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and the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer
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The aerial view . . .

Adam Aitken interviews Martin Harrison

Martin Harrison's latest book, Kangaroo Farm, released by Paperbark Press in mid-1998. He speaks here with Adam Aitken about his work...

AA How has your work in radio influenced your thinking in poetry?

MH I've always been interested in electronic media and I also realised early on that I would work in radio–it has all sorts of connections in my life to do with childhood; radio is often a childhood experience for people. Your love of things starts there. Also because I feel that a lot of writing is just not for the page. Writing is something that goes on in film and television, and other forms of electronic media as well. It's part of the environment I live in.

AA You seem to use images in a linear way, as TV would.

MH Yes. I am trying to write poetry that lives in the same world as watching TV, listening to radio and watching movies. And I've been thinking a lot about what the poetic image means these days–the classic Horatian definition of pictoria poesis has to be rethought from generation to generation. I'm trying to make my work coexist with contemporary ways of perception. I'm interested in the kind of detail that the camera can provide that the writer can intimate with. If you take a room or a scene or a person there is something about the way those images cover the object, and something about the lingering attention you can give to what's produced there. It defines a contemporary sensibility. I like that kind of attentiveness.

AA People think that the way TV and radio influence poetry is a very contemporary phenomenon but in fact in your work you owe a lot to Roland Robinson's aesthetic. He says "the thing is to keep moving". I'm thinking of your poem 'Moon Gazing in Sorrento Dusk'. You call the moon a "breakthrough moon", "moon of eternal knowledge", and you also say that "everything about it was the opposite of how I felt". How are these ideas sourced in Roland Robinson's poetry?

MH I wanted to write an elegy for Roland. He published some of my first poems, I admired his work and I enormously liked him. He was one of those great generous human beings basically. A man of incredible memory and resource. He was someone who in a subtle way changed your mind about the nature of local experience. In the poem I wanted to bring out the aural and the hearing basis of Robinson's own work. I regret never having managed to record him, do what we're doing and record his conversation. He would move from talking into poetry and poetry into talking. He spent a lot of time travelling up and down New South Wales–the south coast and north coast and some of the inland areas–during and after the war, travelling and meeting mainly local Aboriginal people and writing down their stories.

AA There's a sense that in your poetry the "I", the poet, is on a pilgrimage through various landscapes–pastoral surface–but not in the way David Campbell writes pastoral. What's your sense of writing the Australian landscape as a certain unravelling of myths rather than a reinforcement of, say, the country-city divide?

MH That dialectic has worn itself out. I'm not denying that there are regional differences in Australia. City-based Australians underestimate that. City-based Australians have very little understanding of what the place looks like from some of the bush areas. But I agree I'm not interested in arguing that the country is a kind of idyllic space. I'm interested in talking about the country as no less a technological invention than urban space. It's an aspect that's constantly underestimated. Its importance is not understood. It seems to me that in this country you have got to have a many-levelled sense of place. I know this can be very troublesome, because memory and attachment is many-levelled but not in the sense that there be several different stories running side by side. I mean your attachment to a house or a room or a view is yours and it resonates in a thousand different ways. But that is a little different form what I'm saying, which is that you have got somewhere to have this double vision of spaces and places. They do have multiple histories–they have Aboriginal histories, early settler histories, contemporary histories and so on. You've somehow got to keep those sides of things together. And so I try to keep that possibility open in the poems.

AA You mentioned the elegy to Roland Robinson. That is one of the reasons why the moon became important in that poem. I was trying to tell a version of the moon. It is in some way an aboriginal story. I'm trying to have two moons in that story–the moon of Diana and the reincarnational moon of many–not all–but many Aboriginal stories of the moon.
John Ashbery

The Pathetic Fallacy

A cautionary mister,
the thaumaturge poked holes in my trope.
I said what are you doing that for.
His theorem wasn't too complicated,
just complicated enough. In brief,
this was it. The governor should peel
no more shadow apples, and about bedtime
it was as if the lemon of Descartes
had risen to full prominence on the opulent skyline.

There were children in drawers, and others trying to shovel them out.
In a word, shopping had never been so tenuous,
but it seems we had let the cat out of the bag, in spurts.
Often, from that balcony
I'd interrogate the jutting profile of night
for what few psalms or coins it might
in other circumstances have been tempted to shower down
on the feeble heathen oppressor, and my wife.

Always you get the same bedizened answer back.
It was like something else, or it wasn't,
and if it wasn't going to be as much, why,
it might as well be less, for all anyone'd care.
And the ditches brought it home dramatically
to the horizon, socked the airport in.

We, we are only mad clouds,
dauphin's reach from civilization,
with its perfumed citadels, its quotas.
What did that mean you were going to do to me?
Why, in another land and time we'd be situated, separate
from each other and the ooze of life.
But here, within the palisade of brambles it only comes often enough to what
can be doved off quickly, with the least amount of fuss.
For the ebony cage claims its constituents
as all were going away, thankful the affair had ended.
Andrì Kissane  

On the Highway

after Dorothea Lange

The road takes your eye.

Dave stands in front of me
on the loose gravel, his gaze locked
on the bitumen, following the curve
past the last tree to the haze of hills
in the distance. His arm is extended,
ready, prepared to make a supplicating arc
whenever a car approaches. There's no sign
of a car. There haven't been any cars
for fifteen minutes and the last one
was going in the wrong direction, back
to Arizona, back towards our abandoned car,
back to the old farm, the sweeping furrows
ploughed right up to the verandah by now,
the vegetable garden and chicken coop gone,
replaced by furrows as far as the eye
can see, as far as a tractor, that bright
new toy of the bank, can make them.

It's hot. The sun is burning Dave's neck,
burning up through the leather soles
of his lace-up, pointy-toed white shoes
- his favourite shoes - not the sort of
sensible shoes you'd wear on a country road
in the middle of August 1936. At least
I'm resting, sitting on our suitcase,
my girl asleep on my lap, her hot breath
gluing my dress to my skin. My son squats
beside me, feet bare, cap tilted, his hand
under his chin, musing, supporting his father
who is still gazing down the road in search
of a lift. Dave says there's supposed to be work
around Bakersfield - grapes, more cotton,
oranges, even some regular jobs at the cannery.
He keeps saying it - there's work in Bakersfield,
as if simply repeating it will make our luck
change. California. The name used to be as sweet
as sherbet on my tongue, but now it's a parched
growl stuck in my throat. I smile. For my son's
sake, for Dave's, I smile. He's humming
some tune to himself, the girl's sound asleep,
my boy's dragging a stick through the dirt,
the road taking your eye.
Dan Disney

...I once asked a deaf magician the famed question: if a tree falls in the forest, will it always make a noise? He wrung his hands wretchedly, then signed "yeah; but what's a man to do?" Earlier, he'd pulled me from his velvet hat, lipreading the gaps of a gathered crowd...

...if I was going to burn a hole into the night my inventory would include starlight, & a magnifying glass. Once the hole was made big enough, I'd scaffold it so as to hold it in place. Imagine that. Then I'd crawl in. What would I find there—the cure for madness? An undiscovered number. Simplicity. Perhaps the perfect shade of blue? Who knows. But I do know I wouldn't take too many people in, because they'd just fuck it up. I'd take you, though. That's for sure. I'd take you.

...
Deb Westbury

Metropolis

Latin from greek; meter: mother, polis: city.

Something very precise had sawn her almost in two, and she lay under the green sheet like a fish half-gutted, suspended in the amniotic sea that pumped and pulsed and breathed for her.

A single white line measured her equilibrium; the distance between heartbeats.

A monitor divides the metropolis into meridians of light, two lines of pulsating colour build up around an obstacle;

two lines of pulsating colour build up around an obstacle;

telegraph pole, the wreckage of an ambulance and the donor's heart still vacuum-sealed and packed in ice.

The white line falters and she succumbs to the blocked and loaded arteries of her heart wondering, at the last if this is what her mother meant when she said “I’ll kill you.”

Patricia Prime

Artist at Work

This is the story of Picasso’s painting ‘Woman in an Armchair’.

To exalt Eva's sexuality he portrays her, proudly and tenderly, but also monstrously, in terms of her genitals.

Inserted into the voluptuous violet of the chair the soft pink architecture of her beauty beckons us into the painting.

Her face is a vertical slit. Her lap is covered by a chemise draped immodestly so as to attract attention.

When it comes to her beautiful pointed breasts, so redolent of tribal sculpture—he nails them to her body with another set of nipples.

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AA What do you mean?

MH Everything is available but you don’t know why you might prefer this one to that one. You have no authentic reasons for getting engaged with one work as opposed to another work.

AA Your poem ‘Leeches’ starts off in that naturalist mode but the last line’s great: “textbook leeches right now though I see them as false climbing friends”. You’re talking about the shape-shifting organism—is that the problem with internationalism or poets who appropriate any other foreign body perhaps and live on that?

MH I wasn’t thinking of any poets or other writers in that poem. I actually do have a strong aversion to leeches! A lot of people who have read that poem say to me “But don’t you think leeches are very good, very nice!” But to me there not. I have an aversion to parasitism of various sorts. That parasites are killing an organism. The leeches in that poem fasten on to you and deprive you of life source and life energy, and they are amorphous, shapeless, have no form, and by definition, are uninteresting.

AA But highly adapted to their function!

MH Yes in that poem highly adapted to their economic rationalist function: they do nothing, believe nothing, say nothing, a do-everything function.

AA I found ‘Tasmanian Tiger’ to be a interesting poem. . .

MH ‘Tasmanian Tiger’ is one of those poems in the book reflecting on creativity in various ways. I started writing it in Sorrento during the winter. Again, it’s a poem I did literally spend a year or so trying to get to work. There were two things in that poem. One of them was to do with the nature of the feeling I was trying to express which I had enormous difficulty getting there into the language, and the second thing was trying to find a way of talking about this simplest and most natural of things, of looking up at the window in a particular sort of late winter light and seeing these casuarinas against the window and the particular effect of that light. I really did spend a lot of time trying to get that detail vivid, the many-sidedness of that detail, and ultimately to try to acknowledge the intensity of what that was about, that movement, as the object comes into view and there’s a particular energy, a drive that occurs at that point. Exactly at that point, it’s there, and then it’s gone.

Which is why the tiger could not be a living tiger roaming in the jungle, it’s got to be in some way extinct, it’s dead in some way. It’s about trying to compose in microscopic detail. I’m trying to get that very detailed, that everyday moment, to have it there and not to overlook it.

AA The tiger poem is adjacent to another set of poems, the ‘Closeups’. You’re trying to do what the Imagists were trying to do—get inside the object—but what’s interesting is that you use a completely different syntax to do it. Your lines go right across the page. I noticed that when I was listening to some of the lines, the actual object, and subject of the sentence disappeared or was lost, but it didn’t seem to matter. Bob Adamson mentioned to me that, at reading that, he tried to get you to edit down
Adam Aitken and Martin Harrison...

those very long lines.

MH I did go through the book after Bob had seen it the first time and it was in a somewhat different state. It went through a lot of change in that process. I'm not trying to be obscure. I went through the book to ensure that every line was clear, and that there was not a single line I did not agree with.

But, yes your comment is a good one. It's hard to ignore the nature of the Imagist image— its specificity, that precision and openness to sensation, that sense of immediacy, that up-front- ness, the colour, the vibrancy of it. You need to have that I think. But I also think I am interested in connectives— in how things connect. How the eye wanders from here to there. How when you are looking at someone having a coffee in the street at the same time you're having a conversation with someone else. And maybe the radio is on in the background. They are ambiances as precise as the Imagist image. Therefore you have to go about them in a different way.

It was a breakthrough point for me between this book and the earlier book DISTRIBUTION OF Voice to realise that though I agree that a poem must be precise, highly economic and all the things we are regularly told about poetry that what a limit it was not to be able to go for length and put in all of those details, which, if we believe the story, Ezra Pound carefully after weeks and weeks deleted in the making of the two line poem 'In a Station of the Metro'. I felt that the poetry I was reading and writing was less rich than what was going on around me. I wanted to put in as much as I could, so that they'd have that energy resource.

I am a sort of Imagist who lives seventy or eighty years after Imagism in a completely different intellectual and cultural environment and a different poetic environment.

AA We could say you're going back to pre- Imagistic poets like Appollinaire—not in the sense that you're writing about what you see in the city—not even celebrating Australia as fecundity.

MH The poets I particularly admire are poets of that generation. Apollinaire is one of my favourites still. I also feel so close to Blok, and Machado, I find Browning interesting too. Writers who are still able to tell stories, who are not totally obsessed with modernist purity and fragmentation, interest me a great deal.

AA You want to get everything in there, but you would reject certain L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry strategies, where putting everything into the poem is a gesture of egalitarianism I suppose. Why would you reject the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry aesthetic.

MH Because I think such statements confuse politics and aesthetics. They try to make language theory do what politics should do. The idea that if you use language anarchically or chaotically you are in some sense contributing to social change or anarchy. It's a delusion. A category mistake. I want my poems to communicate to ordinary people. I feel that if you have to have a theory before you open a book you are immediately excluding the reader.

AA The book's first poem 'Eels' have the lines "myth gets us nowhere", and "the mythos of peninsula light is that it drifts rich as snow". I wasn't sure what you were getting at here.

MH It's a controversial line: it's saying that myth will run out, and realities won't.

AA It's ironic. Or in 'Australia' you write "Call it Australia, call it perhaps a well off, livable Argentina with its shards of myth set up in export mode".

MH Yes, and again, there are shards of myth constructed media-wise for tourism. I have nothing against tourism, but I think the business of trying to make a local art will have to bypass that stuff. I also think a genuine politics will bypass that stuff. I wrote a lot of that book during the early nineties when it seemed there were too many convergences between political movements and mythic belief systems.

I find your question about Imagism really interesting because one difference between anyone writing now and an Ezra Pound or the other Imagists is to do with scientific theory, that the Imagists live in a period where the notion of atomic structure, and the refinement which gets you the keremel, but a kernel which operates in a relativistic system, is very much what you expect in the age of Einstein. But I think the age now is of living systems.
untitled for a number of times already

i sold a poem today
at the junction of plenty road and dunn street
where they used to sell age in the mornings to passing cars stopped
before the red light
or waited to collect coins to fill in barrels of charity
or wiped a few coins out of the unconcerned window screens
but i sold a poem today
believe it or not
to an australian
a bloody australian
who looked like a greek
spoke like an asian
smelt like a middle eastern
behaved like an adolescent
average man
who said:

pom? what ya mean, pom?

i shouted in his grey hair of y/ears:
i'm going broke and mad today
this is all i've got
a poem of pants
not puns
nor puns
that i had picked up in a garage sale
for a couple of bucks
that i had worn though thick and thin
in a lot of fucks
i'll just give it to you
for a cent

(here it is
i have the cent
he's got the po(e)m
i don't know what to do with it
nor does he)

you understand?

The Other Eye

when i was getting in the clothes aired on the umbrella wires in the garden
the other eye watched me
through its post/colonial window
curtains
saying in admiration
one must really have such guys for mates
for they are so womanly

when i was backing my car out of the driveway slightly clumsily
my front wheel rolling over the curb
the other eye turned away to the grass being cut beneath
its noisy lawn-mower
thinking to himself:
these people are really no good at such things

so it was the same when i let my garden overrun with flower-dotted grass
for the other eye would simply show contempt
for such heathenish practice
or snort at my sometimes yelling to the boy
ughhhhhhhhhhh
those bloody cruel animals

the other eye is omnipresent
wherever you go
whatever you do
it keeps its vigil over you
wordlessly

until you see it yourself
in your heart:

an eye white
Experience and Transcendence

KEVIN HART on Tomas Tranströmer

Keri Glastonbury

Pulp

In love
I'll usually effect a threshold.

Usually a stream.

And there we splash and banter.

The threshold is my flattened-out organs without a summit.

Or sometimes I dig holes
and think that I'm clever.

It's a method of frustration
and deferral.

Although when I'm in love
like I am with you.

I'm a citrus orange
plunged chest first
on to a stainless steel juicer.

Waiting for a pure form
of domestic violence
to turn delicious.

say, "it may disclose the meaning of being, reveal
there is no meaning to being, or in questing beyond
the world may undermine itself by disparaging lan-
guage". Another group figures transcendence as hori-
zontal movement: poetry leads to places we never
knew, and in doing so changes the author.

This strange world with its assertions, arguments and
bewildements is our own, the world of modern
poetry. After living here for a while, one begins to
pick out individual voices that are more subtle, more
intriguing, or more commanding than others. Under
the guise of M att L auirds B riggs, R ik e observes that
"verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings [...].
they are experiences [Erfahrungen]. In order to
write a single line of verse, one must see many cities,
and men and things", W ire this literally true, we
would dismiss the poetry of Emily Dickinson and
Arthur R imbaud. However, R ik e is not aiming at
those who experience the world in little but at 'beau-
tiful souls' who refuse to engage with the world at all.
At first, Wal l ace S t e v ens appears squarely in R ik e's
sights when he says, "Poetry is the expression of the
experience of poetry". But his point is quite differ-
ent: Keats found himself in reading S tompson, Y eats in
reading S hel ley, and so on. To look closely at any
scene of authorial formation would doubtless be to
find evasions in what poets say about becoming poets.
If Stevens is right, no poetry simply reflects experi-
ence. At the least, a poem answers to experience and
transcendence. Poetry holds a mirror to life", we are
told. "Poetry is no reflection", we hear in reply, "it is a
furious ascension". M eanwhile, disputes break out
over "experience". For some, poetry is confession,
while for others it is a passage beyond the opacities of
personality, a quest for a deep self or an escape from
self. Other arguments rage over "transcendence".
One group sees transcendence by way of the verti-
cal. "Poetry is an illumination of the heights", they
ignites what a consciousness registers, not what a per-
son physically encounters. And one begins to walk
down this track when seeing that the important
thing is not the poet's consciousness but what could
be called the "consciousness of the poem": a work's
ability to signify in the absence of its maker. In poet-
ry, experience does not abide within an organising
intelligence; it is bespoken by a poem that, once writ-
ten, has no further need of the poet. Poetry cannot be
conceived simply as a representation of an experience,
even one that includes a good deal of reflection. For
in its dealings with forms, genres, languages, tropes
and traditions, none of which can be fully controlled
by an individual, a poem may present experience that
the poet had only while writing or not at all.

H aving come this far, we are in a position to
hear what M aurice Blanchot says of poetry
and experience. "The act of composition, he tells us,
leads a poet to risk losing everything: the
poem's unity, the poet's self-identity, even the poet's
faith in God. One writes in order to name reality; but
the 'I' that appears on the page differs from the
writer's consciousness, and the immediacy of what
one wishes to represent is destroyed by language
itself. So language, even when rigorously used, is not
the vehicle of the clarity, as French classicism teaches
rather, it embodies the nocturnal, the absent and the
veiled. Yet language also reveals itself as reassuringly
material: perhaps one can take it as the end of one's
quest, thereby regarding night as a simple modifica-
tion of day. Almost immediately, though, the poet
becomes aware of language as a play of rhythm and
form that anonymously co-operates in writing the
poem. Gazing into the heart of language, the poet
behinds an immemorial and interminable combining

Footnotes

1. H an d C h a p, F ureur et m yst è re, prof. Yve s B er ger (P aris:
2. R an k M an R ite, T he N otes b o ok s of M ait L auirds B riggs, introd.
S tephen S pond er (Oxf ord: Oxf ord U niversity P r ess, 1984), 19.
3. F rank K er mole and Jo an R icha rd so n, ed., W ALL A CE S TEV ENS:
C O L L E C T E D P O E T RY A N D P A S S E (N ew Y ork: T he L ib rary of
A merica, 1997), 904.
4. A llen G ro ss m an, S umma L yr i ca: A P rim er of the C ommonpl aces in
S peculative P oetry, in T HE S H O R T S N I N T E E N , TW O W O R K S O N
P O E T R Y ( R a g s b er g s a nd W a it e r s, A llen G ro ss m an w ith M at t
H olly d ay (B alt im ore: T he J oh ns H o pin s U niversity P r ess, 1992), 268.
5. W hat f o l l ows is a paraphrase of B loch e t's T H E S P A C E O F
L I T E R A T U R E , trans. A nn S m i c k (L in c oln : U niversity of N ebraska
P r ess, 1982).
proposed a broader understanding of the word "impos-

discovery of indeterminate being in no way precludes
the experience of determinate being, transcendent

work, and whether a poem can properly be said to
itself. Here words no longer refer to things; they are
but a condition before the world. Writing leads one

the main western conceptions of God.

language involves the mediation of concepts there can
inhere whatever human existence, not
to experience the most determinate being, tran-
scendent being. Being itself, or the W holly O ther, all
of which surpass human existence and which form

the word "God"

privileged relation to the impossible: the word "God"

3

The impossible, for

B

I

I

I

L

I

B

the impossible is broached.

impossible: what happens may be singular, ground-

infinities already vanishing points. Perhaps, as with
Blanchot, this moment conjures the approach of
death, to which the distribution of these vanishing
words yields to the same, while the impossible retains
more and more of its original meaning. Perhaps the
impossible is broached.

And I exist. At that moment my experience is consti-
tuted with the possible and impossible as more or less

...a poem is fundamentally an act of
understanding...

equally distant vanishing points. Perhaps, as with
Blanchot, this moment conjures the approach of
death, to which the distribution of these vanishing
words yields to the same, while the impossible retains
more and more of its original meaning. Perhaps the
impossible is broached.

These are extreme examples in life though not in
poetry. In life or art, however, "to transcend experi-
ence" does not name the impossible, as people some-
times say. The expression merely indicates that expe-
rience is not the same in all regions of being.

Experience is especially complex in the region we call
poetry. Of course, most verse, of whatever school,
abides almost wholly in the realm of the possible, and
even so-called experimental poetry often does little
more than rearrange formal possibilities. Filling or
destroying a form can expose one to the unknown,
but it is the passage that is important not the vehicle.

Despite appearances, devotional poetry has in itself no
privileged relation to the impossible: the word "God"
usually falls flat alike in literature. A memorable
poem, whether about a God or God, passes from mas-
tery to mystery, if only for a moment, though on
rereading it one finds that the relation between the
two cannot be narrowly specified.

W

were I to continue these reflections with
Yves Bonnefoy in mind my comments
would differ from those on other poets to
whom I feel close: Philippe Jaccottet and R oberto
Juanzon, for instance. Each speaks of the impossible in
his own way. If I choose to read Tomas

Brian Purcell

Rita Coolidge Plays Mt Druitt

1

The minarets of Auburn’s mosque
are topped by shining metal cones.

Calm, early afternoon-

D i rk Hartog bangs a nail
through the sky’s pewter dish.

2

Land the colour of dried sponge,
razor grase- a white flame
sputters in the wind.

LA obsessed cars

stretched by the tar’s

tightening belt

where in-between houses

over in heat;

Speer the architect.

3

The carriage judders

the glaze from

a passenger’s eyes;

and R ita thinks of fame,
can almost roll

that kernel beneath her tongue:

a signature song that could shake

any audience to its feet.

4

Instead she scans

newspaper reports

that read as obits:

Delta lady achieved her fame
in duets with K ris.

Under her breath she croons
watching the N epeon’s algal blooms
from the sluggish, half-full train.

5

She knows the audience loves

her casual dress

as much as her songs.

The way she flicks her skirt the way
young arsonists flick a match

to thunderous applause.

Michelle Taylor

Paris

Paté like dogfood from a tin
stale baguette
white cheese want for ripening
makes me long for the glamour
of my backyard.

B
Experience and Transcendence

Kevin Hart on Tomas Tranströmer

Tranströmer, whose work is equally close to me, is because his poems not only open themselves to the impossible but also meditate on it without using the word. 11

Tranströmer lives in the wake of what Friedrich Hölderlin calls the “double infidelity”: God has turned away from human beings, leaving us to experience His absence, and we have turned from Him, no longer regarding this absence as significant. The poet abides in the space created by this twofold abandonment while remaining open to the chance of a new revelation of the divine. Certainly Tranströmer does not thematise this openness by way of an uncritical endorsement of Christianity. The Church is “the broken arm of faith”, and the Cross is “like a snapshot of something in violent motion”. The latter does not affirm this openness by way of an uncritical assumption of the divine. Certainly Tranströmer’s poetry seeks a moment which I am a part of”, this mystery is not simply new revelation of the divine. Certainly Tranströmer asks that the people he sees walking out of the darkness say, “It’s always so early in here, before the crossroads”. There is a sense in which all Tranströmer’s poetry seeks a moment before decision, before the consequences of our choices can make us into adults. At the same time, this is a poetry that honours the “Beautiful slag of experience” that compose a life, even when viewed from the perspective of death. There is a lost innocence we mourn, and a higher nation from another, dreaming from waking, life and death. We are told of, pictures that call themselves “The Music Lesson” or “Woman in Blue Reading a Letter” – she’s in her eighth month, two hearts kissing inside her. On the wall behind is a wrinked map of Terra Incognita. Art historians say that the painting most likely represents a creased map of Holland, and that “terra incognita”. Yet Tranströmer’s point is precisely that the everyday and the nearby are an unknown country. An common event like having a baby requires this world too”, that the impossible touches what we know with what cannot be predicted. The chairs in the painting are covered with an “unknown blue material”. We are told to consider how the fabric is fixed to the wood. The gold studs flow in with incredible speed and stopped abruptly as if they had never been other than stillness. The tension between energy and calm recalls the Cross that “hangs under cool church vaults” and that nonetheless seems to be “in violent motion”. The pressure in the painter’s studio comes from “the other side the wall”, the noise from the street out-side art is sustained by life. But “wall” quickly takes on wider connotations when we hear that “it hurts to go through walls, it makes you ill” and that “the wall is part of yourself”. Once again, experience is leagued with transcendence.

What kind of transcendence? The poem’s final lines enrich the question rather than attempt a definitive answer:

The clear sky has leaned against the wall. It’s like a prayer to the emptiness. And the emptiness turns its face to us and whispers “I am not empty, I am open.”

The Annunciation is quietly evoked then withdrawn: there is no angel, only daylit; the child is human, not divine; and conception occurred months before. O my emptiness, certainly not divine plenitude, characterises our world after the “double infidelity”. Even here one may risk a prayer, however. No mention is made of God or the divine, yet the answer to the prayer is impressive and mysterious. There is no easy assurance – the voice does not whisper of fullness – and to be offered openness is an opportunity for further experience and further transcendence. In the words of a lyric that speaks more directly than “Vemmer”:

An angel with no face embraced me and whispered through my whole body: “Don't be ashamed of being human. I could understand you vaunted yourself away from it, but you've been my family all along!”


Cordite would like to thank the New South Wales Government Ministry for the Arts for supporting this essay with a grant for contributors’ fees
Editorial

As some readers may already be aware, Peter Minter has left CORDITE to pursue other poetic projects—which should result in more interesting poetry publications in the near future. Peter’s vital founding involvement set CORDITE on a path of growth and improvement that saw a good idea leap from the drawing board to become a popular national poetry review with over two hundred subscribers and a strong body of contributors in only three issues and two years. N endless to say, this has been a rich learning experience for the both of us.

Congratulations are due to CORDITE co-editor Jennifer Krammer, on her winning the 1998 Australian / Vogel Prize for her novel PEGASUS IN THE SUBURBS.

Recently I was unpleasantly surprised to find a poem published in CORDITE Nº2 also published in an issue of another literary journal released last year. It’s worth noting that journal editors, somewhat addled by pride, are so possessed of the idea that their journal must be different to every other journal that they will usually insist on being the first and only publisher of a given poem. More bewildering still, editors, once they have selected a poem, are nearly as keen as the writer to see the poem in print. Contributors, please be careful with your editors—try not to double-dip—we may just send your next book to a dispeptic novelist for review!

Letters

Peter Minter writes!

I would like to thank all those poets and readers of poetry who have made my time at CORDITE so successful by having extended to the review their financial, moral and textual support.

I have chosen, after two years of hard work establishing one of Australia’s best new poetry publications, to move on to my own work and some new, exciting projects.

I also extend my best wishes to the new editorial team, and trust you will continue to enjoy CORDITE.

Peter Minter

Faulconbridge

Bucked Off

I write in response to Jim Buck’s review of SUB DUE Nº3 in CORDITE Nº4. Buck obviously didn’t bother to read the issue so why write about it? Is this personal? Most peculiarly, why was a magazine containing 95% fiction reviewed in a tabloid devoted to poetry? Normally I’d take any publicity, but this is wholly stoppy, unprofessional review and I feel compelled to respond.

According to Buck’s review, “SUB DUE professes to be punk”. Not since I last checked, although we did include back issue information containing a quote from FACTSHEET FIVE, who described our first edition as “punk and in-your-face”. It wasn’t us, Jim, honest.

Apparently, Adam Ford and myself had two poems in that issue, there were in fact four. Jim thinks they’re to do with “Ballard, Crash and auto-erotic”, but ultimately is unsure, as it “all seems a bit thin”. He fails to mention the five-page interview with JG Ballard adjacent to one of the poems, which provides a bit of context if one cares to delve.

Perhaps I’m being petty, but I can’t escape the feeling that Jim’s work method is equivalent to the lazy reviewer’s trick of reading the blurb to a book and faking the rest. The effect is cumulative. Buck’s jolly bon mots and careless penmanship serve to trivialise and undermine the philosophy of SUB DUE and that of its contributors.

Buck states that SUB DUE is “a publication for boys”, full of “dicks sticking into things”, and there’s a flippant remark about Dungeons and Dragons.

Paola Bilbrough

Canvastown

That spring we lived in Canvastown, there were mushrooms the size of dinner plates in the fields, frayed at the gills with lice. My mother wore a feather in her hair, naked, in profile, always painting. My father, stringy pony tail, pink shirt, threw pots in a cow shed. I half wanted to be the neighbours’ child.

She, fat and breathless would see me on top of their enormous freezer, a mortuary of animal carcasses, feed me bright yellow pickles, doughy bread. The odour of Basset hounds, mutton griddle and hot vinyl.

She created nothing, sat indoors eating melted cheese from a dented frying pan.

Furrows on her husband’s brow ploughed deep, skin red as raw beef. Yet he could listen with the trees, make a willow stick dance to the song of an underground stream. The flick of my mother’s brush on canvas, the buzz of bees building white clay houses, the dull roar of my father’s kiln. Across the road the weaver at his loom, weaving a poltergeist’s footfall into a vermilion carpet. Sound gradually drinking in all its listeners.

The fat woman and I didn’t listen. She was bored with the water diviner, resplendent in a green chenille housecoat she turned afternoon into evening by watching Bewitched on TV. I liked to lie in her overgrown garden, watch crab apples pull malevolent their wormy tongues at passer-by.

-- Adrian Wiggins

-- Adrian Wiggins

1998 Nº4 / p13

CORDITE Nº3, The Next Wave Issue, is launched at Glebebooks. From left, Joanne Bums, Juno Gemes, John Tranter, Pam Brown, Arabella Lee, Adrian Wiggins, Nicola Hawdon, Justin Ellis and Ewan Isbister
Reviews

Tiara Lowndes

Ben Brady & DJ Huppatz, eds. AUTOMATIC Textbase Publications. Three (PO Box 2057, East Brunswick Vic: 3056. T 03 9149 0084)

Justin Lowe, ed. HOME BREW. ISSN 1329-3748. $20 for 4 issues.

T his little unassuming journal with its black cover and raised title logo is very deceiving. It sat on my desk at home for days hiding behind the matt black, with just a tongue of a title protruding from the contents like a pip at the beach. AUTOMATIC it said. And then I opened it.

AUTOMATIC is another activity from Textbase, based in Melbourne and originating around 1995 as a focus for textual activities and writers’ projects within the art world. This dynamic little journal aims to develop fictocritical and experimental writing and to explore writing as a visual medium and broader questions of writing and how it works.

Issue N 1 is a powerhouse of interesting and challenging works, from fiction pieces to essays, interviews, and reports. The great context is often by thoughtful and unusual layout, from different typefaces, to curves, triangles and other shapes appearing in text. The journal has a kinetic energy, with numbers leaping at you from the contents page, and the text taking a visual journey around the pages throughout the journal. N 1 has some wonderful highlights. The first piece titled ‘the voice of Robert Desbordes’ is a little work that relives the final moments of French writer Desbordes. Weaving together the facts of his life with dream-like moments, it is a superbly mastered Fictocritical essay.

O cupying the centre of the journal is the bold font of the Annie W Aliwicz interview, one of Australia’s best-known experimental writers and performers. The interview is short and precise but asks some very pertinent and interesting questions of Aliwicz, and is accompanied by a fabulous piece of hers called ‘The Fountain’.

Perhaps my favourite piece in the journal was second to last, with no title. A visually challenging work and a great piece of automatic writing it seemed to embody the very essence of the textbase arms. Layering handwriting over type it plays with both the process of writing and the words themselves.

Dara Weir

The White Boat

The birds are sleeping, it’s far from morning, except for the birds who’s rightful haunt the dark, and the low-life, lazy geese who’ve given up their fly-way rights to live at ease around the man-made pond below the ridge. They come around the hour of the wolf and wake me up. I can’t help but love their haunting, honking grief. It sounds like grief tonight.

A white boat in full moon light is rocking on the lawn. It rocks and rocks like a giant’s cradle or a mammoth’s bassinet. It rocks like a cradle for a god or a devil. The white boat doesn’t want to go home.

Peter Boyle

Everyday

You go to a restaurant and you eat a meal and you choke and die. It happens like that. You feel hungry and you visit a sauna, get careless, and you catch AIDS and die. You open a present while straphanging on a tram, miss your stop, get off in a hurry, don’t notice a truck, get hit and die. Or you breathe the mould of your own body for a lifetime, day after silent day, and you turn white and die. Or you open your hand and the lines suddenly go walking off in different directions over the edges of the world and this puzzles you and you can’t understand it and out of such perplexity you die.

O ne day the face of the sunflower deity is splattered on the bedheads and you grow prickly and are never visited by the bees that carry sweetness in their thighs and from the hunger for their soft release you die. You construct a house of stone underneath a well of pure skywater and there you bring the pillars of every deity and the offerings for every cult and you crush flowers and the tiny hands of the newborn dead and, forgetting how substanceless is sacred food and ritual water, you reincarnate as gesture without body and die.

On a Saturday during the football on an airplane over Antarctica in galoshes in a business suit on the holiday of a lifetime tomorrow and yesterday after five minutes of thinking and a decade of acceptance passively as oxygen from a mask in this room which has grown as small as a child’s crib you open your mouth to all that exits and all that rushes in and wanting so much to speak you start to mime the opening of a word and you begin to understand how the silence that fills you and the passion for words that overflows is your own private and chaotic death.

Jennifer Kremmer

Hugo Tolhurst

Filth & Other Poems

Black Pepper 1997 63pp $15.95

Filth 1. foul or disgusting: vile; 2. extreme physical or moral uncleanness: 3. vulgarity or obscenity. (Collins Concise, 3rd edition)

W hy does Hugo Tolhurst feel the need to begin a book with a gesture of expansiveness rendered only faintly ironic by what he’s ‘giving’ as it’s possible to give what’s not actually owned?

I give you what is beautiful in my city, the brake-fluid rainbows, the rosy ultras, the kisses among the litter on the fore- shore finishing with: ‘I’ve locked myself out and I’m not going home’.

Filth is the rejected’s realm. Filth is shit; hell; to give it is to express the ambivalence of a child in the face of another’s apparent power. Hugo’s gift to a gentle reader is entirely Geduld; even as the opening poem sets a tone of masterful poet giving the gift of a city’s darker charms, he is also “locked out”, and Hugo later paradoxes himself as a fallen angel: ‘I had this bad dream, spent all my money on fucking Reeboks, ran into a level crossing & lost both my wings’.

Hugo sometimes ascertains that he’s fallen (or lost his wings) due to hubris. But at other times, and perhaps more significantly, he engages in banter with well-known editors and poets, and it’s obvious that this prince of darkness also suffers from a heightened sense of embarrasement (mind you, he still manages to rub shoulders in Lit Board soirées). But what else to make of:

& where to tender my Catullus now
& to you dear John, my ten-speed bankrupt,
 Forbes?
The brave so soon become the editors & scandal fucks but quarterly by vow not to mention:
I was at University House once, loose on my end, having failed to back a winner in the writer's grants, when Wallace-Croze took a shine to my company. I think he thought her an escort.

The latter and similar bars are Hugh's "Filth", despite his claims to "give" what is beautiful in his children's underlyingly early in the book. In a gentle, bantery way, Hugh does fling a little bit of shit: "Tanner asked for coke & had to sit in the corner." In fact, however, the tone is so playful that it really does render pointless accusations of sour grapes for not having got a grant. Hugh's grapes, if anything, are bountifully: that not only does not wish harm upon the recipient, he even tries hard to win entry into their realm:  
...so you'll allow
submitting this one poem without cause.

Filth in a child's terms is about rejection, but since the child's well-being depends on the parent, filth can only ever be symbolic. For example, Hugh's self-instruction after his "glosser bitch" (many apologists are phrased in the possessive: my friend, "you, idesia, etc) in the face of romantic dissolution: "& you, Tolhurst, face north, make like a lone", The poem is addressed to the departing love and thus the instruction by its very failure already admits to failure.

Behind Hugh's work is a belief of himself as a brooding Byron; a grand, lonely, dark space and form in the belief that language embodied an oppressive system and had to be transformed by the poet to express radically new perspectives."Poetry therefore as opposition. Opposition to the dogma and conformity that overlays us, that hardens the tracks behind us, the reason to write poetry."-Nanni Balestrini.

The avant garde are periodically accused of being out of touch and self-indulging, but this antholgy shows how profoundly political, how embedded in the context of this appalling century, such poets are. Against the monoliths of business and government and the hybrid monstrosities of the media, the poet counters with the force of imagination. One is reminded of Blake, of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators. It is, it seems, the duty of poets to be revolutionary or, as William Carlos Williams put it: "Poetry is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas."

Emma Lew

Now, Some Facts

I'm related to Karl Marx
My great great great great great grandfather ruled Poland for a month
Anna Fred Burbasat my mother
My great grandfather never had a hole in his teeth
Stampeding horses tore my grandfather's thumb
My great uncle wrote Suicide and Attempted Suicide
My great grandmother had two sets of twins
My uncle was a bankrupt four times
My great grandfather wrote poems in German
My other great grandfather walked from Russia to Palestine
My aunt and uncle breed llamas in Israel
I'm related to Helena Rubenstein

Chris Andrews

Mortal

It's amazing how old some people can get before they even begin to realize they're going to have to die one day too as if no-one had ever made it perfectly clear the stuff about dying wasn't just a threat.

I say that like I'd pied the Styx on a skiff like my death was some sort of exotic fruit ripening deep in the hothouse of my being but how will having gone on about it help when my body is definitively stiff?

It's amazing how long you can go between drinks I mean those moments when it's clear as gin that after all you're not completely dead yet there's a survivor buried in you somewhere I say all this like my life was pure routine.

Adrift

For the first time in my life I didn't feel like an empty hayshed leaning down the wind on top of the last thing you could dignify by calling a spur beyond which penumbra and then just plain for as far as I could see from where I sat near a bale a straggling runt had pulled apart to find it gone grey all through:
not absolutely sure of my emptiness as if something in it was working adrift, and almost unaware of falling behind.

1998 Nº4 / p15

Geraldine McKenzie

Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, eds.

This is the second volume in an ambitious project, superbly realised by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. They have attempted to do nothing less than give a sense of where poetry stands in the 20th Century, the dilemmas it faces as a marginalised art form and the experiments of those poets determined to revitalise deadens language and enervated practices of conventional poetics. The focus in this volume lies on the period following the Second World War up to the present; Rothenberg and Joris' introduction establishes that context of chaos, distrust, disillusion and fear which characterised society: post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima. That shock to our cultural psyche produced, on the one hand, a retreat to the lyric/demotic/personal/pastoral, albeit with a modern gloss; and, on the other, a profound exploration of the possibilities of rhythm, sound, space and form in the belief that language embodied an oppressive system and had to be transformed by the poet to express radically new perspectives. Poetry itself is opposition as the dogma and conformity that overlays us, that hardens the tracks behind us, the reason to write poetry.—Nanni Balestrini.

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& I was slippin past me into water. & I was rippin upwards

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Unrecorded

Cook stands on the shore at Farm Cove: it is the past. Sydney surrounds him. Low green apexes of land slash into the harbour; above blows the open-heavy sky, some equilateral clouds. He is not a simple man. Banks carefully traces specimens others of his crew insert themselves, finding unseen views, outstare blacks, hook strange fish. Cook does not have questions. Haberdashery in Stalhes is everything, he sees he knows that there are no 'new data', that all phenomena are a single kind, a thing of the world can be neither explanans nor explanandum. Really he has not left Yorkshire, has not stopped digging in his garden, is still in church in London, singing. Drink machines lie buried under the sand. Usually he will not accept his own simplicities – Where do words come from? Why is the start of action? The harbour is no place of options it is like thinking into blotting paper; in the natives' language “spider” is the same as “web”. Products and history start to fill the land.

The royal banners forward go. The music is corrugated, a twisted metal framework rustling by a desert sun. Observations are not observations – he skips a stone. The State of the Union is Zan Ross’s first collection of poetry and the first book published by Monogone. Its cover is reminiscent of a 1950s movie poster: a woman and a man, his face fedora-shadowed, are espied by a chrysalis whose glinty towers seem on the verge of engulfing them. It’s a telling introduction to the poek: gothic has often been regarded as B-Grade material and there’s a strong gothic edge to this collection. This is evident in its invocation of certain nineteenth century novels. "Syphilitic Redemption, 1860" is an inversion of Jane Eyre, while ‘N Q O Quite Gothic’ directly addresses Emily Bronte’s Catherine (and the reader): “Should I reach through the broken pane, grab your arm, match wounds, link us for life?”

The pages are possessed not only by ghosts but by vampires, zombies and werewolves. When __ hen __ the full moon came, I slept with the shutter __ closed cause I’d read Dracula, __ I knew the score: never invite burning__ eyed __ men into your bed; go to confession, wear __ a crucifix at all times. Don’t forget the silver __ bullet: Werewolves are an increasing possibility.” (I write 6 months with M long & night) However, it is as these overt gestures that truly manifest the gothic in B-Grade such trappings are often present in the genre but are not central to it. Instead, the gothic is most clearly demonstrated in Ross’s relentless examination of confinement and of unstable borders.

Ross’s work abounds with diverse images of imprisonment: a madman is locked in an attic, lightning strikes a cage around a woman’s shoulders, a daughter stuffs herself into a sheep crate, women are likened to kangaroos trapped on a salt dyke and fish in a barrel. Imprisonment is a central trope of the gothic but it is a particularly vulnerable captivity. The heroine locked in her cell becomes simultaneously enclosed and yet open to intrusion. Gothic walls are strangely permeable boundaries, breached by secret passages and spyholes, a device Ross employs in ‘Waffower’ – “Up against the wall, the other: | black eyes, holes in plated.” This permeability enables access; “it steps out through the windscreen in through the slumbercurtain” (‘Waffower’). Even someone who is “encompassed, all four directions” (“Conciliations”) has no place from which they are not accessible. This vulnerability is shown at its most harrowing in ‘Movies To Kake Waking Q’identer’ a dark and ironic poem:

Sometimes you are a hostage, gagged when no one else is. Men laugh, smoke, kick you occasionally. You sit in your own filth. When they finally pull you to your feet, you can’t walk, fall on your face, a small silence of bruising spreads on your left cheek. The men have to support you out into the sunlight, complain about your smell. You vomit behind the gag, dribble down your shirt, but all you really care about is the sound of boots on solid ground when you’re thrust in the back of a black car—you’re not certain of rescue. Someone up front assures you it’s safe, cuts the bonds. You unlace the gag for the car to fold into a stone wall, and then walk away without your body.

Ross’s poetry has been described as transgressive, even excessive. These are both attributes of the gothic but it is this point that B-Grade diverges most clearly from the genre. Within the gothic, transgression “by
his anthology has been formed from poems entered for the prestigious Newcastle Poetry Prize (I use the word prestigious because I won the prize in 1989 under its Mallira imprint and that’s I’m pretty sure, the adjective my CV employs). Reviews of anthologies invariably concern who is in and who is out and the orientation of editors in the poetry world but the prize is judged anonymously (though I’d guess that the selection of poets in the anthology are probably not).

The whole project does the service of providing a cross-section of what’s being written now-ish by well-known and unknown Australian poets (in the category of poets spending $10 to enter for fame or fortune or as an incentive with deadline). How do judges judge poems? In terms of weight and importance or innovation? And how does the editor choose the poems? As a pot pourri or some brave stab at representing a “year in the life” of Australian poetry. No other publication in this country performs this service (though the Round Table anthologies used to a few years ago, with a changing editorial). I was surprised that, out of the 31 poets represented, I recognised all but three names. Where are all the new younger or more experimental poets that such a prize would levitate to print? Are they wary of losing their deposit if not selected? One rough guide to experimentation recently has been Botting’s guide to experimentation (rather than use the term prose poems).

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In the suite, there is an uneasy energy, the lines don’t kiss you with beauty the way some of his lyric memories can, those moments that seem to dance most in his handwriting poems, glinting with fish. The second part of the sequence, The Nightjar ends in poetic utopia, a world rich enough for the Argument from Design, (with Eudicry for me rare), His language handling direct domestic irony, a love that’s hooked: My love, today I’ll catch you a silver dory and tonight, grill it with lemon and a pinch of salt.

The winner is... The winner is Anthony Lawrence with a handful of poems. He also mentions a nightjar in a poem of an intensively past the lyric, an obsessive mutilation of poet and poem in the natural environment, a poet practicing a call, ‘something lyrical, obsessive and pure’ as he ends the poem When I used to burn. The poem Thanatopsis both better poem with the poet freezing into the landscape, but this time more much more of his poetic voice (I type vicio. W hen I heard it read in the poem on ABC Radio’s Book Show, its poetic introspection distanced me:

Before you turn away, say your name and count the seconds it takes for the name to be repeated from rockface or the face of another lofty, death contemplating heart.

I thought of Poesa’s poem ‘Self Analysis’: The poet’s good at pretending Such a master of the art
He even manages to pretend the pain he really feels is pain.

Not that I doubt the integrity of the poet or poem. I know the poet, he is intense and passionate about his craft. It’s just a danger that all poetry can find itself, in one that greatly concerned WH Auden. On the other hand, Thanatos could be an example of what one of the judges, Veronica Brady—quoted in the introduction—calls, “a sense of poetic tradition?” I was much more impressed by The Extended Narrative of their Lives family snap shots of memory embroidered with a wet scattering | of bees under the bird’s cut crop or “their shoes on a gravel path and thought the sound the dead make, crossing over”. And the final section carves a chilling but wonderful trace of the living dead in The New England landscape, surprising and original using well muscled Anglo Saxon language. This poem alone, I thought was a worthy winner and worth quoting in full.

Ethereal Paris

Adamson’s ‘A Day Book For Eurydice’ was joint-runner-up together with Jean Kent’s ‘Working Our Way Up To The Angels’ (shared possibly because of disagreement between the two judges John Scott and Veronica Brady-Farr enough, how could you and I agree on a poem’s anything?), Jean Kent’s poem begins with a notion of equilibrium: For every black hole in space, there is an equal white one. Remember this, as you are sucked under-ground.

Different in quality to the natural equilibrium that half of a healthy wood is dead or dying, more ethereal and Platonic. It is a beginning that sucks me in as if to the dark wood where Virgil may appear.

Kevin Murray

Story

Under the umbrellas of Lygon Street doing our Renoir ‘Boating Party’ scene a voice (mine) is saying –

O no! in Suva a lovely Fiji girl wrote a message on the flyleaf of my Lonely Planet guide to her grandfather, a village chief in 0 valua that ancient island and in due course I walked down a track under the volano one into a green clearing, was led to meet Joeli, sat to a meal with the elders in a long hut and was asked to bowl the first ball in the Sunday kirkit match. Wh hird I did. Then lay drowsy in the palm-fingered shade.

T his tale curdles among the coffee cups. ‘You made that up.’ Indeed I did. The iron laws of narrative make fictions of us all.
Zhu Wen
translated by Simon Patton

bend over eat grass

eat, eat grass
bend over eat grass
sun dancing on the tips
of the blades of grass, the rhyme-feet of light
a riotous profusion of
golden dancing shoes. today
it seems there's nobody more
fortunate than me
eat, eat grass
bend over eat grass
I lie on my stomach, lie
on the grass, on my left
cow, on my right another cow.
the one on my left is bigger
but the one on my right is more beautiful
as for me, I seem
to be entirely without redeeming features, but
boy am I hungry.
eat, eat grass, eat, grass,
that person in the field
over there, look!
that's my cute little
brother, he leads me
to the grass, but then
hugs the girls over there
don't laugh at him, don't laugh
we were once like that
ourselves, and love

I'm running out of space so just to men-
don one more poet, encountered first as
I duped, as one does, into an antholo-
y. Or perhaps I came across the name.
I wanted to read the poems like I try to run
paintings in an art gallery, without seeing
the maker's identity, (the names are too
prominent for this-in both areas).
From a K r i's H e m d y e r's untitled poem:
The growing thum of their wheels leaves
the thum
of wings in my ears when
pigeons flock upon a flags\ntion's distribu-
tion
of bread crumbs.
A baby moral with words working like
thum and flagrant (flying from flagrant,
vagrant or typical) and with an easy rhythm
though the piece starts off with an awk-
awardness that narrative sticks onto this lan-
guage of ours:
This is the image; suddenly a road full of
bicycles
in that time when there were more bicycles
than motor-cars.
The first line could be from a film script
but the formal prosaic does take me back to a
time when men wore hats (or rode bicy-
cled unlike the following lines which I find
hard to read:
spangle and raucous signal however muf-
fled
by public-house doors & curtains or even
the eight of patrons' numbers.
A kettle of fish, strange and silly. But with
out diversity some and syntactic or referen-
tial drain and formal play, poetry would
lose its power and become bland as the
sweetmeats of greeting cards.

M any others deserve a mention but
without the room I'll leave you
with a quiz-march the line's
with the poets.

And the night / is nudging us with grass
familiarity
you felt your skin prickie
with fear, despite the alcohol,
despite the anonymity of the sea

Yesterday noon\'s has been travelling
at my elbow
- will the last person
to leave the twentieth century please
turn off the lamps
All mending, fear batters, tree so rot that
stranger figs can feed
The poet's gun as clean as
the soldier's poem
where does none find
a word
for such a blue

- and I see / that mountain useless with
its / crop of snow
The poets are Adam Aitken, Judith
Beveridge, Joan Burn, C. Charlotte

C. Lutterbur, Lisa Jacobs, John Kinella,
Peter Kirkpatrick, N. Nicolee Stakos. For the
answers buy the book. There's plenty of
interesting poems in a collection that pro-
vides a valuable annual record of what's
being written by Australian poets. It is also
a handsome production in the tradition of
Paul Kawanga and Christopher Pollinitz,
the previous editors of the H i t a r r a antho-

Footnotes
1. This exchange quoted by Kevin Hart in "Writing
Things. Literary Property in Heidegger and Simic,"

Sue Bower

FRIENDLY STREET NEW POETS No 4.

Junes Direen THE RIGHT SIDE OF MY FACE

Jules Leigh Koch A STRIP OF NEGATIVES

Jason Sweeney BOY STUNNER

I enjoyed this collection. I think one of its
strengths is the fact that it is a mixed
book. When I've heard the term
"Friendly Street Poets" I must admit I
envisioned a closely knit group of poets
writing the poetry of suburban concerns.
There are, however, three very different
poets here. They are too different to be
said to be forming a "school" and none of them
are writing in an identifiably South
Australian vector. These poems could
be set anywhere. While a lot of them are very
much of a certain time and place, it's hard
to tell exactly what time or place.
(with, perhaps, the exception of Koch's
work, as he locates a number of his poems
in identifiable places). I was already familiar
with the work of Jules Leigh Koch and
Jason Sweeney. The work of Junice Direen
was new and as (hopefully) the case with
many new poets, there were a few surpris-
es in there.

Direen at her best is a risk taker. She
is not afraid to be vulnerable to be
lonely especially. And she does it
well. The sense of emotional states seems to
satirize the text. Not that there isn't some
humour in there as well:

singles cough quietly
borrow maximum books
proverb market with a string bag

- SINGLE

There is a lot of light in these poems and it
takes all sorts of forms and functions as
a lozenge, a frenzy. It bounces off the
faces of the text and it is easy to let your eye
be seduced, but it is what goes on in the shad-
ows of Direen's poems that is the meat of
the matter:
A frenzy of lights
the skyshimmers low
never lifts
whilst in another part of town:
cranes scour wounds
in raw dark earth plant concrete pylons
she receives no mail
the answeringphone is mute
admission of an orphan.

- CYCLOPES

There are many places in Direen's text that
are apparently usual until something very
odd happens that compels you to go back
to the beginning of the poem and start all
over again. Just when you think you are
sitting pretty there will be a line that makes
you stop and think "huh?" This is good.
The vignette is given an edge, the strange
made familiar.
I have been a fan of Jules Leigh Koch's poetry since reading his poem 'Garden Snails' in a magazine. The surreal nature of this poem impressed without seeming at all forced or unnatural to the poet. There are a number of similar poems at the beginning of Koch's section, in the way of a sequence and they all surprise, turning environments on their head. Floors become "landscapes of ninety degree angles" for mice, garden snails' house interiors are all different and a crowd's afternoon becomes a strip of negatives. This kind of imagination is depressingly scarce.

Koch explains at the beginning of his section that he is more concerned with imagery than sound, story or language, and it certainly is this aspect of his poetry that stands out. Many of the poems in the sequence deal with seemingly small episodes, but he manages to imbue these with a sense of magnitude and space. The structure of the poem seems to work out from the perspective of a microscope to that of a telescope. That is, the poem will examine the minutiae of something and then move out in scope until something is observed from a great distance. This shift serves to heighten our sense of things as they are perceived. Look to the poems Earthworms, Glimpses, View of Harbour from Churchyard for instances of this phenomenon. One aside that I will make here (others may feel differently), is that I feel Koch uses the word "like" too often in his poems and often more than once in a poem. It seems a shame to me when this simple and overused device is employed to reveal an interesting dynamic within a poem. When a poet is on to a good thing, as Koch so often is, I think it pays to wrestle with it more.

Finally, I found that the poetry of place has a strong presence in Koch's work. He is skilled in putting essence on the page, stuff that serves to heighten our sense of things as they are perceived. Look to the poems Earthworms, Glimpses, View of Harbour from Churchyard for instances of this phenomenon. One aside that I will make here (others may feel differently), is that I feel Koch uses the word "like" too often in his poems and often more than once in a poem. It seems a shame to me when this simple and overused device is employed to reveal an interesting dynamic within a poem. When a poet is on to a good thing, as Koch so often is, I think it pays to wrestle with it more.

I came to the poetry of Sweeney from much the same place as I had with Koch's work. I was only familiar with one poem of Sweeney's and that was 'Technosperm', a poem that I had liked and selected for Henry while I was an editor. There is a lot of pressure in Sweeney's poetry. It feels as a "poofter he's wearing BLACK" is palpable. The imagery reflects the physicality of this anxiety, much of it stilted in the mouth with its "sucking", and "small dental reflectives". To say it is only erotic would be to underplay this work. There are elements of eroticism, but it is more about penetration, who gets to fuck who. Who has the power, who is desired.

Even though Sweeney has dispersed with many classic devices of the poet and his poetry looks like prose on the page, it might emerge from beneath thin skin. Paech seems fascinated by how we read each other in different places and under circumstances that, however varied, come down to one thing: I start at my bowels and move up through my stomach to my head which I suck out like an oyster in bone until all that's left is my mouth. As in his earlier collections THE BITumen RHINO and x IS FOR keeper ASiS POTY, he is concerned with the determination / definition of the significance of surfaces, the relationships between "i" and "the world", where his fingers are "skinscape voyeurs": "the space between us | is a dictionary of collagen". She cuts her hair and a city collapses I am a flat irreplaceable horizon when she isn't present I am a flat road leading up to a horizon I can't contact...

This collection plays with the eros of impressions-the voyuer as "an architect of fantastic abstractions". Paech's experimentation with form makes much of deconstructive poetry.

Bev Braune

I'm contemplating the relationship between the "Eye and M feet" in painting, M fearee-Poty noted what we often take for granted when we are not thinking about it-that is "the enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking". It is "this strange system of exchanged" that Neil Paech challenges in The skinscape voyuer. This is a collection of poems that is "bare"-bare of desire to appear to be anything other than simple statements of what might emerge from beneath thin skin. Paech seems fascinated by how we read each other in different places and under circumstances that, however varied, come down to one thing: I start at my bowels and move up through my stomach to my head which I suck out like an oyster in bone until all that's left is my mouth.

I am not human there is no grave in this world for me but still I wish to bless the earth today I leave behind these poems and you-the forests I have planted-will stay for it is my wish that not everything of beauty follow me when I go stay and grow in this city and do not refuse anyone's dependence bring forth your red flowers and your leaves and when you bend in the storm I ask the city buildings not to shake in the wind

Yu X injiao

translated by Simon Patton

Benediction

I shall walk on lightning I am not human there is no grave in this world for me I will see the golden-mines of heaven and the bamboo poles of labourers see your smiling face wet with shining tears that hand, in hand with another, running to another hand that forest, surging towards the edge of the sky after another forest

I will follow this forest and surge to the edge of the sky thinking of dance halls on earth thought of school yards and vegetable markets government troops and actors wearing various expressions there at the top of streets, the bottom of lanes, lined up on either side of the gates judge from this heart I can no longer show them any other identity papers when I am in heaven this heart will be of use to no one but you in the twilight on this bench which exists only in name you hold me tightly don't let this heart tremble uncontrollably hold me closely let me wet your sleeves with my tears you've known it all along no, I am not human there is no grave in this world for me
tivid concerns with words. He uses small "button points" instead of "full-stops" to indicate a break within a line. And the drawing of the person, by the lines of poetry stride the "skin" of the page concretely the conceptual focus of the collection: "skin around skin". The body is unexplored territory to be made and remade in the voyeur's eyes and through the voyeur's body, the distinction between human form and urban form tightly woven so that what he sees is the extent of a cyphate of a many-windowed self.

Divided into two sections 'penny' and 'ann', THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR is once a document of affaires de coeur as much as it is not, for the "lover" we learn about carves the nerves: fibres of neither penny nor ann but those of their skincap. The voyeur achieves a nudity that betrays burdensome transparency: "disdissation has sunk me like cement to my feet". It is about the ironic ordinariness and exclusivity of intimacy, about the the need to bare oneself, to bring barren ground amidst of pulsing flesh. The poems of THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR are remarkable for their consistent attention to the taut voice of someone with mirrors in his eyes-the voyeur arriving at mouths of rivers-where fees closely are expected.

T

his is not the complex mir-
en-sane of the "in-body" that I find in Stephen Lawrence's BEATS LABIAL. Lawrence's is a menagerie of intellectual intrigue. His three-sectioned volume comprising 'Beats Labial', 'Beats Thesmorphic' and 'Beats R amparen' focuses on or address recognizable characters and places from C.S. Lewis' sphere, a wide range of contemporary figures (from Pauline Kael to Luis Borges) and methods of communication (from computers, fonts and letters to arteries and sea-journey) "nervy ends slung at the sharps frontiers," Lawrence's skill lies in his ability to bring everything alive from the past and leave it there so that it remains imbued with mystery:

Thoughts without words
Fix yourselves in blind motion
Upon the sign before, as one might contemplate
Passively.

A mandala, or crucifix,
Waiting for abandoned and meaning to unite
And this thick reverence to leap into
purposiveness.

Meditation is lost but its ghost remains.

— Sign

BEATS LABIAL is reverential, divine-seeking.

— Two gardeners to tend and admire

The beauty of the world's former crystalline

ting in the eye

The ballet of physics and the jigsaw growth of ice-mountains

— Eden

— but even here, the beats of mundanity continue to interrupt the reverse of his voicing.

As studied narratives on the nature of perception of drawing pictures of the "beast" in us THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR invites readers into the text by pretending to keep us out, while BEATS LABIAL leaves us definitively through epigraphs and carefully but never overdone explanations of contexts. Both volumes regard the world much like Richard Wollheim trying to rationalize the concept of drawing pictures—though we are convinced that we need our eyes to draw accurate pictures and to "read" them, we suspect that there is more than accurate physical vision that brings a picture alive. Or, as Paech might put it: "her picture clarifies the tongue;"

Lauren Williams

Anthony Lawrence

NEW AND

SELECTED POEMS

University of Queens Press 1998, ISBN 0 7022 2980 0

I came to review NEW AND SELECTED POEMS knowing very little about Anthony Lawrence or his work beyond his seeming ubiquitousness at the "high" end of the list of poetry awards, and the accompanying veracity and flourish of much of this collection, the poetry at the heart of the poems could be dissected.

For my money, Lawrence is at his best when most direct and natural in speech, as in 'The Fire Danger Board', which describes the experience of waiting for, then actually seeing a man come to move the red arrow on one of those isolated indicators of bushfire risk that dot country roadsides. Blackberrying amusingly debunks the bucolic myth of most English of country padsmen with a comically Australian scene:

The British poets must have had a terrific time blackberrying while I staggered around in a paddock outside Tamworth with an ice-cream container full and a pin-pricked hand after sprinting blue-black having eaten too many green ones with a bottle of red wine.

The powerful and moving sequence, 'Blood O'uh', uses the voice of a young inexperienced jackaroo to narrate the true story of two boy's death in the desert. I was blown away by the piece when I heard it years ago, but couldn’t remember who wrote it, so I was delighted to rediscover it in this collection. It is one of the all-time great Australian poems. The sequence on the sport of cricket reinforces the fact that Lawrence does Australia very well:

Test cricket’s a gas, a blue for the Ashes a Boy’s Own Annual of thrills.

I’ll watch every catch on the televised match, but I’d rather get pissed on The Hill.

Lawrence's musings on various literary figures, including Brautigan, Bukowski, Ginsberg and Gappoony, are entertaining.

In the sequence R environs, events such as rain falling on a tin roof, a burial, a case of food poisoning, a decomposing animal and a hunted kangaroo, are described as though the film is running backwards, a playful and effective device.

In 'Genes' the poet responds to the personal items left on his dead father's desk. The poem is poignant and works despite the line cold as a thumb-nail on the tongue, which had me treading the smile and finding a thumbnail on the tongue isn't at that cold. 'Lone Pine Road', where a gibbous moon in Pluto and a "moon entering M er's" are astrological impossibilities, also had the pedant in me sul-tutting at did the misspelling of "ceildh" in Allihies, Minor points, granted. And in 'The Boiling Head', one of the poems that had previously prompted my association of Lawrence with fish, I also rediscovered what I don't like in Lawrence—a kind of over-sweet "craft-straining" (to quote Laura Ridding), where lines like a "bald statistic in the wall" and "the aenigmatology of wonder and desire" leave me struggling to find meaning in their important-sounding vacuity.

H

owever, the breadth of Lawrence's verse—humour to tragedy, realism to fantasy, landscape to psychoscape—and his skill as a poet triumph over his flaws, and I now understand why he wins so many prizes. He's good.

Philip Harvey

Q

Who ate the rest of my portion, when there has been no purchase yet, When are we stopping to have a rest, sentences missing their mark, Moments passed waiting, no reply, Who wrote your autobiography, Where is the South China Sea, what were you doing at the toy museum, Sentences best left for others, post-modernists those who might actually say, Why do it then stop, how does the grass grow up, Why is the radius of the solar system, sentences that demand an expert, For which the italians reply Bob! Is the site of the century, Are we standing in the main street, am I in my right mind, Sentences eliciting a straight yes or no without any further to go, We put our heads forward in this changey world, there is no way Of knowing, no way that's for sure, sentences children dream upon, Phrases that together away like trees, W hat is the missing letter, Why is that line is short, you can't be serious, can you, Sentences that imply a hidden intent, where something more must be meant, Why did you say such a despicable thing, do you think the wordless you as a living, How much longer can this go on, sentences you don't want to hear, Hazards for the unthinking major. Can we be born again, Are you the one for me, is this what we came to see, Sentences begetting others more impossible than those that began. Is this all there is to a party, why am I the Wild of staircase wit, And shall my pilgrimage reach a centre, sentences no one should ask, Not that this stops them, not that we don't see the contrary instanter, W ho are you, what is this, where is that, when to, how come and why not, Sentences we have heard too much from, sentences, sentences, sentences, sentences Walking around in a circle hoping to find the step in or out.

Cordite
PoeticA
Presented by Mike Ladd
Every Saturday at 2.05pm on ABC Radio National

Program Details

September
19th World Banquet 1  – a programme looking at the relationship between love, food, and poetry from around the world
26th World Banquet 2  – further explorations erotic, gastronomic, and poetic.

October
3rd Spring Journey  – the final programme in our occasional series on the poetry and music of the seasons.
10th Very Serious Stuff  – contemporary Australian wit, satire and comic poetry.
17th Animalia  – a big bestiary, selected and performed by John Turnbull.
24th Loose Kangaroos  – the work of a group of Australian poets with schizophrenia.
31st Kantor  – the poetry of the famous stage director Tadeuz Kantor, and an exploration of the psychology of rooms.

For further details contact the producers of PoeticA
Mike Ladd  08 8343 4928
Krystyna Kubiak  08 8343 4271

Octavio Paz
translated by Peter Boyle

Basho An

The world
in seventeen syllables:
you in this hut.

Tree trunks and straw:
through chinks
Buddhas and insects creep in.

Made of pure air
between pine trees and rocks
the poem soars and shatters.

Vowels and consonants
weaving, interweaving
the house of the world

Centuries of bones,
griefs turned into stone, into mountains:
here all weightless.

What I am saying
barely makes three lines:
hut of syllables.

Coda

Maybe to love
is learn to walk in this world.
To learn to stay silent
like the oak and the linden in the fairytale.
To learn to see.
Your gaze is a woman sowing seeds.
It has planted a tree.

I am speaking
because you shake the leaves.

Octavio Paz, Nobel Prize Winner, died in Mexico City on the 20th of April this year at the age of 84. The Consulate General of Mexico in the Mexican Cultural Fund have organised an Homage to Octavio Paz that will be held at the Théâtre de la Porte Dorée on Wednesday September 30th at 6:30pm.

The programme for the evening will include readings of Paz’s poetic works by distinguished writers and academics, and a television interview granted by Paz last year where he read some of his poems.

Ring 02 6201 2416 for more details or email:
poetry@comserver.canberra.edu.au
Letters continued

Given the media’s hijacking of sex and sexuality, Sub Dee champions a nominally science-fiction format because it seems to provide an appropriate vocabulary with which to describe altered psychologies. But apparently this makes Sub Dee a magazine for “nerds”.

It pains me to have to spell this out, yet again: the realism vs fantasy debate is a tired hoary game. Jim Buck buys into this counter-productive fetishisation of aesthetics by refusing to accept and critique Sub Dee on its own terms.

Finally, Bucks belief that Sub Dee is a “publication for boys” completely negates the work of the five female writers and artists represented in Sub Dee N3.

Ironically a piece from Kerry Wafford also appeared in that issue of Cordite, applauding your publication for providing a context for writers not since I last checked.

Symon Brando
Editor, Sub Dee
Fitzyo

Cordite

Contributors

Adam Aitken lives in Sydney and has published poems in a variety of national and international journals. His most recent volume, In One House, was published by Angus and Robertson in 1996.


Chris Andrews is the translator of Luis Sepulveda’s Full Circle (Lonley Planet, 1996).

John Ashbery is an American poet of some renown.

John Bennett’s most recent collections, Australia Field Notes and Alien Field Notes were released by Five Islands Press in September. He has just completed an MA in Creative Writing.

Paola Bilbrough is a Melbourne poet. Her poetry has appeared in journals in England, New Zealand and Canada.

Sue Bower is a poet and former editor of Hermes. Her first collection of poetry, Factory Jocker was published by Five Islands Press in 1997.

Peter Boyle was awarded the 1995 NSW Premier’s Prize for Poetry for his first collection. Hale and Iremonger published his second collection The Blue Cloud of Crying which won the NBC Banjo Award for Poetry.

Bev Braune’s most recent collection, Camouflage, was published by Bloodaxe Books earlier this year.

Joanne Burns is rarely capitalised. Her latest book is Penselope’s Knee (UQP, 1996) A new collection of poems, Aerial Photography is to be published by Five Islands Press.

Jennifer Compton, poet and playwright, lives in rural NSW. Her play The Big Picture premiered at the Griffin Theatre in 1997.

Tricia Dearborn lives in Ashfield.

Dan Disney is a Fitzroy poet.

Keri Glastonbury lives in Coogee.

Kevin Hart’s most recent collections of poems are New and Selected Poems (Harper Collins) and Dark Angel (Dealsus).

Philip Harvey lives in Clifton Hill.

Lisa Jacobson lives in Brunswick.

Andy Kissane’s first collection of poetry, Facing the Moon, was published by Five Islands Press in 1993.

Jennifer Kremmer is a Sydney writer and an associate editor of Cordite. She recently won the 1998 Australian/Vogel Prize for her novel Pegasis in the Suburbs.

Emma Lew lives in Richmond, Victoria.

Tiara Lowndes lives in Coogee.

John Mateer is a West Australian poet currently studying in Melbourne.

Geraldine McKenzie lives and writes in the Blue Mountains.

Dennis Mizzi has exhibited widely in a Australia and overseas. Work of his has previously appeared in

Hermes and Heat.

Kevin Murray lives in Balwyn, Victoria.

Simon Patton is a translator. He is currently studying in Hong Kong.

Patricia Prime is a New Zealand poet.

Brian Purcell’s first collection Lovely Infestation was published in 1995.

Nick Reimer is a postgraduate student in Linguistics at Sydney University. He has work in Ultarra, Southerly, Hord and Otis Rush.

Debbie Robson is a poet living in Newport.

Graham Rowlands, for many years poetry editor of Overland, had his Selected Poems published in 1992.

Brendan Ryan lives in Abbotsford, Victoria.

Gig Ryan’s new collection Pure and Applied will be released by Paper Bark Press later this year.

Michelle Taylor has lived in England and Scotland, and is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

Deb Westbury lives in Mt Pleasant.

Lauren Williams is a poet and student of Spanish language. She lives in Melbourne. Her forthcoming collection is titled The Good Fish.

Ouyang Yu’s work has appeared in many literary journals in Australia. He lives in Kingsbury, Victoria.

Matthew Zapruder lives in Hadley, Massachusetts.


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Compton's Hammer

What is poetic “truth”? If not a concern for correspondence between words and things, and for getting the match right? In presenting an aspect of the world (that is, a representation), to what extent is the poet accountable to others on the grounds of accuracy? And if a post-actually or otherwise-skeins words an aspect of the world of experience for the sake of appearances, what does this mean for the validity of the poem as an aesthetic and instructive object, not to mention the integrity of the writer?

Despite—or perhaps in spite of—the lessons learnt from Marxist criticism regarding the ideological dimension of literature, many critical essays and reviews of Australian writing are written within the assumption that “true” art exists above or beyond questions of power, privilege and specific injustice. However, a recent poem by Jennifer Compton published in the Bulletin serves to remind us just how overtly ideological literature can be:

I was raped by a woman
the knife she held at my throat was sisterhood
no man had ever taken me so disdainfully
when I met her ever after I was deathly polite and formal

The first thing to notice about this poem—after you’ve recovered from the whack over the head it deals you—is the fact that it is composed in the form of an epigram. The epigram is, ideally, characterized by compression, pointiness, clarity, balance and polish. Pointedness is the interesting term here and a decidedly ambiguous quality given the central metaphor of Compton’s text. One of the main purposes performed by the epigram is satire. Often the satirical impulse is inspired by an urge for revenge. Yeats’s “The Scholars”—All shuffle there, all cough in ink—is a good example of what Frontline’s Mike Moore might call the velvet hammer approach to trial by verse.

You might wonder about the appropriateness of the satirical objective in a poem ostensibly about rape. Alexander Pope could get away with “The Rape of the Lock” because he wished precisely to highlight the gross incongruity between the name and the act it was applied to (Arnabell Fermo’s slight loss of hair). However, in these days of heightened sensitivity towards repressive behaviour, the word “rape” is not one we can use frivolously. It has, on the contrary, a terrifying force. So what does Compton mean when she uses it? To answer this one immediately confronts the distinction between literal and figurative language. Does “rape” here mean “the act of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse against her will” or does it have a metaphorical sense?

It is this ambiguity that the poem exploits. At first, we as readers give her the benefit of the doubt—it’s her poem after all, and we are obliged to read the poem as literal truth until the text itself persuades us to do otherwise. After some reflection, however, we are forced to abandon the literal view for several reasons. Firstly, to write of a literal rape in a four-line epigram is a disastrous miscalculation; the form—with its stylistic overtones—is entirely unsuited to a subject of this magnitude. Secondly, the metaphorical description of “sisterhood” as a knife suggests that the whole cast of the poem is in fact figurative (hence also the pun on “deathly”).

Thirdly, the conjunction of certain terms—rape, sisterhood—and the implied comparison between women who “rape” and men who, with relative verbal mildness, merely “take” suggests that Compton’s poem is actually a comment on the behaviour of men and women in general. Finally, the title, which uses “human nature” as a euphemism for negative behaviour, makes it clear that the point of the text is to attack the notion often attributed to vulgar feminism that women are innately “better” than men.

Lisa Jacobson

Evolutionary Tales №2: Flight and distant travel

From this distance, I’m small and quiet, being all curled up in this poem and waiting inside the woman who lies spread-eagled, silenced by the temperament of generations

Her husband cradles a book, whose contents no one remembers and as he reads
she listens not to this but the sharp unfurling of wings within our dim-lit cage; her muscular breath.

Slow march of words crawling back through centuries, letters inked into leather scrolls,

a dark wind lifting the fabric of memory and my mother labouring me up to the world’s flimsy rim beyond which lie the nameless continents and my father, who has long since put his book aside.

False equivalence. I undoubtedly, sisterhood-like any other society-transforming idea—has its zealous. It also has its inevitable caricatures. You can read about “those ball-breaking, hairy-legged feminists” in John Pasquarelli’s new book about Pauline Hanson the Amazon. But is it unfair to expect poetry to rise above bigotry?

In their introduction to Who’s Afraid of Feminism, Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell make a useful distinction between “disent” and “reaction”: There is . . . an important difference between dissent and backlash. Disent is disagreement, but implies respect for the other position, or at least the acknowledgement that the other position exists independently of the opposition to it. Backlash is primarily a reactive position, dictating something that has proved either to have been lost, or to be under threat. A backlash must formulate the case that it is opposing, with respect to feminism, it must characterize feminism in a particular way in order to convince us of its basically misguided, damaging nature.

In other words, one of the best ways to attack something that you disagree with is to misrepresent it. What I find most dishonest about Compton’s poem is that it is literally unable to name its real target. “Raped by a woman” means, figuratively, “feminism”, a belief in the equality of men and women but one which the poet apparently finds coercive. However, such honesty would bring the issue out into the open—a clarity that the poem avoids. Instead, it attacks its object by stealth. By projecting the violence she feels for an idea by transforming it metaphorically into an implement of physical assault, by exploiting the emotive force of the word “raped” for the confusion it creates between the literal and the figurative, and by blurring the distinction between “rape” and “take” (Compton misleadingly implies that “to be raped” and “to be taken” are interchangeable terms), Compton would have us believe that “there is a great deal of human nature in women”. There is, fortunately, much irony in this pseudo-ironical title.

References

In here is occlusive search for peace.
Limbs find the fairest fall,
Stomach is content, back assumes a line,
Head inclines toward presence.
Words lose their grammar, logic disbands,
Features change outline and fade;
Memory’s meanings come apart,
Actions their purpose, practice its perfection,
Conditions are put behind
And here trust is given to unempirical evidence.
Fragments form figments, longings gravures,
Loves landscapes. The unknown of the known discloses,
Quits its tethering events, the jury out forever.
Inside here cannot be brought back to light
Yet merges unaccountable calls into colours,
Conversation in languages that never evolved.
Hemmed by the furbished home in your infant suburb
You are closer to its mood than is remembered,
Seeing faces in unfamiliar places.
Womb without casing, not death but a drug
That slows deep and you can know yourself
Dying of tortures unheard of, only then
You disrobe the germane erotic.
The future rears in a torrential typology
That defies the constringent analysis
Of the exegete in the woken street.