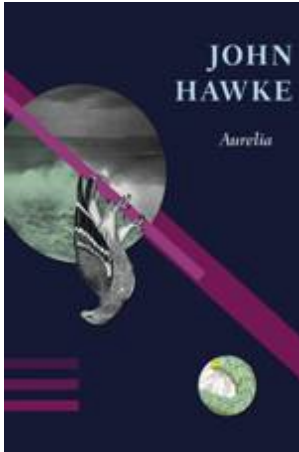
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TEXT review

I am ‘modern’ but want to go back

review by Jack Ross



John Hawke

Aurelia

Cordite Books, Melbourne Vic 2015

ISBN 97809942596

Pb 67pp AUD20.00

An arresting image, ‘the skeleton of a kitten killed by frost’ – certainly no minimalist understatement there – was my first impression of John Hawke’s collection, *Aurelia*, which has won the 2015 Anne Elder Award for a first book of poetry. The line which contains the image, quoted below in full, reveals the book’s defining qualities: its richness and luxuriance of language, its revelling in the long line, in poems that turn the page and then have to turn it again, so much material does he have to pack into them.

Under a gnarled quince tree the ghosts of three
children
guard the skeleton of a kitten killed by frost.
(‘What Was There’ 11)

It’s not as simple as that, of course. This is no poet intoxicated by his own verbiage. Looking again at those lines, one senses a certain despair, a deep pain behind them. Nor is it really clear if it’s the author’s childhood or someone else’s that’s being evoked – that detail later in the poem about ‘the two old sisters who shut themselves / inside this house for twenty years’ (12) sounds a little too baroque to be strictly autobiographical – but then, how would I know?

How could I know? There is, admittedly, a good deal to be known about Hawke’s book. Some of the information is provided in his own preface; even more in the short introduction by Gig Ryan. Ryan is particularly useful in providing details about ‘Aurelia’, the title-poem of the volume – or, more specifically, about Gérard de Nerval’s *Aurélia ou la rêve et la vie*,

the novella / prose poem the latter had just completed at the time of his suicide in 1855.

Ryan, however, does not choose to emphasise that final connection, explaining instead that:

‘Aurelia is a manifestation of art – “I first fell in love with Aurelia / in the face of that woman painted by Giovanni Bellini” – that is, love clasps the actual simultaneously with its ideal, just as Proust’s Swann imagines in embracing Odette, he embraces Botticelli’s Zipporah, whom she resembles’ (xi). Hawke, in his preface, appears to agree:

When Nerval writes that dreams are a second life, he not only refers to the dreams we experience in sleep, but also to the dreams that arise as a consequence of lost desires, dreams perhaps thwarted by chance: of lives once meant, but never lived. (ix)

Aurélia is as much a record of Nerval’s own descent into madness as the simultaneous love story / dream diary it purports to be on the surface. Is it this Hawke has in mind when he claims that ‘to write is always to admit to, but also to dwell with, loss – to experience the loss of a once-loved person as a mode of living’?

It’s no use: such biographical hints and semi-deductions bear little fruit. Too much is hidden, half-hinted-at, veiled in the ambiguity between poem and reader – what Ryan refers to as the ‘labyrinth between world and Being’. This could be a collection centred around a defunct love affair, or a series of elegies to one (or more) ‘once-loved persons’. It seems too various, the product of too many different moods and times to fit easily into such a definition, however.

Nor is that surprising in a writer who seems to aspire to be some kind of latter-day Symbolist. One can imagine Hawke – from his poems, at least – as an eager attendee at Mallarmé’s famous Tuesdays, perhaps even a satellite of Proust’s Madame Verdurin. He is, after all, the author of a 2009 monograph on the influence of the Symbolist movement in Australia, which argues (according to David Callahan in *Reviews in Australian Studies*) that ‘Symbolism is as important as Nationalism in the development of Australian literature’ (Callahan 2010).

It all sounds a bit old-fashioned, one must admit: Art for Art’s sake against the Art of Social Utility: Walter Pater vs John Ruskin. Just because it’s an old argument doesn’t mean it can ever be resolved, however: like that other perennial, content versus form, the answer is – inevitably – both, and neither.

Reviving old forms and ideas can have its uses, though. TS Eliot’s revaluation (one can hardly call it rediscovery) of the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals gave impetus to the whole of New Criticism, not to mention opening fresh perspectives on such ‘difficult’ new poets as Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore.

Has Hawke had similar success in plumbing this strange territory between reality and dream – between the lofty European artists he fantasises about and the Australian here-and-now he inhabits? It hardly seems probable in prospect, but I believe he goes a long way towards carrying it off.

There are some breathtaking poems here. My favourite, ‘The Point’, does a wonderful job of blending the two themes. First:

this is the place where a foreign novelist
 once stood briefly before continuing his pilgrimage:
a part of my spirit will always remain here,
gazing like a ghost across this dark line of hills. (18)

Then returning to the more quotidian: 'I simply halted where the bitumen ran out, / banking the car against the tussocky sand' (19). Novelist, narrator, and Aboriginal land protestors combine to construct a kind of epiphanic vision of Australia today.

Ryan, in her introduction, singles out its longest poem, 'The Conscience of Avimael Guzman' – about Peru's Communist *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) leader – for particular praise. Certainly Hawke balances Guzman against his fellow mythomane, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, with consummate skill. For myself, as a fellow colonial (albeit one raised in New Zealand rather than Australia), I have to admit to a preference for those poems where the garish colours of our part of the world seem to leak in most strongly. 'Pietà', for instance, with its:

five degrees of nostalgia:
 bad posture, imposture,
 A glossy Ted Nugent poster, post-it notes in a volume
 of *Rameau's Nephew*... (5)

Or Hawke's opening piece 'Reliquary', where 'somewhere it is September 1986':

And I'm feeling sorry for all the noise
 beautiful poems will never contain,
 because I am 'modern' but want to go back
 for a few words, not many (1)

There are so many things that John Hawke does well that it seems almost insulting to single out only these few strands. I'd like to keep quoting, pointing out particular pages and lines for praise, but perhaps it's more useful at this stage to reiterate how churlish it would be to criticise Hawke's desire to go back as far as the nineteenth century for those 'few words, not many' (1).

This is no phony Aestheticist posturing – no attempt to 'maintain "the sublime" / In the old sense. Wrong from the start' (as in Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' sequence) (Pound 2016 [1920]). Hawke is most definitely modern (with or without the screamers). He has a sense of humour, for a start (anyone who's ever had to live with a Ted Nugent poster could hardly doubt it).

He's a devilishly efficient poet. It's hard to catch him out. No plangent last lines, no Ashberyesque cadences (for all that he undoubtedly owes to that poet). My one quarrel with this book is that its forty-odd pages have made me impatient to read more from the same pen, soon.

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Dr Jack Ross works as a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Massey University's Auckland Campus. His latest poetry book A Clearer View of the Hinterland appeared in 2014 from HeadworX in Wellington. His other publications include four full-length poetry collections, three novels, and three volumes of short fiction. He has also edited a number of anthologies and literary magazines, including (from 2014) Poetry NZ. He blogs at: <http://mairangibay.blogspot.com/>

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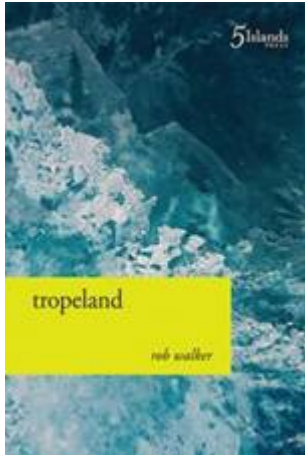
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TEXT review

When to laugh, when to cry

review by Owen Bullock



Rob Walker
Tropeland
Five Islands Press, Melbourne VIC 2015
ISBN 9780734050267
Pb 98pp AUD25.00

Humour is a tricky thing, rarely funny when overt. But life in its ridiculous twists and turns is often vastly, unpredictably funny. *Tropeland*, Rob Walker's first new collection since *phobiaphobia* (Picaro Press, 2007) revels in word play and sometimes makes me laugh aloud. It tackles difficult subjects like learning and dying. The title poem declares wordplay and humour as important elements. Here, matches 'spontane combustuously' and vampire bats are 'garbags'. Expressions like 'Surreal estate' and the idea of blank rainbows which we fill in ourselves are appealing. The poem ends with the claim:

In Tropeland
it's better for you
and metaphor for me (14)

The humour is nicely complex here. If the poem 'Selfgoogling' is overt in its humour, it also succeeds in narrating what is probably a common experience:

Selfgoogling as a pasttime's quite inspiring.
Eponymous achievements will ensue –

The anti-climax is; it isn't you. (49)

Lines like these make me suspect that Walker's poetry would often be at its most compelling in performance:

extreme onion unction
 tongue-and groove junction
 of lung removed function (69)

Wordplay is again to the fore in the riffs around ‘on / off’ in ‘Making a Preposition (On Watching *Big Brother*)’. It’s clever and fun, but even such skilled poems can leave a reader wanting something with stronger emotional engagement. I admire Walker and have often enjoyed his work in journals. I used his poem ‘Shall I compare thee...’ (from *Blue Giraffe* #6) in a number of writing workshops. Walker’s grasp of the vernacular is special, and there are similar examples here. But the voice of the poems in *Tropeland* often veers towards self-lampooning, which tends to make the poems fall flat (e.g. the ending of ‘Speaking in Tongues’). Overall, the persona of the author is large in this text. I am interested in what emotions and imaginings can be stirred in the reader through some of the profoundly serious and important scenarios that are being narrated. If Walker does present aspects of his own personality as part of the content it needs to be there as a vehicle for effect on the reader, but I’m not sure that it’s always so calculated.

The best pieces are those where the attention is on someone or something else and the authorial persona is less central. The poems ‘Surprises’, ‘Soft’ and ‘Yamamoto Sensei Snaps’ give a strong impression of the culture of teaching and learning in Japan; the observing mind is witness but doesn’t intrude. When Sensei severely punishes an unruly student, the other teachers leave because it is ‘None Of Their Business’ – the formality of the capitals (also used elsewhere in the poem) helps capture the tone as well as the prevalent attitude. ‘Plympton Gopher’ is firmly focused on the unexpected character of a man looking for dope gear. ‘The Darkening Eucalyptic’ is entirely about the voice’s experience of cutting down a tree. It gets close to the emotions involved without being maudlin and so it moves the reader. The narrator of ‘dad’s got is own / playstation in the lounge. / dozen lettuce uzit tho’ (from ‘Danny in Detention’) is allowed to speak without mind-clutter – even the excellent use of vernacular is less important than the sense of pity that this detail conveys.

The use of such convincing detail tends to highlight the fact that in some poems the use of abstraction is problematic. For example, the text refers to the ‘bluff and bluster / testicles and testosterone’ in ‘Bull Evaluation Day’. One gets the point, but it would be interesting to be offered an example of the behaviour. Similarly, it could be a fuller experience to learn about the nature of the father’s ‘benign transcendence’ in ‘Transcendence’ or his ‘awe’ and ‘discarnate nostalgia’ in ‘Watching My Blind Cat’. One wonders in what ways we try to keep memory alive (‘Elements’). As a reader, I’m in the dark in these situations but keen to look further, and to see the text explore fully what it suggests is important; it would surely be worthwhile going deeper into the situations described.

But, as previously mentioned, it’s difficult to get away from the ‘I’ (or ‘my’) in the poetry: even when the ‘i’ is written in lower case and where the poem is ostensibly about someone or something else, it can dominate. The problem with persona seems to occur at various levels in the book. At its simplest, one wonders why it is important that the reader learn that certain plaster of Paris scenes are ones which ‘I’ve previously seen only on Christmas cards’ (‘De-composition’). In a weightier example, the pathos of the moment when a father asks his doctor on the phone in a public place if he needs an ultrasound, is unfortunately obscured by the competing, narrating ‘i’ (‘Cloze Procedure’). The reader has to dig this moving detail

out of the poem and hold onto it, rather than the poem allowing 'i' to speak with all its power. 'Watching my blind cat' is potentially a fine juxtaposition of observations of a cat with decisions the narrator of the poem needs to make about his father; with greater detachment, the comparison and its effects might be emphasised. Because of the decision being made, it seems perfectly valid for the persona to be present, but I can't help feeling the poem would be stronger without that presence. The self-consciousness of other poems also seems to work against their poignancy (e.g. 'Against the Grain').

I suspect that the poem 'Clearview', written for the author's brother, comes closest to the blend of humour and the cosmic that Walker might be seeking. The text insists, 'A cemetery is such fertile ground / for humour...' (76) and though I've sometimes felt unconvinced by the more overt use of humour in the book, these final lines are subtly effective:

Are you laughing, looking up at these poor
bastards
who have to mow your resting places
for Eternity? (76)

With this sense of effective humour comes the feeling that humour is at the service of something more profound and that perhaps the reader is invited to partake of other strong emotions which the body makes into tears.

Owen Bullock has published a collection of poetry, three books of haiku and a novella. He has edited a number of journals and anthologies, including Poetry New Zealand. He is a PhD Candidate at the University of Canberra.

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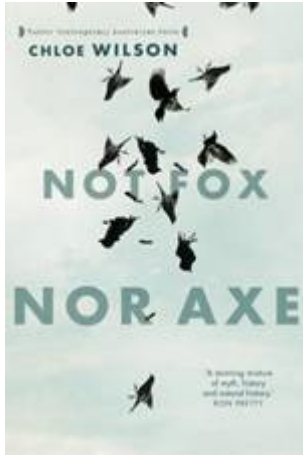
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TEXT review

What gives us chase

review by Rose Lucas



Chloe Wilson
Not Fox Nor Axe
Hunter Publishers, Santa Lucia, QLD 2015
ISBN 9780994352804
Pb 95pp AUD19.95

Not Fox Nor Axe is Melbourne poet Chloe Wilson's eagerly awaited second book of poetry after *The Mermaid Problem* (2010). Wilson is a young poet gaining momentum, having won the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize, the John Marsden Australia Prize for Young Writers, the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Poetry Award, the Val Vallis Award for an Unpublished Poem and a highly commended in the Mary Gilmore Award. This most recent collection confirms such promise, bringing us a range of expertly crafted and provocative poems to jolt a reader out of their comfort zone.

The voice in this collection is strong and often sharp; in general, these are poems which seek out a difficult or disturbing edge. This aesthetic of unsettlement is produced in a number of ways: through the excavation of topics or scenes which are hidden in some way; through the precise use of an often ironic voice; through the building of evocative imagery; as well as through experiments with form and punctuation.

A poet is always looking for the material or scene on which to concentrate their reflective gaze and thus through which to discover insights about themselves, human behavior, mortality, or indeed about the business of creating art itself. Wilson ranges widely to find such material, drawing on the visual arts of painting and photography, characters and stories from the past, details from writers such as Shakespeare and Chekhov, the vistas of travel and even personal reflection. As a result, the collection is full of vivid vignettes, strongly drawn experiences and colorful characters, from Tchaikovsky to Trotsky, the French guillotine to the plague doctor, from travel in Central America to images of the mass death of blackbirds – all

of which are refracted through the ability of the poet to peer underneath or behind what is immediately apparent.

In the fine tradition of ekphrastic poetry, Wilson uses the replicating mirror of studying another artist's contemplations of the world as a mechanism to discover her own insights. As well as using the rich texture of Caravaggio in a couple of poems, the long sequence 'Double Exposure' focuses on the photography of Diane Arbus and that artist's interest in twinning images, the bizarre and the out-of-kilter. 'A thing is not seen because it is visible, but visible because it is seen' (16), Wilson writes, foregrounding the crucial and creative activity of 'looking' itself. Any art, even the art of the poem, is not merely looking for the entirely novel subject; rather, it works to create the new and intensified manner of *looking* at something – anything which literally catches the eye. Like the poet, the photographer is attempting to catch at the ephemeral, to hold the slipperiness of time and experience up to scrutiny:

A ghost
in a sheet, with no-one to terrify
but me. I drop them all into the stop bath –
there – you're fixed. *They are the proof*
that something was there and no longer is. (20)

This technique of responding to other art forms is also reflected in the technique of re-inhabiting fairytale narratives and mythic tropes in poems such as 'Grandmother Says', 'Rapunzel's Hair' and 'Persephone Goes to Night School'. In a manner reminiscent of recent feminist poets and which also echoes the endless deferral of deconstructive practice, Wilson re-envisages existing narratives, unpicking their ideological assumptions through changes and disruption. Thus, for instance, an energised and determined Persephone, reminiscent of the character Louise in the film *Thelma and Louise*, is 'dressed in sunglasses / and a headscarf [and] puts her foot / to floor' (75), but with an eye on 'the knife, the flare' (77) while waiting for Hades' return: 'this time, she'll be prepared' (77).

In 'Observable Phenomena' the poet makes use of the imagery of the nineteenth century séance and a jarring use of the colon to evoke the tension between what we can see and what we can't, what we might long for and what we might fabricate: 'that fraction: / of the original: which manages: to escape' (6). Poetry is itself concerned with phenomena which is observable – but often in order to get beyond it, to evoke various forms of the unseeable. Similarly, in 'The Specifics of Shipwrecks', Wilson gives us both surface and depth: the 'Liners [which] glide daily / above centuries of evidence / that the ocean doesn't want us / crawling over her skin, / or burrowing underneath, and in' (3). As the poem gathers the 'trinkets' of loss, it speculates about why we collect such evidence of loss and what it is we might 'hope to learn' from them.

This idea of what is left over, or the extant things which it is possible to see, is developed in the title poem, 'Not Fox Nor Axe', where the speaker offers an often chaotic assemblage of observation and experience which she describes as 'this rough assembly / of memento mori' (37). Situated in time and place in Central America, the poem evokes a graphic and visual history of Aztecs, Cortes, the Inquisition, and sacrifice, as well as the roving perspective of the observer. The relentless, prose-like lines which pile up the imagery – talismans? trinkets? – lead to the collection's key point of view:

And us –
my darling, what of us? Perhaps not fox nor
axe,
but something gives us chase – (40)

Somewhat like TS Eliot's fragments, 'shored against my ruin' (cf Eliot 1922), the poem, and perhaps poetry itself, accumulates this 'rough assembly' both as markers of finitude and as almost Orphic-like efforts to hold back the advancing tide of mortality. The address is to a beloved – an anchor point which one might hope provides some ballast in an inventorised mélange of experience. However, the intimacy here lies in the shared realisation of being pursued by time and limit. What can be observed and gathered by the sustaining business of poetry may comfort and keep us afloat for a time – and even give us some insight into the inevitability of loss and death, that which 'gives us chase'.

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Dr Rose Lucas works in the Graduate Research Centre at Victoria University where she also supervises in the areas of literature and creative writing. Her collection of poetry Even in the Dark (UWAP 2013) won the Mary Gilmore Prize in 2014. Her most recent collection is Unexpected Clearing (UWAP 2016).

TEXT

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TEXT review

Layers of understanding: How deep should we dig?

review by Mary Pomfret



Susie Utting

Coal Dust on Roses: last days in a mining town

Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide SA 2015

ISBN 9781760410223

Pb 90pp AUD20.00

At first, when reading *Coal Dust on Roses* I found myself wishing I had paid more attention to high school geography lessons, in particular to those on rock and coal formation. Coal is actually a sedimentary rock formed by an accumulation and burial of layers of decaying and dead material. Not that any detailed knowledge on the formation of coal is required for an understanding and appreciation of Utting's collection of poetry about the excavation of the town of Yallourn in the late 1970s for the purpose of extracting coal. The collection's 'Forward' provides a comprehensive background on the demise of the Victorian coal mining town of Yallourn.

Utting's verse prologue asks 'Why coal dust falls on roses' and the poems in her collection attempt to answer. Utting's prologue creates a sweeping vista of the coal mining landscape in terms of both its physical vastness and depth of its deposits, as well the time involved in its formation: 'Eocene to the Miocene geological and climate gestating / thick brown pulmonaries' (9). Juxtaposing 'boggy-spored / wombs' with 'strata heavy with dead trees' (10), Utting sets up the ubiquitous theme of life, death and renewal that permeates the poems in this collection.

'Dramatus aborem' describes how a tree garden with 'theatres of ash & poplar / vaulting sets of golden elm / & oaks' deteriorates to a 'brown empty stage' (11), when the 'garden city' (7) of Yallourn becomes a shell as its residents are evicted to make way for the mining of the coal beneath. This death-like absence is mirrored in the sparse lines of 'Fading ...' with the '... stillness of an empty room' / and 'autumn ash / column of falling copper / drift in as single shroud' (13).

Utting repeats the imagery and imaginings of death and mourning throughout the collection in her use of language such as: ‘wooden / tombstones’ (14), ‘crematorium towers’ (15), ‘winter pall’ (20), ‘death caps born under oak kill in hours’ (27), ‘sackcloth’ (34), ‘your time is up’ (43), ‘front lights *fade to black*’ (45), ‘leave the picture forever’ (48), ‘empty bag of blood and bone’ (62) ‘lambs are murdered’ (71), and ‘in another room my dead mother / cries in her sleep’ (77). The titles of poems such as ‘Death of the Wanderers’ (68) and ‘Hotel Funeral’ (79) are unambiguous in thematic intent. Unmistakably, ‘Memorial Garden’ is an elegy for Utting’s ‘dead’ town of Yallourn. The narrator laments:

garden town now dead
in a brown coal grave

In sculptured beds
eternal red roses

bloom on
marbled stems. (60)

Not all of the poems in the collection are elegies. The ‘Snap Shot’ series (34-50) is a photograph-like meandering through the 1930s to the 1970s using familiar images of a by-gone time. A young woman milks the cows and ‘lingers / in sepia forever wondering – / *did I rinse out the butter churn?*’ (35). A paper boy from the 1950s is ‘snapped between black & white / in a world never turning grey’ (37).

Utting is not taking us on romantic journey through halcyon days, but rather offers a re-imagining that defies nostalgia in its subversion of the sentimental. In this series of snap shots, Utting adopts the position of the observer of an earlier time through a critical contemporary lens: student nurses escape the confines imposed by the stultifying 1950 values of their ‘parents in another state’ (38) and the ‘d) 1979s Butcher Shop’ (40) – filled with images of blood in a place ‘where the scales of life are tilted’ (41) – is almost certainly an allusion to the illegal abortion clinics of the times. A 1970s swimming pool clock warns and concludes, ‘Midnight Swimming pool clock your time is up’ (43). A school production of the musical *Oliver* ends ‘when the front lights *fade to black*’ (45). Utting’s ‘g) 1970s Back Row Boys’ (46-8) recalls familiar and stereotypical nicknames of the era, names that would be considered derogatory, and even racist, now, such as ‘Nathan Nerd’, ‘Farm Kid Barry’, ‘Angelo the Wog’, ‘Class Clown Kevin’, ‘Gavin the “Girl”’ and ‘Peter the Jock’. This series of ‘Snap Shots’ haunts with images of the past that linger ‘in the shutter’ (50).

Utting’s poems are not, however, without hope for the future. ‘From the kitchen sink...’ celebrates life and the natural world, ‘the greatest privilege’ (52) as does ‘Saving the Wisteria’ – a declaration of hope and renewal – because like ‘Dad’ who ‘digs’, the plant is ‘*Tough as old boots*’ (65). Towards the end of the collection, Utting demonstrates the poetic form of *haibun*, ‘a Japanese literary form that integrates poetry (haiku) and prose in the same text’ (7). An example of this style is ‘Garden Stall’, a poem of hope and fecundity where ‘kidney seeds’ are ‘asleep in a twin womb’ (72) and ‘Rose & ivy geranium climbers ... / from broken homes’ are bound for ‘strange new walls’ (72). Despite ‘disillusion disillusion’ roses are saved in another *haibun*, ‘Saving the Roses’: ‘We dig up bushes & wrap them in hessian sheets’ (73) and,

Afterwards ...
down to the hall where
CWA ladies serve tea & scones with
apricot jam

Perfumed keepsakes dug out by the roots. (74)

Haibun in form, the final piece, 'Buying the Farm', is a joyful sweeping out of the old and in with the new.

Our youngest is playing with dead daddy long
legs near the
back door
I pick him up and find an old straw broom &
sweep them
down the steps (85)

Susie Utting's *Coal Dust on Roses* rewards and perhaps demands more than just one single reading. Much like its subject, the death of a town built upon sediments of dead material that took eons to become coal, this work is one of layers – and one which requires time on the part of the reader to discover the depth of its riches.

Mary Pomfret is a writer who lives on the goldfields of Central Victoria and works at La Trobe University. She has published two collections of short fiction and has completed a novel and a creative PhD.

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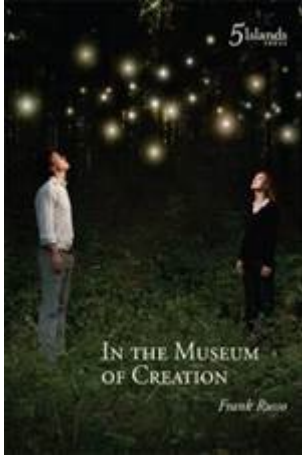
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TEXT review

A curio cabinet of poetry

review by Caitlin Maling



Frank Russo

In the Museum of Creation

Five Islands Press, Parkville, Vic 2015

ISBN 9780734050274

Pb 96pp AUD25.00

It is unusual to encounter a debut book of poetry as focused as Frank Russo's *In the Museum of Creation*. A typical first collection is eclectic, bringing together the full range of the poet's interests, influences and poetic experimentations, setting the broad foundation from which the mature poet will emerge. *In the Museum of Creation* meets this expectation, in how the collection embodies its title, bringing together a diverse range of objects and moments in history; each poem a small cabinet of curios. The focus is primarily on Europe and America, so we encounter parachutists from 1943 (14), the Museum of Creation in Tierra Santa (8), Bronzino's Portrait of a Dwarf (16), the ruins at Loci (19), Proust's Bedroom (20), many Madonnas (41-2), Pharlap (35), and the Dance of Death in St Nicholas's Church Tallina (54).

Unlike the sense of randomness that fills many first collections, the variety of objects in Russo's museum has a strong sense of curation, of intent. This works well when the collection is assessed as a whole; the poems, like the objects, have a kind of cumulative power, although it is worth questioning how much of this power derives from the repeated references to great works or their creators: Voltaire, Rousseau, Freud, and Caravaggio, to name a few. It is risky to try to invoke so many other works – Russo's poems tend to be swamped by the intertexts' stronger and more familiar resonances. Yet as a whole corpus, it is fascinating to watch the speaker move quickly from thing to thing, place to place. The overall effect is one of compression of time – not quite timelessness, but a sense of viewing history on fast-forward, the speaker assessing what remains and what has been left to decay. This is aided by the movement of many

poems through different modes of interpretation that could broadly be termed the ‘sacred’, the ‘scientific’ and the ‘popular’.

At the level of the poem, the collection and its strong sense of curation is perhaps less successful. The weakest of the poems are those that feel over-derived, where the speaker directs the reader in their interpretation of an image or object. In these poems little is left for the reader to do and crucially there is none of the indeterminacy or ambivalence that we often find in great poetry. With this overemphasis on clarity, there is accordingly at times prosaicism to the prosody. Unfortunately this is the case with the title poem, ‘In the Museum of Creation’, which describes in detail the speaker’s reactions to an American biblical museum. Some of the images are crisp, as in how ‘[i]n a vine-covered room Pterodactyl bones hang / from a cathedral ceiling. Trunks of prehistoric firs / rise from a bog garden’ (8), or ‘[i]n a room filled with monitors / the six days of creation are shown / on repeat every four minutes’ (9). Ultimately though, the poem is let down by the speaker’s interpretive asides: ‘[a] snake – too measured in its movements to have tempted Eve’ (8), ‘Eve ... her long hair laid across her breasts / as though she had already known shame’ (8), hers and ‘Adam’s / faces amalgams of every tribe, / inner-city melting pots from which / the races of the world might disentangle’ (8-9). These asides prescribe too much of the reader’s experience and understanding of the poem, and extend out the sentences at the expense of the music of the line.

More successful are those poems in which Russo deploys shorter lines, such as ‘Skin’ where ‘[h]e noticed how / the chain of her necklace / left indentations across her throat, / that lingered as she showered’ (34). Similarly the poems that rely more heavily on what Ezra Pound termed melopoeia are immediately engaging, such as ‘At home with Peggy’ which uses alliteration and repetition to pleasing ends:

Peggy in Pegeen’s room. Peggy studying
the photo of Pegeen sitting on the Byzantine
throne.
Peggy observing her daughter’s paintings,
how they teem with happiness: scenes of sun
and Riviera.
Pegeen’s paintings, primitive and naïve. (44)

Russo’s poetry is driven by thought: in terms of a basic binary – his is an intellectual rather than emotive stance. In the less successful poems, not enough room is left for the liminal spaces of poetry, of Robert Bly’s imaginative leaps. Bly famously coined the idea of ‘dragon smoke’ to describe how ‘a great work of art often has at its center a long floating leap’, where ‘the real joy of poetry is to experience this leaping inside a poem’ (Bly 1975: 4). This is descriptive of the poet making ‘a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance’ (1975: 1). Russo, through careful telegraphing of his speakers’ thoughts, does not allow for the role that the unconscious plays in poetry. Bly, of course, primarily focused on poets he termed ‘deep image’ such as Lorca, Rilke or Neruda. It could be that a rhetorical or discursive mode such as Russo’s will never fully be accounted for in Bly’s terminology.

The poems which are extremely successful are those where the speaker’s interpretative capabilities are sidelined. In these poems Russo’s wonderfully precise descriptive ability reveals him to have great powers of observation. These poems are as a whole more associative, less pre-

determined. 'Calvario' opens mid-scene with the immediately arresting '[t]hey found one of the blond twins to play Jesus – / the ones whose parents had migrated to the Ruhr / to work as factory hands' (27). The poem is constructed in tight quatrains and is particularly impressive for its mixture of narrative perspectives. These perspectives shift between members of the audience, moving from the man who had 'ridden his motorcycle down from Essen' to the old woman who 'cried, / He's like a real Jesus', to the startling image of an actor playing Judas perhaps too successfully hanging himself:

As Judas climbs a metal ladder, takes the
carefully
knotted noose, a man recounts how
the best Judas they had was the one
that time in Ragona: so possessed
the guilt of betrayal stamped on his face –
when he took the noose away and kicked away
the chair,
the way he struggled appeared so real –
how his legs kicked and bucked,
how his hands struggled to untie the noose
– how could the crowd not burst into applause?
(27-8)

'Calvario' succeeds through a concerted meditation on a singular image, scene or theme. In this respect, 'A journal for shooting' (61), 'Walgett' (62), and 'Thin silver lines' (63) are particularly impressive. It is interesting that in 'Calvario' and in several of the other most successful poems the speaker incorporates the speech of others. Hence in 'The book artist' we encounter the striking opening: '[o]ld bibles are the best, she said / on account of their exceptionally fine pages, / so easily twisted into delicate arrangements' (47).

Russo is a poet capable of deep insight, of bringing forth the unexpected in what might seem like a commonplace or extremely familiar situation or object. It will be interesting to see what path he develops from this assured first collection.

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Caitlin Maling is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney. Her work examines pastoral poetry in the USA and Australia from an ecopoetic lens. She has published one book of poetry and a second is forthcoming in early 2017.

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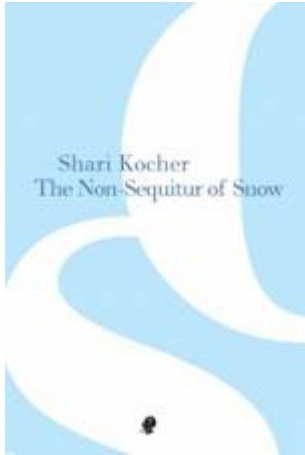
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TEXT review

A beautiful debut

review by Monica Carroll



Shari Kocher
The Non-Sequitur of Snow
Puncher & Wattmann, Sydney NSW 2015
ISBN 9781922186829
Pb 62pp AUD25.00

For Shari Kocher, the year 2015 will probably be remembered – to borrow a phrase from her poem ‘Bellbird Gully’ – with ‘a spume of wonder’ (29). She published *The Non-Sequitur of Snow*, her first collection of poetry, and was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy from The University of Melbourne for her PhD thesis on the verse novels of Dorothy Porter and Anne Carson. The twenty-six poems that make *The Non-Sequitur of Snow* reveal Kocher’s interesting background of having lived and written in many places over the last two decades. A diverse richness of experience is clearly evident in this debut collection which spans dreams, observations, memory and moment; moments such as those in ‘Notes from the Abyss’ where ‘a candle holds its lit canoe / afloat in a bowl of wax’ (17).

Kocher’s poems follow the dictate in ‘Bellbird Gully’; her work is always ‘approaching the very *whatness* of things’ (29). Appealing to the clarity of haiku, Kocher’s work sustains precision but also embodies a quiet yet deep sensuality. We see this in the poems, ‘Cut’ where ‘soft faces cotton the touch’ (37), ‘My Singing Empty Hands’ in which ‘my sister’s tears / taste like lamingtons’ (40); and ‘My Beautiful Fig Tree’ with ‘its furry umbrella / bulging / with purple fruit’ (47). They are simultaneously sparse and lush – evidence of Kocher’s patient experience and sharp eye.

Many of the poems weave delicately into domestic imaginings: ‘Dreaming in Auslan: a Study in Yellow and Grey’ with ‘those curtains she hung like mustard’ (35); ‘Spoons’ with ‘their metal mouths / pursed and shrinking’ (27); and the gently-rhyming ‘Breakfast at Full Tide’ with ‘This billowing / tide enclosed, awash with dishes and dirty sun- / light, flooding the walls

with mashed banana' (28). Children, family, and nature are a loving texture throughout the book.

In contrast, many poems contain suffering and darkness, such as 'Cannibals at Dinner in Formal Attire' featuring 'the clown with the crooked teeth' (33) and 'bellies of pus' (33), and 'A Letter to Dorothy Hewett' where the body is 'guttled of all light' (44). 'The Canvas', too, does not pass shyly through the narrative and mood of the poem:

one dark morning (or was it an endless night?)
neat thumbs pressing the air out
of his daughter's throat
now sitting in the bottom of a boat
reading a book less than the size of his hand.
(52)

Darkness is balanced by an undeniable groundedness and jocularity in poems like 'The Scent, the Scent'. In this, and a few other poems, Kocher talks of frogs and toads and toilets:

jasmine round the table the smell of tree frogs
mould at the window the red
horsehair sofa the downstairs
toilet on its rattling chain all the adult
voices rising
in a hubbub of beer and smoke and *out you go*
now
the sharp poo smell emanating from the cistern.
(55)

'The Scent, the Scent', 'Switch on Day' and 'The Bridge' are unmistakably Australian in context. Other poems are drawn from different geographies, such as the abandoned Ireland of 'CanalSong', yet there is a deeper sense of power in some of the poems set in a geographical nowhere, such as in the opening prayer poem of 'Snowmelt':

Let rain in a cup be. Let the hour.
Let the grace of a face immersed in hush
be the grace of a face immersed in hush. (11)

Kocher's work is not all free verse. Some structured poems such as 'Flow, Repetition, Decay' and 'Swim' are offered. They are structured in different ways to each other, but again show the firm mastery of Kocher's pen.

There is no definitive form or structure that can be named from this collection. It is both approachable and experimental. Yet, in all the works it is evident that both word and line in Kocher's work are exact yet generous, such as in 'Notes from the Abyss':

How to hold this pause of silence in a piece of
music?
How to feel light exploding in your hand
when you're deaf and Vivaldi's *Gloria* rushes
through your fingers back up the waterfall. (17)

Silence, as Billy Collins noted, is central to poetry. The poem, as a form, makes sense because it is an interruption of silence, a break in the space around it. These spaces, or silences, can be not only an absence but also a silence of those things we cannot think or grasp. Kocher's poems are just

that, a break in silence. We may not be able to explain why a given tragedy or suffering occurs, such as the 2009 murder of Darcey Iris Freeman, the background to Kocher's poem 'The Bridge'. Yet, through this poem we can understand:

without her a wrinkle a mirror, see how she
likes it, reaching
 across, undoing the belt
No Daddy No limp as a doll always pretending
see how she likes
it, a few short steps
and Bingo she's over – *All-Over-Rover* like
she's over *him* –. (56)

Understanding, however, as a break in silence, is achieved not just through each poem, but also through the ordering of Kocher's collection. The sequencing of 'Clay', followed by 'Spoons' and then 'Breakfast at Full Tide', for example, is pleasing. Similarly, the confrontation of 'The Bridge' is healed through the clarity of the next (and final poem in the collection), 'Blue Irises'.

Although it is possible to dip into random poems, the structure of *The Non-Sequitur of Snow* is important: to read the collection from front to back cover brings an unexpected journey. The structure is not just an arrangement of words but also a treat for the eye.

Based on my reading of *The Non-Sequitur of Snow*, I look forward to reading further narrative experiments by Kocher, namely a published version of her 'verse novel of archaeological embodiment', submitted as part of her PhD. Until then, *The Non-Sequitur of Snow* is a nurturing small feast.

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TEXT review

Talking back to a ‘million little violences’

review by Helen Gildfind



The Lifted Brow

Ellena Savage and Gillian Terzis (eds)

Issue Number 29, March

The Lifted Brow, Melbourne VIC 2016

ISSN 9771835566092

Pb 112pp AUD13.95

The Lifted Brow describes itself as ‘a quarterly attack journal’. This stance is evident in its cover-image of a Vegemite jar ‘rebranded’ from ‘Kraft’ to ‘Daft’ in a blatant denunciation of Australia’s white, colonial history. Though clearly left-leaning, there is nothing politically reductive about this journal. Through multiple means its contributors express intelligent and informed critiques, moving effortlessly between the personal and political, the abstract and concrete, the fictional and factual.

The essays in this issue are topically diverse and strikingly well written. Stand-outs include Jana Perković’s insights into both the ‘emotional labour’ (7) of criticism and ‘the million little violences of heteronormativity’ (6): a ‘bruised’ (5) heart renders the critic unable to do her work. Briohny Doyle exposes our culture’s repression of teenage girls’ sexuality through a discussion of seventies ‘baby’ rock groupy, Sabel Starr. Doyle demands a world where teens can explore sex safely ‘without letting skeezy dudes off the hook’ (10). Shaun Prescott uses Kriss Hades’ 1990s death metal group, Sadistik Exekution, to perform his own critique of today’s overly-policed Sydney-for-the-rich, where tenants live in slums and music lives (or dies) via ‘corporately branded music festivals’ (23). Why doesn’t today’s Sydney vibrate with the anger of Sadistik Exekution? ‘It should sound like a war’ (23). Paul Dalla Rosa expertly weaves personal experience, pop culture and critical theory into one unified narrative that gives those from ‘the kingdom of the well’ insight into the ‘kingdom of the sick’ (71, quoting Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*). Taking insight and courage from Sontag, Cixous and Kristeva, Rosa

approaches writing as a self-actualising, legitimising, political act: 'Write yourself. The body must be heard' (72).

Other excellent essays include Stephanie Van Schilt's article on today's lauded long-form television dramas which, she wryly notes, look very much like the traditionally-derided 'feminine' soap opera dressed in 'masculine-crisis drama' clothing (19). Dion Kagan writes on Patricia Highsmith's book, *The Price of Salt*, and its recent film adaptation, *Carol*. Kagan shows how Highsmith's high-class femme – not an easily identifiable 'butch' lesbian, and not clearly predator or prey – subverts the genre conventions of 1950s lesbian pulp fiction, thus refusing to perpetuate homophobia or pathologise homosexuality. Lou Heinrich courageously criticises how rape narratives – filmed through a male gaze designed to both arouse and horrify viewers – are used as entertainment in our society. Heinrich wants rape scenes forbidden, and though her strong argumentation is undermined by reference to her Christian beliefs – which can delineate 'clearly', apparently, between 'good and evil' (97) – her ultimate point compels: we can feed the 'wolf' of darkness within, or we can starve it. Amy Gray looks at the plight of apotemnophiliacs whose 'body integrity identity disorder' (61) makes them vulnerable to back yard surgeons like 'Butcher Brown'. Fatima Measham cites five hundred years of history to reclaim the 'fierce dignity' (50) of Filipino women who are regularly assumed to be mail-order brides, idiots, gold-diggers, or a commodity that signifies white wealth and status. Adam Rivett writes guiltily on the pleasures of 'Cinema at 20,000 Feet' (99), whilst the collection fittingly ends with Jean Hannah Edelstein's personal essay on trying to live a life that's not geared towards writing personal essays.

The journal showcases images and comics by a huge number of artists, including Merv Heers, Lyra Hill, Mary Leunig, Freda Chui, and Sam Wallman who presents a timely satire of the recent trend whereby adult colouring-in books were outselling books with words. These graphics share space with short fiction, commentary, memoir and poetry by such writers as Ruth Wier, Stuart Barnes, Wendy Xu, and the poetically verbose, self-named 'whore' Regrette Etcetera. David Thornby's prizewinning 'Being the Boy the Memoir' (56) eloquently evokes the real-time disassociating horror of child sexual abuse and its deforming, disabling legacy:

I am a man, and he is dead, and nobody touches my cock
and I touch nobody's... I am terrified of what I ache for,
and I ache, awfully, for what terrifies me. This seems
unfair: it seems a consequence of being the boy, when now
I am the man; I should be free. (56)

One of the most striking pieces of writing in this issue is Paola Balla's beautifully rendered reflections of a woman with indigenous and Calabrian heritage. Here, the protagonist recalls sex with a stranger:

A hotted up Commodore idles nearby, its red tail lights like
red eye at the window, seeping into the exhaust fumes like
beautiful bleeding little clouds, red eye mooky taunting me,
watching and disapproving while I open myself up to a
complete stranger.
A young Italian from the western suburbs, older by about
nine years to my sixteen has me pinned onto Yorta Yorta
Country pushing me into her until I feel like I don't exist at

all. I fall through the Country like a little dark Alice, falling
and falling... (25)

She sees welcome, pity and love in the underworld's petrified creatures, and later, the Murray 'laps ever so gently' (25) nearby. In this way Balla makes us feel the comfort of the land's impersonal quietness – its never-threatening, always-thereness – and thus emphasises the brutal indifference and violence of the man. Balla's restraint allows her to say very much with very few words: using contrast, humour and keenly observed gestures and dialogue, she reveals the chasm between indigenous and white Australian experience. She watches the town's old white ladies, noting their gold jewellery and their obliviousness to its 'connective purpose' (27) in the earth. Their oblivious sense of entitlement and privilege provokes the narrator to erupt into anger and accusation, an eruption which powerfully reveals the internal pressure of her prior restraint: 'I am sad, bitter and wounded and really, really angry' (28). Why do these white women get to grow old when the narrator's Nan died at 61? Why are they free from worries about 'feeding your kids... or knowing how to read the signs when you are going to be raped or bashed...'? (28) Balla's writerly skill allows her to express deep affection for her people in the very same gesture that she shows how detrimentally they have internalised their diminished status. Of her grandmother, she writes:

'My big damper nose!' She'd laugh, mocking herself and
pushing her elegant long fingers onto the tip of her nose
(which I thought was beautiful like her) squishing it from
side to side. (28)

The narrator's own self-diminishment manifests in her casual reference to her breakdown and sexual abuse as a child: they are mentioned in passing, as if they are ordinary, as if they simply don't matter at all.

The foil to Balla's story ostensibly lies in Khalid Warsame's 'Australia Day', an energetic parody that depicts seemingly superficial people 'celebrating' a superficial day in their superficial lives: 'we knew most of Audrey's friends Face-book-well, which was well enough' (53). Whilst this superficiality is emphasised by the story's 'dot point' structure, it is undermined by hints of seriousness: miscarriage, death, inarticulable grief and the characters' constant struggle to both avoid and achieve real human connection. Cleverly, Warsame suggests that the apparent superficiality of his peers' world is simply that: apparent, superficial.

The Lifted Brow shouts with a chorus of deeply informed, visually and linguistically skilled artists who not only have something important to say, but the courage to say it. Impressive.

Helen Gildfind lives in Melbourne and has had reviews, essays, fiction and poetry published in Australia and overseas.

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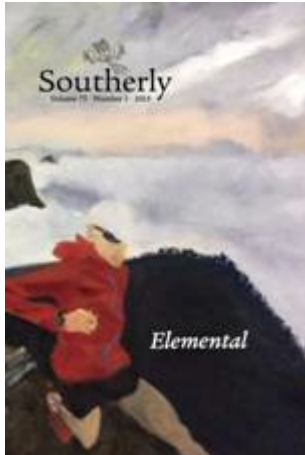
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TEXT review

Matter(s) at hand

review by Ruby Todd



Southerly: Elemental

David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon (eds)

Volume 75, Number 1

The Journal of the English Association

Brandl & Schlesinger, Sydney NSW 2015

ISBN 9781921556890

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As its title suggests, this rewarding edition of *Southerly* offers a compilation of diverse and searching perspectives on the human experience of the elements. The themes and subjects underpinning the stories, essays and poems of this collection are variously meteorological, environmental, and chemical, and the four classical elements of earth, water, air and fire are constant touchstones. The disparate voices in *Elemental* are connected by their preoccupation with the essential and primitive in our experience of not only the physical world, but also of our own bodies and senses, and the imaginary territories built and sustained by this felt experience. In all cases, there is a marveling at the suddenness with which our routine experience of our selves and the world can suddenly be revealed in its strangeness, transience and precariousness. As Ian Buchanan observes in 'Not our element', a meditative essay on the poetics of swimming, '[w]ater is not "our" element; as such, it induces both awe and fear' (50). This is a truth applicable to encounters with other elements considered in the collection; elements which, to quote from Elizabeth McMahon's editorial, are variously 'real and imaginal' (6).

In his essay 'Oi Kaymeni ("The Burnt Ones")', George Kouvaros reflects on the revenant capacity of repeat encounters with cinema over time to confront us with past versions of our lives and selves, held in our memory of earlier viewings. Kouvaros blends the philosophical with the personal in recalling his migrant mother's recent reluctance to re-watch the 1951 Elizabeth Taylor film, *A Place in the Sun*. Kouvaros traces this reluctance to his mother's instinctive awareness that re-encountering the film would

also involve revisiting difficult memories of a more innocent self, decades before, in a now-distant Cyprus. As Kouvaros writes, ‘some part of who she was then remains preserved in her memory of the film, in the same way that the faces and bodies of the film’s actors are preserved in the images’ (83). In Alice Bishop’s personal account, ‘Wyenondable Ashes’, it is the sudden and cataclysmic force of the Black Saturday fires, rather than migration and the passage of time, which precipitates a more immediate kind of exile. In her story, ‘The Bird Watcher’, Raellee Chapman also evokes the radical force of fire in the rural Australian landscape, as both an atmospheric threat and a deadly reality for human and non-human inhabitants. In her description of the protagonist watching panicked flocks of birds struggling to escape the blaze, Chapman captures the strange beauty that sometimes attends the terrible commotion of bushfires: ‘She watched small, colourful Lorikeets darting and diving chaotically underneath the larger birds; they were unable [to] stay together as a flock and scattered like a rainbow unravelling’ (26).

Necessarily, the subject of climate change pervades and troubles much of *Elemental*, as both an indeterminate force and as a certain cause of drastic and measurable change. Claire Corbett’s ‘The Trillion Pearl Necklace’ evokes the unnerving spectacle of ‘an infestation of giant jellyfish’ on a Pacific island under siege from ‘rising king tides’ (106). Corbett’s description of the infestation is delightfully weird:

From one day to the next, the harbour was flocked with domes of pearly gelatin. The water rumpled and folded like bolts of cloth, almost solid, so thick no ship screw could turn. (106)

In ‘Angry Waves’, Dael Allison discusses the predicament of the low-lying Pacific island nation of Kiribati, which is already experiencing the effects of climate change-induced rising sea levels. One of these effects is an increase in the frequency and scale of coastal waves, causing both immediate and incremental destruction. Allison, who is a foreign resident of Kiribati, describes the disorienting transformation that these so-called ‘angry waves’ caused in 2015, when a familiar landscape was suddenly rendered strange:

Rivers flowed on these tiny atolls which have no rivers; people waded through lakes where lakes have never been before. Pictures of the new maternity wing of Beito hospital showed patients on sodden hospital beds awaiting evacuation. (134)

Due to the ongoing effects of climate change, Allison notes ‘[p]rojections suggest entire atolls may become uninhabitable within the next generation’ (141), and despite the best efforts of Kiribati’s president, Anote Tong, and others, to campaign for political action, these projections portend a future of migration for the nation’s 110,000 residents, plans for which are already underway (141). What might the social and cultural implications of such a mass migration be? As Kouvaros observes, ‘migration is not just about a dispersal of individuals across continents; it is also about a dispersal of the narrative details that we use to understand the people close to us’ (83). The consequences of narrative dispersal will be irrevocable in the case of Kiribati, where the very possibility of return is in question.

Unsurprisingly for a volume concerned with natural forces and cycles, themes of mortality, burial and memorial recur in several works. In ‘The

Bones of Genesius', Moreno Giovannoni weaves a story of death and mortal remains while meditating on the import of human and animal excrement at both ends of the life cycle in the farming hamlets of San Ginese in Italy, speaking at once to the transient and eternal. Roslyn Jolly's essay, 'St Thomas's Churchyard', poignantly explores the history of those buried in several colonial graves in a Sydney parkland cemetery, then acknowledges the relative 'insulation from catastrophe' with which we in the Western world are currently privileged (100). In 'A Richer Dust', John Stephenson delivers a distilled reflection on burial and memorial in literature and life, in encountering the surprise of a friend's final resting place.

Alongside these and other stories, essays, and memoirs, is a robust offering of reviews, and a vibrant and diverse selection of poems from Pam Brown, Kate Lilley, Laurie Duggan, David Brooks, Brett Dionysius, and many more writers. Sophie Curzon-Siggers' poem, 'mourning takes me in red', starkly evokes the way mourning radically alters the reality of the speaker, who is compelled to 'wade through the lake poured / out on the floor. there circulate new veins / in legs and arms of wood, rugs / and teatowels sucking, / sponges at fate's edge' (131). In this poem, the boundaries between the speaker's body and the environment become desperately blurred, as otherwise ordinary domestic surrounds are animated with hallucinatory intensity.

Throughout *Elemental*, we are reminded fruitfully of the extent to which – just as the physical phenomena we experience constantly mark and shape us – our felt experience of those phenomena is genuinely transformed by the memories, hopes, fears, and dreams we project upon them. In the process of encountering a once-familiar film, a savage fire, a stretch of slowly eroding coast, or the grave of a dead friend, we are at once witness and witnessed; revealed to ourselves as strange for a moment, before the other within and without us.

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