

## ALWAYS DISAPPEARING

Laurie Duggan's new book, *Mangroves*, contains this observation: "Most poetry exists as a kind of memorial for its lost self; it inhabits the realm of the cultural artifact 'poem' like a tramp in a condemned apartment building". Poetry exists, in other words, in a post-poetic age. So how does one write? For many, just as one ever did, in memory of poetry. But poetry need not merely be elegiac for its lost self as the books discussed here will show. To begin, though, it's worth noting that Duggan is less apocalyptic than might appear. The comment is consistent with Duggan's modest claims for the status of poetry. His description of his work in "Living Poetry" includes this from 1979: "My poetry – a life watching curtains flutter – and what kind of story is that?"<sup>1</sup>

The fragility of such poetry became manifest when Duggan abandoned poetry for some years. If poetry seemed untenable, Duggan didn't stop writing. His doctoral thesis was published by the University of Queensland Press as *Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901–1939*. Returning to poetry, Duggan seems to have made the fragile note even more apparent. At the same time, his writing is more assured than ever, and it's fitting that *Mangroves* recently won the poetry section of *The Age* Book of the Year Award.

While Duggan has not suffered from obscurity (*The Ash Range* and *Epigrams of Martial* were also prize winners, for instance) he hasn't always received the recognition he deserves. This is partly because of the work's variety (which ranges from the quib to the epic) but also because it isn't showy. Duggan's plurality and documentary aesthetic make the usual terms of criticism almost redundant. *Mangroves* may be difficult to account for, but its power makes it clear that Duggan is a master poet.

*Mangroves* begins with the latest in the 'Blue Hills' sequence, works that bring together Duggan's interest in place and visual art. The mix of the delicate and brute reality, so conspicuous in Duggan's poetry generally, is seen in the book's opening lines: "Sunlight on a west wall lights up brick

/ beneath a band of concrete: // AUSTRALIAN MERCANTILE LAND / AND FINANCE COMPANY LIMITED". Ever the bricoleur, found text appears in numerous poems here. This in turn calls to mind Duggan's documentary aesthetic:

At the mercy  
of what I'm given  
to work with  
radiant windows  
dust hanging  
in the atmosphere  
morning radio  
city mythologies.

Duggan is like a painter – “At the mercy / of what I'm given / to work with” – dealing with ephemera, shifting light, nuanced effects. “Louvres”, a sequence in verse and prose, mixes “pure” observation with theorizing about poetry and shows how important visual art is to Duggan's thinking. Like an artist, Duggan relies on the transitory: “Marks on paper, gradations on screen / as ephemeral as the factory light oscillating / upside down in the river”.

It would be wrong, however, to use these lines to characterise Duggan's work as “weak”. They might concern the fleeting and intangible, but they are powerfully rendered. *Mangroves* is notable for its power, its multiplicity, and its wit. Humour, as ever, is important to Duggan, and *Mangroves* is lightened by many great jokes. “Darlington 1974” (from “Sites”, a kind of discontinuous and ironic “growth of a poet's mind” poem) begins: “I stood outside the poetry reading / waiting for the mushrooms to work”.

*Mangroves* is an ambitious book. It is not only large and varied; but it also takes the idea of poetry to its limits. This is both ambitious and consistent with the condition of poetry. As the American poet Robert Pinsky put it:

First, only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not been made poetry already by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no new use, the art rots. Second, the habits and the visions of the art itself, which we are responsible for keeping alive, can seem to conspire against that act of use or witness. The material or rhetoric that seems already, on the face of it, proper to poetry may have been made poetic already by Baudelaire, or Wordsworth, or Rilke, or Neruda.<sup>2</sup>

Any age, in other words, is potentially post-poetic. If such thinking sounds Bloomian, it is because it is more properly Emersonian, a recognition that poetic power cannot only be found within what is considered proper to poetry; that one must respond to the aggression of “tradition” with an aggression of one’s own. The books discussed here all renew poetry in some way by writing against the “the habits and visions” of poetry itself.

Poetic renewal is found everywhere in the two most important *Collected Poems* of the last year: those of Les Murray and Gwen Harwood. Harwood’s *Collected Poems: 1943–1995* is notable for the exemplary editing of Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann. The edition is complete, textually authoritative, and includes numerous elegant and extremely useful notes. The poems are also returned to their pseudonyms: Walter Lehmann, the farmer, Miriam Stone, the frustrated housewife, and so on.

Such pseudonyms are consistent with the fictional characters and personae that Harwood used to write her satirical and elegiac lyrics. Like the work of her peers, especially James McAuley, Vivian Smith and Rosemary Dobson, Harwood’s work is intense, well-fashioned and memorable. Even amongst these poets, Harwood’s poetry is notable for its concern with the intersections between the world and the world of culture, from the Bible to Wittgenstein. Significantly, Harwood and her peers are or were elegiac poets. In Harwood’s case her work became more personal (and as the previously uncollected work shows, more occasional), no doubt in part because of the illness that she images in a number of later poems. Harwood was ultimately a poet of honesty. The haunting last lines of “Andante” suggest this: “Hunger, music and death. / And after that the calm / full frontal stare of silence”.

Les Murray’s *Collected Poems: 1961–2002* shows little obvious anxiety about the status of poetry. Its large size is testament to a career marked by immense facility and originality. But this activity is itself a response to the problems of being a poet in a post-poetic age. Murray reacts powerfully, sometimes belligerently, to renew poetry as cultural practice. If, because of this, Murray’s career seems unduly marked by the torsions of ideology, his poems more often attend to the redemptive power of language.

While there are plenty of pugilistic moments here, there are many of praise, humour and wit. These are in his attention to the domestic scene (“We’ve reached the teapot of calm”); his love of puns (“Y chromosomes of history, apologise to your Xes!”); his unparalleled descriptions of the animal world (a bat’s face is “one tufty crinkled ear”); and his genius for juxtaposition (bikies are “Santas from Hell”).

What is most notable about this edition of Murray's *Collected Poems* is that it comes with an audio CD (something also found in Craig Powell's *Music and Women's Bodies*). Murray's reading of fifty-five of his poems is revelatory, showing that if there is a key to his poetry it is rhythm, the most ancient source of poetic power. Murray's readings and introductions are surprisingly illuminating. The lines about the music from "farty / cars that goes Whudda Whudda / Whudda" show that Murray hears the world as much as sees it. The CD is more than an adjunct to Murray's book: it is essential to it.

Missing from Murray's *Collected Poems* are his verse novels, *The Boys who Stole the Funeral* and *Fredy Neptune*. Narrative poetry has become consistently appealing to Australian poets trying to renew their art form, especially since the success of Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*. Porter's new verse novel, *Wild Surmise*, shows that she herself continues to find that form compelling.

In *Wild Surmise*, as in Porter's earlier verse novels, short lyrics effortlessly combine to produce a narrative. Different here, though, is the shifting narrative viewpoint, a technique that Porter uses with great finesse. Characteristics of Porter's other verse novels remain present here: hyperbole, intense imagery, and an interest in the relationship between sex, power and death. *Wild Surmise*, while cinematic in its use of montage, is really operatic in its aria-like lyrics, extreme emotion, and grand gestures. And like opera, literal-minded approaches are not helpful. (It is perhaps not surprising that Porter has written a number of libretti for operas with Jonathan Mills).

The narrative centres on Alex, an astrobiologist searching for extraterrestrial life who is married to Daniel, a jaded literary academic and poetry lover. Alex is pinning her scientific hopes on Europa, a moon of Jupiter, but meanwhile is having an affair with Phoebe, an astrophysicist who mocks Alex's "feminine" search for life. Porter isn't interested in science fiction for that genre's usual concerns (technology and exploration). She works instead within the minor tradition of "domestic" SF, being more interested in human relationships than alien ones. The space travel is imaginary, and intellectual discovery parallels sexual discovery. Like Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* grieving for his family, or Kelvin in *Solaris* grieving for his dead wife, Alex (mentally) travels through space only to discover what she has lost.

The importance of loss points to a surprising negativity at work, seen in the images of nothingness, stillness, death, infinite seas. *Wild Surmise* is a space oddity: its negativity is strangely baroque, its narrative curiously

undramatic. But it is affecting because of this. Poetry, like astrobiology, is one big wild surmise (the title comes from Keats), and to be faithful to poetry one has to be unfaithful to it. The book's overwrought style, for instance, makes the quiet ending all the more effective. Light years from Jupiter's moons, it is a kind of love poetry. As ever in Porter's work, there is much to discover.

Also strange, but less convincing, is John Jenkins' *A Break in the Weather*. This centres on scientists, too. Together the weather scientists Bruce and Miko must, as the press release has it, "go into battle against the carbon fuel lobby". Okay. Not quite comic enough, the narrative labours under the digressions that seem to be this book's *raison d'être*. At times they seem a little out of control, as in the seven-stanza account of a lost weather balloon.

While not a verse novel, Zan Ross's *En Passant* is more akin to Porter's poetry than Jenkins'. Her sequences are often concerned with the drama of sex and sexual difference, often characterised by a pop sensibility attracted to the mock romance of Hollywood icons. Alicia Sometimes, whose *Kissing the Curve* is from the latest Five Islands Press "New Poets" series, is also interested in the dialectic between language and identity, though her poetry tends to be both more self-reflexive and humorous. Sometimes she has a marvellous sense of camp: "like a cheerleader I turned to you / with ice cream all over my chin / & said / my favourite star is 47 tuchana". There's something irresistible about her po-mo whimsy, seen in poems like "the history of evolution through small sketches" (complete with sketches): "Large animals ate / smaller one, then / looked to the skies & / agreed; boo to comets!". Meanwhile, "the trick to masturbation" must get a big laugh at poetry readings.

Where Sometimes eschews grand gestures, Anna Kerdijk Nicholson's *The Bundanon Cantos* is notable for its ambition, an extended meditation on Australia. This may sound more programmatic (and dated) than it is. But poems such as "Simple Sex Sonnets" show Nicholson searching for a language as wide as possible to discuss her topic, often making it a rare and impressive work. Where landscape and history are central to *The Bundanon Cantos*, Louise Wakeling's *Medium Security* attends to politics in a work that, implicitly, gives a picture of contemporary Australia through often-searing portraits of violence and power.

While also attending to such concerns, Sudesh Mishra's *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying* shows a poet unafraid to write it up rich. His long, lyrical lines pulse with extraordinary imagery (and can't easily be quoted briefly). "A Bilimbili for Madelaine" is exemplary:

Wherever I go now, I see my likeness  
Lulled in teacups, in dead pools, in green bays –

Except when the light, rid of its harness,  
Glances off the surf, glances off the sand  
Kingdom in which your childhood is empress

Levying shell tariffs on both sea and land,  
Drifting in and out of the haze and draught  
To distract with a delicious command

Your master ship-builder plying his craft  
In the madder shade of an immortelle,  
Who must now draw on a digressive art

To stay your vast impatience, who must tell  
Of sirens and fisher-kings, of thatched druas  
That swallowed up the sea like muscatel

And retched up our sailor gods, of terrors  
That trailed my mad itinerant fathers  
To the grail of themselves, to ask: ‘Who endures?’

Mishra’s terza rima is remarkably assured (not to mention his use of caesura and enjambement) and one of the extraordinary features of *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying* is the way it eschews preciousness. In part this is because of Mishra’s technical facility, in part because of the authority and richness of his imagery (“The phone leaps to unbead / The rosary of sleep”). But it is also because of the intellectual strength of these poems. At times this calls to mind Wallace Stevens, as in “Our donnee’s the sun”, but as the sequence from which this comes (“Ephemera”) demonstrates, Mishra can attend to both the exuberance of poetry and the difficulties of ideology. The eponymous prose poem is a fitting climax to an exceptional work concerned with the intricacies of identity and diaspora.

Altogether different but equally powerful is Kevin Brophy’s *Portrait in Skin*. This work is deeply rooted in experience, though Brophy’s poems are neither realist nor confessional. The domestic – moving house, going to the laundromat – often occasions his poems but it is never a source of banality.

Brophy's poetic imagination powerfully transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Brophy's work is open to both fragility and the need for laughter. The former is seen in the achingly beautiful poems, "Turning Fifty" and "Horizon Lines". Laughter is found throughout, as in "A Redemption Tax" in which the poet is ordained by the Australian Tax Office. Sometimes Brophy's eye for the nuances of experience is artistry itself. This can be both utterly familiar and profoundly moving, as in the description (from "Morning") of the poet walking his children to school:

At school they kiss me, business-like as birds,  
and leave me by the school fence  
with other parents also suddenly at a loss  
but wanting not to show it. I want to shout a last message –  
some kind of reminder to them.

Such small losses are shadowed by larger ones. This collection is deeply marked by loss and death, seen in the book's masterful centre pieces: "Why I am a Poet" and "What to do When You're Told it's not Cancer".

"Why I am a Poet" is an extended prose poem that shows the ambivalent condition of the life of words: "dead in the endless life of words, it was not easy to know what to do with my life". The poet, as altar boy and then novitiate, learns the sacred power of language, but also its connection with death, and its inability to redeem the real world, as the death of the poet's sister so poignantly shows. *Portrait in Skin* is a superb book. It powerfully illustrates the strangely antithetical conditions of life – the shadowy life of things.

Life and its shadows haunt Jordie Albiston's *The Fall*. The title poem centres on the woman who jumped from the Empire State Building and was made famous by the *Life* photograph of her on the crumpled car upon which she landed. It is a beautiful poem and its falling imagery resonates throughout much of the rest of the book. But *The Fall* is not portentous. It shows, like Brophy's and Duggan's poetry, the strong relationship between lyricism and wit. Albiston's catalogue poems are especially witty, but they are underwritten by darkness, as seen in "Numbers of Reasons to be Grateful": "Four seasons turning: the taste of a ripe peach or pear. / Thoughts that the Trinity many not be enough to redeem. / Twice bitten, always shy, but still willing to dare / to awaken to morning – first time – without despair".

Where the Wye river poems might have bordered on preciousness, they

are saved by an intellectual toughness, seen especially in the theme of self-denial. Albiston is also a discreet formalist, commonly attracted to chain structures, seen in poems like “The Fall” (the ghost of a pantoum, perhaps), “Dark Souls Swept Out Far too Far for Saving” (a villanelle), “Numbers of Reasons to be Cheerful” (in terza rima), and “Chained Letter” (a sestina). Yet such formalism is defined by a cheerful eclecticism when it comes to voice and approach. The poems of this excellent book are occupied by letters, the Bible, advice, lists, and instructions, all of which show how the poetic comes from the unpoetic.

The poetic world of Emma Lew is a little like Albiston’s made strange. The poems in Lew’s astonishing second collection, *Everything the Landlord Touches*, are populated by figures from an imaginary Europe: there are sentries, women wearing silks and crinoline, wells, manors, the “Trieste dialect”, snow, wagons, and wars. Strangeness is also seen in Lew’s genius for unexpected shifts (“She opens the window / and lets in the dark flowers”), striking metaphor (“The moon happily displays its scars”), and teasing obscurities (“In the sonnets they pray for rain / with beautiful fists, / with beautiful thirst”). Like traditional tales or allegories, Lew’s gothic tableaux are disturbing but obviously factitious. Her images are simultaneously precise, nostalgic and suggestive of the inner depths of the psyche.

Lew’s poems imply damage: “fallen women”, girls “rehearsing melancholia”, characters fearing that “the dead / will jump up to settle accounts”. “Nettle Song” 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 varying an iambic beat). Often her poems are like collections of individual lines that magically go together to make a poem, as in “Famous Vexations”: “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”.

The mixture of precise musicality and semantic obscurity makes these very late Symbolist poems, attending to mood and creating states of mind. But unlike the Symbolists who were (despite their modernity) kinds of Romantics, Lew has seen the twentieth century, giving many of her poems a profound, knowing edge. This book is evidence of a major poetic talent.

The titles discussed here are those that strike me as the most powerful, those that are not simply elegies to poetry’s lost being. It is



extraordinary that one year should produce such work. (And renewal is also seen in the excellent journals *Salt-lick Quarterly*, *Blue Dog* and – on CD-Rom – *Papertiger*). Duggan and Lew show that the most rewarding poets are often those who make response the most difficult. The final poem in Duggan's *Mangroves* is the last piece he wrote before his years of poetic silence, and it is utterly unique. "The Minutes" takes poetry to its limits. An extended prose poetry sequence, it is made up of diaristic observations of the world. But that is a totally unsatisfactory description of the poem. For while the poem represents the quotidian, the world of memory, and the material facts of living, it is intensely aesthetic. It is elliptical and allusive, a kind of music, like a long Coltranesque solo on what would otherwise be the most banal of themes. Were it not so suspicious of such terms it could be called a small masterpiece.

The title is a pun, since the poem notes the passing of time, and is also a record of something. The poet is taking the minutes of his own life. (There is also a pun regarding size.) But in taking a record of the small things that pass, "The Minutes" shows that for all his humour, Duggan's documentary aesthetic ghosts an elegiac one. As "The Minutes" shows, poetry is elegiac not only because the world that it is recording is always disappearing, but also because poetry itself is always disappearing. It is apposite, then, that "The Minutes" should be so allusive in its rendering of reality: "What I have written I have written. Pink buds, white flowers, over the fence. Intermittent rain on the dead leaves".

### *Poetry Received 2002–2003*

*Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review*

\*Albiston, Jordie. *The Fall*. Hawthorn, Vic: White Crane Press, 2003.

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\*Blue Dog. *Australian Poetry. Volume 1 no. 1*. Poetry Australia Foundation: University of Wollongong, 2002.

\*Brophy, Kevin. *Portrait in Skin*. Wollongong University: Five Islands Press, 2002.

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## Notes

- 1 Laurie Duggan, "Living Poetry", *Meanjin* 53.2 (1994).
- 2 Robert Pinsky, "Responsibilities of the Poet", *Poetry and the World*. Ecco: New York, 1988.