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"...QUINCE TREE, BIRDS, LIGHT SHOWS, RAINS, EVERYTHING"

Robert Drummond, Ships on Fire (Ardent Sun, 2002); Emma Lew, Anything the Landlord Touches (Giramondo, 2002); Jan Owen, Timedancing (Five Islands, 2002); Tracy Ryan, Hothouse (Fremantle Arts Centre, 2002).

It is a cliché of literary criticism that poetry, being the supreme example of literary language, “defamiliarizes”. The idea that poetic language ‘makes strange’ goes back to the Russian formalists, to Wordworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads, and beyond. Shklovsky, best known of the Russian formalists, argued that poetic language impeded our reading, slowing things down to dispel our automatic responses to things (this weather, this house, my life). The very familiarity of this idea might blind us to the fact that to really defamiliarize implies strong originality, a recognizably different voice. It forces the question, ‘How can poets keep being poets?’ Jim Morrison’s line that ‘People are strange when you’re a stranger’ is pertinent here, since a primary way to make the familiar strange is defamiliarize oneself, to be a stranger to one’s house, one’s life. The four recent books of poetry discussed here deal in this kind of strangeness, but in strikingly different ways.

As the title suggests, Tracy Ryan’s Hothouse is full of life—flowers, fruit, insects—but not necessarily the kind found in nature. It is a strikingly post-Romantic work: a book about creation, but also about things going to seed, about being displaced, living away from home. The poet-as-stranger can be seen in the memories of adolescence, in the metaphor of the weed amidst the crop in ‘Against the grain’, and
in the poet as a foreigner living outside Australia. In the hothouse, childhood memories mix with intense lyricism (mallee roots used for fuel are like “Medusa self-petrified/ slow burning”); familial and foreign places are settings for dramas of selfhood (“we see through chinks—another life”), and the strangeness of language is akin to the strangeness of others (“I’m learning/ contours of your language from the points/ you halt at in mine”).

The difficult syntax, the ellipses, and the idiosyncratic grammar show poetic language to be a kind of hothouse in itself, producing bright, out of places things. It goes without saying that Ryan’s poetry needs to be read carefully. But as careful readers we simply mimic the careful reading of the poet, whose poems are often inhabited by similar figures, longing to understand themselves or nature. ‘Against the grain’ (a key poem in this highly original book) refers to ‘text or terrain shot through / with longing’.

Longing is central to Ryan’s poetry, illustrating both emotional sincerity and the intransigence of the world. In “In the absence of hair”, one of two homoerotic poems of youth, the poet recalls a girl who shaved her head and wore her “good butch beauty/ like a placard I could never/ quite read and why should I/ expect to”. Instead of a “Political Issue” to tease out “there was only the sweet real nothing like/ this and resistant you”. Longing is a kind of meaning, but it also makes the strangeness of the world more apparent. The vagueness of the demonstrative pronoun “this” is one of a number of occasions when Ryan seems to introduce pronouns without their nouns. In this case, I take it to refer to the poem, the act of remembrance: “sweet real nothing”. The nothingness could refer to the resistance of the very materials (from the “real world”) that the poet works with.

References to plants, flowers, houses, and family show that intense Romanticism and the bourgeois realm are not mutually exclusive. This is a common enough trope of women’s writing—think of the poems of Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson—but Ryan is notably self-conscious about the meaning of aestheticizing the bourgeois world (though occasionally, as in ‘Outside the glasshouse’, she can also lapse into preciousness). The flowers and interiors of Hothouse open themselves to a significance, even violence, that their domestic context would usually occlude. This is seen in “Wasp Diary” (in which the poet’s house is infested by wasps). The insects are exterminated and the concluding lines pointedly bring together images of domestic order and the excess conventionally seen as antithetical to
bourgeois life: "The chairs, though, left up// on the tables, our normal
clutter// gone straight now, like an addict// after a near miss".

Given the emphasis on life and creation, it's not surprising that
some poems deal with pregnancy. Here, and in the love poems, there
is a sense of plenitude, mixed with the recognition of limits. In
"Regeneration", a love poem, the poet remembers peeling hibiscus
flowers with her lover. The flowers

we filleted and wanted
   to eat though we knew

from the mute perfume
   this would do us no good
   so we left them

splayed and abandoned
   all over the garden, our bliss
   in destruction and sureness

   of coming again.

This erotic, Edenic image is the most utopian vision of the Ryan's hot-
house, but even this shows estranging ambiguity. The power of Ryan's
poetry comes from its recognition of the poison within the things we
think beautiful: we cannot eat the flowers, but destroying them shows
a faith in regeneration.

Timedancing by Jan Owen is also concerned with place and how
we aestheticise it, but her poetry isn't pared back like Ryan's, rather it
is a riot of imagery, and long sentences winding their way through
columnar poems. Many of these poems deal with the poet in an exotic
location. Malaysia—a different kind of hothouse—dominates the first
part of the book. Here the poet places herself in an unfamiliar setting,
producing longish, richly lyrical descriptions that often rely on a con-
junction between cultural and natural strangeness: "By nine, the skit-
tering water-hens/ wuk wuk over the glittering skin/ of the lily pond
where the grey kaloi/ mouth back some dialect of Malay".

There is a superabundance of rhyme here: "by" and "nine", "grey"
and "Malay", "skittering" and "glittering", the "i" sounds there and
in "skin" and "lily", as well as the half-rhymes of "hens" and "skin",
"kaloi" and "Malay". Owen is among that minority band of Aus-
tralian poets unafraid to write it up rich. As such, it's not surprising
that her poems tend towards praise, surprise, or moments of revela-
tion. And while Owen's representation of the tropical landscape as lush
and excessive is a common enough response to the ‘East’, her frank attraction to exoticism is balanced by humour. The fruit of cempadeks, for instance, are “a committee fruit/ by Krupp and Disney and Bosch”.

Owen’s poems move between the exotic world and the domestic world, highlighting the depth and strangeness of both. Their syntax is often dense, but they are often additive in structure. Things add up, if in unexpected ways. In ‘My mother’s crystal bowl’ the bowl, and the mints kept in it, turn out to be surprisingly elegiac.

Many poems are like this: thing-poems (or dinggedicht) that reveal unexpected associations. Often the things are artworks, and two of the most surreal poems are ‘after’ sculptures by Anne Neil. There is also a small group of poems ‘after’ a number of Owen’s peers, such as Kevin Hart and Diane Fahey, though this is a rather coy way of introducing what are, in fact, parodies. These, and the translations of Baudelaire, are the least successful poems in Timedancing. The translations seem too fussy, and while the use of rhyme is technically impressive, in this case it makes Baudelaire seem more a faded decadent than he should be.

Ultimately there is something too professional (and therefore too familiar) about Timedancing. With its poems about travel, its meditations, its ekphrastic poems (poems about art), its parodies and translations it seems to be too much like what competent poets should be expected to do. If this seems a little unfair it is because there is some excellent poetry in Timedancing. It often comes out the blue, as in the ending of “The Kashan”: “I’ve a rug’s blue map for the trip/ and habit’s recurring dream;/ hurriedly packing/ love and sadness and shame/ into the family’s one suitcase,/ this quantum of time”.

The poetic energy of Robert Drummond is far from familiar. Drummond’s interest in violence, history, and his satirical tone are a long way from most lyric poetry being published today. His chapbook, Ships on Fire, is from Ardent Sun Press, a new Geelong press that also publishes The Ardent Sun, an exciting new little magazine. As well as a poet, Drummond is an artist and director of a fine art school. This dual capacity is seen in both an extraordinarily wide visual range and a concern for the role of the artist. For instance, in “The Artist and His Father “the artist-poet paints while his father talks of the horrors of the war in New Guinea, 1943:

I continue to paint
the petrol’s blue flame
all down the neck of a Buddhist monk.
My father becomes art
   critic  *Farting at thunder son.*
   & Steps out into the cicada afternoon with his pain theory
   & its ultimatums

The weight of history, and art’s dual necessity and insufficiency, is
seen in “Less Than 7 Seconds” which relates the response of Leon
Golub (“New York painter/ of large figurative works/ concerned with
torture/ & atrocities/ in Sth. American regimes”) when asked to
describe his art in seven seconds: “ships on fire fuckers/ the ship’s on
fire”. The ambiguity of the syntax there is marvellous, moving from
the aesthetic to the ethical world; from description to warning.

These are the moves of the long sequence that makes up most of
*Ships on Fire:* “Last Days of Hedon”, a social satire made up of surre-
realism, comedy and lyricism. Hedon is a kind of Australia, and the
apocalyptic allegory is disconcertingly apposite at the present time.
The shifts in tone give the work an almost-anarchic energy: “Those in
the know out watering their lawns/ saw the symbols & heard their
songs./ Those in the know noticed the flame burning/ on the head of
every person.// Crikey & Blimey they said/ & went straight inside to
shine their shoes”. The energy of Drummond’s work is one of its most
attractive features, but not its only one. Drummond’s world is unset-
tling, not in small part because he makes jokes in the darkest places,
and because he finds images for things that often go unspoken.

Even stranger is the poetic world of Emma Lew. *Anything the
Landlord Touches* is one of the two first titles from Giramondo Press,
the book publishing imprint of the company that produces Ivor
Indyk’s *Heat* magazine. These first elegant titles are, if anything, even
more stylish than that stylish magazine.

The choice of a photograph by Harold Cazneaux for the cover of
Lew’s second book of poems was an apposite one, since like the
poems, it has a curious quality: ancient and modern at the same time;
highly stylized; both melancholic and witty. And like the photograph,
Lew’s poems are hard to pin down. They are populated by figures and
tropes from an imaginary Europe: there are sentries, women wearing
silks and crinoline, wells, references to manors, the “Trieste dialect”,
snow, wagons, and wars.

It’s hard to know what to make of all this mock sinister. I kept
wondering “How ironic is it?” How does one read lines like these?
“She swanned in voluminous crinoline”, or “Must there always be
some stray, hungry suitor?” or “We were nymphs/ trespassing in the
twiggy depths", or "O my darling, the rigging swarms". But it's not really useful to single out the most outré lines, since they seem less outrageous in context, and it gives the mistaken impression that Lew's world doesn't include recognizably contemporary and Australian tropes. (It does, adding to the strangeness).

Sheer technical and imaginative power makes it impossible not to take Lew's poetry seriously. She has a genius for unexpected shifts ("She opens the window/ and lets in the dark flowers"), for striking metaphor ("The moon happily displays its scars"), and for teasing obscurities, such as "Blue Campaign", which reads:

Flight and retreat and the male sky
    crying above me a I walk down
bitter in the head.

In the sonnets they pray for rain
    with beautiful fists,
    with beautiful thirst.

(This too is a small essay in rhyme).

For all the imaginative richness, Lew has a terseness ranging from the obscure to the tragicomically direct. One example, "You, me, money and fear", is also a great opening line. Most important, though, is how ungiving its tone is. These poems are hard to read as "straight", but you can't just read them ironically, either. Like traditional tales or allegories, Lew's gothic tableaux are disturbing, but also factitious. Many of her poems, such as the remarkable "Honour-Bound" remind me of the collage novels of Max Ernst which used nineteenth-century steel engravings to produce monstrous and fascinating worlds. Lew's images, like Ernst's, are simultaneously precise, nostalgic and suggestive of the inner depths of the psyche.

Lew's poems usually suggest damage: "fallen women", girls "rehearsing melancholia", characters fearing that "the dead/ will jump up to settle accounts", and figures who move through menacing or indifferent landscapes. The strange little girls who occupy this book suggest the milieu of a number of female popular singers, but made even stranger: Sandy Denny on acid, say, or Kate Bush without the whimsy. The Q & A of "Nettle Song" (more plants) could stand for any of the damaged figures in the book: "What's in your heart?/ Glaciers, glaciers,/ a strange, cruel starvation, the smallest storm".

Such lines show Lew's gift for versification. Her use of repetition and her sense of rhythm are superb (especially when it comes to
varying an iambic beat). Often her poems are like collections of individual lines that magically go together to make a poem. She is like the American surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, putting old, found objects in boxes and making them magical. “Famous Vexations” is just one example of such an aesthetic: “Water, wind, morning./ It is fragrant./ Just think, I again dream./ All words become pale./ There are treasures to be taken/ away from this country./ The palette darkens./ Here is my plan”. (It’s no surprise, either, that Lew is attracted to the pantoum).

The mixture of precise musicality and semantic obscurity makes these poems like very late Symbolist poems, attending to mood and creating states of mind, rather than describing the world. But unlike the Symbolists who were (despite their modernity) kinds of Romantics, Lew has seen the twentieth century. “Pocket Constellations”, for instance, ends:

All our lives we have hated white moonlight.
All our lives we have been hating, as we learn
to hate here, tonight, on the ramparts, where
the sentries, the snipers, crave a strong moon.
We have gone through the streets, lisping
our words, hearts full of vicious light,
and always the stars above us that way,
and small children bearing the sonorous names.

Lew is reminiscent of the American poet Charles Simic, who similarly writes weirdly mythical versions of our violent history. There is something Cornell-like about some of Simic’s poems, too, so it is not surprising that he has written a book on the American artist, a work in which Simic offers these suggestive images:

Inside everyone there are secret rooms. They’re cluttered and the lights are out. There’s a bed in which someone is lying with his face to the wall. In his head there are more rooms. In one, the venetian blinds shake in the approaching summer storm. Every once in a while an object on the table becomes visible: a broken compass, a pebble the color of midnight, an enlargement of a school photograph with a face in the back circled, a watch spring—each one of these items is a totem of the self.

Every art is about the longing of One for the Other. Orphans that we are, we make our sibling kin out of anything we can find. The labor of art is the slow and painful metamorphosis of the One into the Other. (Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell, Ecco: New York, 1992, 62)
This is yet another expression of the idea that poetic language is a form of defamiliarization. It is also one that recognizes the relationship between the self and other, the self-estranging that goes into artistic creativity. As the links between ordinary things and extraordinary states suggests, the Simic-Cornell world bears a strong family resemblance to Lew’s.

In fact, Lew’s “A Patient Carpentry” begins with a quotation from Cornell, one that is typically Cornellesque: “...quince tree, birds, light shows, rains, everything”. The poem, presumably about Cornell, more generally concerns an attitude towards the practice of making things strange, and towards estrangement: “Just enough/ body to keep a soul in. A gaze/ like caged birds. Evenings/ were uneventful, but he seemed/ not to mind, prizing echoes/ over truths, thimblefuls”. It is no surprise that Lew should be drawn to this kind of artist, since his aesthetic seems to so accord with her own practice. Like Cornell (an admirer of the Symbolists), Lew’s formal precision allows the echoes to be heard, and the strangeness to transcend mere oddity. Like Cornell, Lew offers extraordinary images that are both real and occult, pleasurable and disturbing.

The four poets discussed here offer their own responses to the difficulty of making strange. The echoes that inhabit their poems have their own timbre and their own haunting quality. At their best, these poems can be surprisingly transformative—able, perhaps, to change the weather, one’s house, oneself.