TEXT review

‘This is Lazarus. / I need an outside line.’
review by Marion May Campbell

Mal McKimmie
The Brokenness Sonnets I-III & Other Poems
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Born in Perth in 1964, Mal McKimmie has travelled widely and has worked as a survey hand, deckhand, vineyard labourer, fruit-picker, dishwasher, laundry folder and part-time ranger. He has also worked in welfare, with people labelled as having a disability, and with people diagnosed with mental illness. This wide-ranging social experience, along with his broad and eclectic erudition, might partly explain what fellow-poet Philip Salom evoked at the Melbourne launch [1] of this book as his utterly singular talent, producing poetry like no one else’s in Australia.

McKimmie has found in affliction striking ways of addressing a contemporary reader’s own brokenness and fragmentation: registering the radical shaking of epilepsy in his first full-length collection, Poetileptic (2005), and more recently, in seizing his orphic opportunity from the potential catastrophe of three strokes. Flannery O’Connor wrote, ‘In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow’ (Baumgaertner 1987), and we don’t so much follow the poet as lose the compass with him, just as his cast of personae and ‘homunculi’ find so much that is a gift in the loss of control

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that is *blessèd illness*.

E Electing the sonnet, moving between Shakespearean and Petrarchan modes through to more elastic unrhymed versions, the three eponymous sequences make over for contemporary sensibilities the form eminently suited to carpe diem, metaphysical conceit, iconoclastic questioning, rebel dissonance and witty paradox. In the twisting mimicry of syntax and lineation, the body disjunct writ(h)es its new knowledge. Through slant rhyme’s play, which, like the funfair ride, can turn to terror, or through nursery rhyme-like punning chains, the ‘reason’ of loftily pronounced *Diagnosis* is triumphantly undone.

Calling his entrapment *the carnival of Un*, McKimmie recognises how carnival parodies the law and institutional discourses which oppress and reduce just as they claim to govern and discipline. The syntax in some remarkable sonnets from the first sequence, ‘The Brokenness Sonnets I’, enacts the excruciating sense of the hamster’s entrapment in the tumbling wheel, from which the scream or the gushing evacuation of self might be the only line of egress (Deleuze 1988):

```plaintext
I was something then; or happy. But
the world
is a calling carnival of Un,
a ferris wheel rolling down a long hill
to the sea. Hands strap me in, I flail
a blind rage: run a hamster’s panic in
this cage; forever further away from
me. (13)
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Here the terror of the unrelenting downward ride is magnified by the ditching of initial capitals, the ‘rage-cage’ internal rhyme and the eloquent awkwardness of the stressed approximate rhyme of lines 9 and 13: ‘Un-in’. McKimmie takes us to the site of catastrophic near-effacement. If the role of poetry is to concentrate the event or encounter – whether amorous, exhilarating, revelatory, painful or devastating – within the sensate and affective intelligence of the reader, then this work frequently succeeds at a high level. McKimmie takes us along the ravaged routes of aphasia, along which circumlocution and approximation breed panic and confusion, where punning becomes a stutter and performs the undoing of language and of humanity. Here the foetally vulnerable and uncoordinated self tentatively emerges post-disaster as syllable by syllable is rescued from the language litter. You experience how these vandal events have routed the site of speech. You recognise yourself in the shadow world of the person paralysed, helplessly mute, very nearly wiped out.

In questioning how torture operates, Elaine Scarry (1985) argues how the interrogation cell is at once a metaphor for the
body and also an evil parody of the living space, of the familiar, hospitable room. In some ways the parallels here are striking: torture is geared to the extraction of speech, a speech which will betray, a betrayal for which the one tortured is made responsible; but here the torture is in not being able to extract speech from the self held captive by disaster.

Reeves was Superman, being American, now is more so. But I am Clark Kent in a phonebooth, fumbling with my catheter; and she loves me from the waist down only, indifferent and efficient as a bedpan. (16)

The crippled attempt at self-transformation, ‘fumbling with my catheter’, is cruelly mocked by the approximate rhyme: ‘Kent in a’/ ‘catheter’; and there is no Lois Lane awaiting this prostheticised Kent. McKimmie knows how to dump the reader into the helplessness implicit in the nurse’s attention to the paralysed lower limbs: ‘and she loves me from the waist down only’. The Superman-American association finds its derisory fall-out in the final rhyme, ringing out the banal instrumentality of ‘bedpan’.

Unlike Susan Sontag (1979), who refuses the fix of illness as metaphor, McKimmie mines the disaster of stroke for its potential both for metaphor and metamorphosis: language is the agent of the metamorphic experience, language wrung back from the abysmal shelf of utter silencing, where brain is deadlocked outside words. Here the poem is at once site of obliteration and of literally painstaking reassembly. Casting out tentative line after tentative line, the poet floats a fragile net across the abyss – between silenced and immobilised self and selves in flight – and the verbal network in turn becomes a cradle for an emergence of new selves who dare to fly in dream. The old Telephone Time Announcement protocol ‘On the third stroke it will be...’ lends a structural pun for the temporal arrest of the cerebral stroke, a shocking and wrenching epiphany in which cosmic space-time seems to collapse into self as black hole:

I stand around like a bathroom fixture.

But at the third stroke, all the time that I have kept falls into me and falls complete: I have wept equally for sorrow as for joy: my tears have filled, with the sea, the
sky.
O my love if you were near you’d
hear me shout:
See swimming up that rainbow,
rainbow trout! (20)

Witness the miracle of lexical mutation: the upstream arching of the trout is dreamed through the gymnastics of language: from the rainbow, biblical signal of reconciliation after catastrophe, leaps the metonymically associated ‘trout’. I might be silent; I might be immobile but in this line I fly – through magical affiliation. This is also to make a jester’s triumph out of the ‘carnival of Un’– from the ‘bathroom fixture’ paralysis to the gravity-defying trout’s flight.

McKimmie’s would-be flyer might be initially (at the third stroke) a nameless miscreant sans flight – a ‘failed invention’.

...My name is a disgrace.
Call me something else, call me Icarus.
With these hands I’ll make a pair of wings

for all my life I’ve been a junkie dreaming
of a hyperdermic filled with emptiness,
escape from this, a blue oblivion.
Of the forgetfulness of fugue and flight,
of God as an annihilating light;
and all the wide-screen sky as television. (21)

Here the contemporary simile (‘wide-screen sky’) reactivates the etymology of television as long-sightedness (or God-like omniscience), and the ‘blue oblivion’ whispers its seductions in the five-fold alliteration: ‘of the forgetfulness of fugue and flight’, as the ultimate fantasy of escape, but divine light, like the Western Australian light that ‘crushes like psychosis’ (57), is also figured as terror: a total wipe-out of self and world. ‘God as an annihilating light’ turns the living sky to digital simulacrum, testifying only to its emptiness, to the ultimate loss of all reference. This is a potent performance of suicidal desire, in the way it builds, with the stress falling on ‘all’, to the awesome culmination of the mind-flash: wide-screen nothingness.

The individual hero Icarus is soon renounced for collective agency, and here is a sort of Deleuzo-Guattarian (Deleuze & Guattari 1986) opportunity to identify with a multitude, as swarming potential:

The Icari have flown since birth
began.
The myth is not outside you, you must
learn
to fly in your dreams or will burn.
The wounding and silencing of the human self lead the persona to intensify affiliation with the whole chain of species, a phoneme or two separating him from the ‘chimp’ as ‘chum’:

I am your chimp, your chump, your chum, your one and only friend. There at the beginning, I will still be there at the end, swinging in the jungle of your DNA from chromosome to chromosome — ninety-eight percent of you is me. But you give weight undue to two percent; up spring cities, churches, nuclear plants. (22)

What is a man: this desperate need to cross the abyss of the ‘missing link’, back to his nuclear-plant and bomb-building humanity? The following sonnet picks up the genetic baton, as it were:

Who among you now will sing a bridge for me? Left behind, I was the first made last; when blesséd [sic] illness stuns your tongue to silence you can hear me keening lonely in your past. Search for me there. Sing your way to the speechless centre of your wound. Then give me your song. (22)

This is a magnificent address to hubristic Homo sapiens who fancies himself at creation’s pinnacle: true humanity might be the humble recognition of the connectedness of all beings, however lowly they might figure on the evolutionary scale. The invitation, ‘Sing your way to the speechless / centre of your wound. Then give me your song.’, derives its beauty and power from its artful shaping of silence. The breath-pause after ‘speechless’ and the caesura after ‘wound’ open a hiatus through which some sublimely ‘keening’ ‘song’ might be dreamed.

In another moment of correction or hierarchical reversal to the advantage of the selfless, McKimmie adopts the persona of Gauguin to address Van Gogh as Master, and in this strange but fascinating re-imagining, the Dutch painter’s God becomes, in his death-dealing, the agent of obliteration, stamping out of the
genial spirit at the very same time as He

...spools out his golden thread from
fields near Arles,
stills the writhing pines, thumbs out
those stars. (24)

In marvellous compression, McKimmie has God as ultimate,
perverse Weaver spooling the painter’s destiny out as golden
thread from the last cornfield painting, willing the
extinguishment of the passionate intensity of His own creature.
This casual annihilation of the storm centre of that genius brings
the scandal of Vincent Van Gogh’s death back to life, along
with the blazing magnificence of his amplifications. Exploiting
the sonnet’s last quatrain to host the beautiful paradox (survival
through art, along with the God-vocation through sacrifice of
self or suicide), McKimmie gives his Gauguin this fervent
avowal:

While the shadows of my master’s
blade and gun
fall between God’s earth and the
world of men,
deep down in the soil, still as an
archetype
I wait; listening for his, and God’s
return. (24)

The comma-hiatus after ‘his’ in the sonnet’s ultimate line marks
something like wonder before miracle. Here, in this breath
pause, it’s as if you can sense the pulse of prayer for the poet’s
return to language.

In ‘Escape from the Rat-Gods’ McKimmie ties the sense of
being a psychiatrist’s lab-rat on medication to the kabbas or
reincarnated rat relatives of the Rat-Goddess Kali Mata. Divine
consciousness is everywhere, in the temple’s pillars, a blessing
even in the food the holy temple rats eat.

But in Calcutta the beggar I could not
shake was Art.
God fell from my head. She rose in
my heart. (25)

The hope of poems to come throws a lifeline: the empty begging
bowl of the as-yet-wordless poem receives an inspiration, an
intake of breath. The resurrection of hope is through this
coupling: art-heart. This shaking of the hierarchies (male God-
female beggar) is pervasive in the collection and the proximity
to the other, sublime or abject, is just one more gift acquired
through blessèd illness.

So, too in ‘Requiescat in Pace’:
Time to marshal the troops of memory, 
name each fatality: 
[...] 
Lost is your war with the past: 
with your heart in your helmet, in your hands, 
return. No more need for weapons. At ease. 
Expect nightmares, but after nightmares, peace. 
Unfurl the white flag of your surrender: 
she waits for you as patient as a mirror, 
but she is not a mirror, she is free. 
And you love her as the wave loves vast the sea. (25)

There is a magnificent acceptance of new limitations which reveal their underside as immensity [2], through this recognition of the freedom of the beloved. There’s a lovely pun in the ascription of ‘patient’ to the beloved attending the patient, she becoming thus quite logically as ‘patient as a mirror’, mirroring the patient’s stillness and silence.

In the closing line the syntactically odd, almost quaint, placement of ‘vast’, rendering it as an adverbial modifier of ‘loves’, draws attention to this new sense of self as just one fold of the manifold, ultimately unknowable, other: an exquisite release, which is inferred in the approximate feminine rhyme: ‘At ease/peace’.

This sense of mortality radically changes the scale of events, and in some ways human life is accelerated into the shocking compression and apparent insignificance of the life of a fly: in a world where warfare uses the rhetoric of freedom to drive capital, McKimmie gives new meaning to Gloucester’s ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport’ (Shakespeare 1986: 1086). The first sonnet of the second sequence ‘The Brokenness Sonnets II’, ‘A Life in a Day of a Fly: America, Afghanistan, Iraq et al’ begins:

    O what a rush!! Twenty-four hours 
    (from maggot mute to backspin buzz) of litter. (29)

The major sequence ‘Apoplectic’ begins with the Diagnosis pronouncing a parody of Genesis. This is not The Gospel According to St John but according to the doctor-gods. This sequence of four sonnets is interspersed with free verse poems
of irregular length and bound together by images of demented
arachnid weaving: the warp and weft of language in which the
poet’s post-diagnosis persona is caught. These are the mock
gods, the ‘Spider Imperator’ masters of fate who make glib
pronouncements from bed to bed. In this travesty of ‘rebirth’,
the foetal takes fatal anti-form; just as Diagnosis, far from the
living God-made-Word, is received as a death-dealing anti-
language.

With such a poet one has to refuse facile, aesthetic responses
where lexical poverty looks like aphasia itself; here the manifold
repetition of ‘Diagnosis’ works to parody the perverse
tautological entrapment of diagnosis: You are experiencing this
because you are a stroke victim. We pronounce you a stroke
victim because you are experiencing this.

Not ‘In the beginning was the Word’ but rather, In the
beginning was the loss of the Word... And the self is spoken by
the other only as a constellation of symptoms. Diagnosis points
to one’s onset of perhaps definitive languagelessness, casting
the whole universe as a Hospital in which foetally, perhaps
fatally, the victim is trapped.

In the beginning was the Diagnosis
and the Diagnosis was in Hospital
and the Diagnosis was Hospital.
The same was in the beginning with
Hospital.
All language was made by the
Diagnosis;
and without the Diagnosis was not
any language made that was made.
In it was Prose; and this Prose was
the darkness of men... (30)

The starvation for active language is performed effectively by
the claustrophobic repetition: of ‘Diagnosis’ and ‘Hospital’,
their capitalisation suggesting monstrous agency and its
objectification of the inert ‘patient’. The fall-out of the ‘third
stroke’ builds the bars of this language-prison through which
medicine pronounces one’s own exit from the living word and
world.

Here the slight awkwardness actually registers the crushing
limitation of diagnosis replacing the world:

But waking here,
this shock your shock now is more.
(31)

Then nurse and night transmogrify; a perverse maternal occurs:

Dressed in white icing, warm as a
cookie,
the night-nurse is baked somewhere in
Hospital.
But the night, not the night-nurse
lactates for
this litter of the still, stillborn, and still
to be born,
each of us foetally, perhaps fatally,
paused
in the midst of a sentence, a day, a
dilemma,
punctuation marks waiting on a writer,
on Time. (31)

And here comes the play of punctuation: these are *punctuated*
rather than *articulating* beings: is this a comma-like pause
marking one’s fatal line, or a final full-stop, period?

And after three strokes, I am an
ellipsis between
known and unknown — void, blank
page, poem
murmuring at the night’s breast. ‘Will
I return?... (31)

And the ‘I’ is emergent in the imagined mirror-self breaking the
spell of paralysis; ‘I’ is the subject of the future writing, already
nurturing the silent and helpless recipient of the brilliantly
invoked ‘venom-sac like a zeppelin’:

Your words here, anger, rage, —
scratching on the future page.
Faith as pure verb,
action taken without faith,
light in darkness before light arrives
to reveal the image in tomorrow’s
mirror:
no longer paralysed, one way or the
other...
& you were not alone.
When the venom-sac like a zeppelin
swung over you at night
spinning you mute & into its word-
web
I was there. (32-33)

From the allegory of Hospital as ‘the great spider, mother[ing]
us all / Deaf and blind and spinning in the dark’, we move to
another ambivalent animal totem, at once agent of
condemnation and salvation, the crow, whose myriad
incarnations and the radical contextual and tonal shifts they
effect, give dynamism and continuity at once to the major
sonnet sequence, ‘The Tao of Smoking’. This kind of work on
the signifier, in which ‘crow’ can become anything, is integral to the liberatory ethics of this book: like Wallace Steven’s ‘blackbird’ (Stevens 1983: 932-34), the crow can become endlessly other. If ‘crow’ is the totem, its serial becomings are effected through the idea of the cigarette as stolen breath, and of ventriloquy as stolen voice. This is an unlikely and fragile affiliation of the thing and its travesty, and yet it works fascinating ironies.

...Cigarette after cigarette, decree after decree, nothing can save the ventroquist’s chatterbox dummy from the implications of silence. (35)

And likewise, ‘crow’ is a signifier despatched through the sequence to become other than this associated fatality: a measure of metamorphic power through the cliché wrung out until it breaks the brittle shell of catachresis, becoming active, edgy metaphor. This is how to write one’s way out of ‘Un’, out of ‘Malediction’:

If I lay end to end all the cigarettes that I have ever smoked
[...]
I will in doing so walk 20 kilometres, which in the city of my questionable birth gets me to the hospital of my questionable deaths; then to the cemetery and my grandfather’s tombstone, on which the crow, first sharpened its beach, inscribing the name of my questionable christening... (35)

The sequence shows cigarettes as endless substitutions, for the mother’s nipple [3], for example, but they are also susceptible to become Crow, to become Christ, the principle of breath and of sacrifice in the rhythm of inhalation-exhalation / inspiration-expiration. Smoking, as with Verlaine and Mallarmé [4], is reclaimed as emblematic of poetic transformation. Sometimes the nipple that nourishes is anything but a nipple; and all in the crucible of the poem is transmutable. And defiantly, McKimmie demonstrates here, in his pun on his own given name: no christening need remain a malédiction.

Smoking and non-smoking are the same
but diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same a cigarette is called a mystery;  
buts a breath mystery upon mystery,  
gateway of the manifold secrets.

This is the Tao of smoking. (35)

Thus are reclaimed the mystery and the force that blow through the cigarette, through one’s own name and through the blue-black crow: Mal’s diction becomes a benediction, with the Tao returning to a version of the Gospel, in a way.

This progression reveals what for me is the secret architecture of this book: the next sequences are animate with a kind of religious ardour as well as playful interrogation. In the title ‘Lapsed Corona’, as in Donne’s ‘La Corona: Holy Sonnets’ (Donne 1965: 246-48), there is evidently the sense of the solar aura, of the halo of saintliness, and even the glowing tip of a cigar. While these motifs are progressively intensified, the corona also lends itself to incarnation as a taking-on-of-the-wound, and at last becomes the crown of Christ’s death-struck tree.

Here the principle of relay and of ventriloquised repetition from one speaker to the next invades the body of these sonnets, and in addition, as it does in Donne’s sequence, the last line of each sonnet is reprised in the first of the next, as in liturgical ceremony. The body of some of McKimmie’s ‘Lapsed Corona’ sonnets is divided dialogically between two speakers, so that in the second sonnet, ‘Childhood’, the voices of Mary and Joseph alternate, the last line being recovered by Jesus in the third sonnet, ‘Temple’. The spirit of the Tao involves dreaming at once of our mortal end as insignificant as the ‘backspin buzz’ of a fly, and our spiritual dimensions scaled down like angels comically spinning on a scholastic’s pin. Just as the sequence declares in topic and form its debt to John Donne, it also manifests, in its play of levity with gravity, a strong kinship with the spiralling paradoxes of the seventeenth century poet’s religious meditations.

‘Mary’ of the sixth sonnet ‘Station’ ends with the superb lines:

Oh living ear of God, before closing 
hear me — behind the seen weeps the unseen. 
The altar is laid and the church is clean. (45)

The last of this sequence, the seventh, ‘Crucifixion’ is both reverent and irreverent as was Christ’s radical doubt at this last hour:
...To claim
me back, a vast heart beats its wings unseen
upon a shore in vain. I will be eaten
now as a child is by its given name,
my death will be planted by men in Time,
a tree will die from the crown down.

Ocean
I have sung drop by drop into the sky
sing me home. (45)

Here the sense of the holy is regained breath-by-breath through a decree of iconoclasm and near-blasphemy; the wound is again wounded and the mortal God pulses in the winged heart of the stroke survivor. Time is breath’s count as the poem’s rhythmic being, but Time is also breath’s ironic death-dealer.

‘Brokenness Sonnets III’ opens with ‘The Judas Tree’ sequence with epigraphic quotes juxtaposing the lines of Trumball Stickney ‘... within me t’is as if / The green and climbing eyesight of eyesight of a cat / Crawled near my mind’s poor birds’ with the assertion from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, that ‘all is the Divine Mother — even the [temple] cat’ (54). In this sequence, just like the crow of ‘The Tao of Cigarettes’ the suicide implicit in the image of the Judas Tree unfolds its many incarnations: suicide as despair, but also as positive abdication of self, suicide as being gathered into the manifold narrative of creation. Here again eastern spirituality meets western spirituality and the ironies overlap resonantly. If the temple cats and rats are all part of holy consciousness as are the temple pillars and offerings of food, so are Judas’ betrayal and suicide essential to the Christian God’s taking on the wound with the flesh. Sri Ramakrishna’s cat is perched up there in the Judas Tree with the Cheshire Cat’s grin:

Sri Ramakrishnan
was soul-mad for me
& would rather have plunged
a sword into

his own breast (& swung from the tree) than live without me... While this man wakes in the wreck

of his life, the cat that Ramakrishnan fed sleeps Cheshire &

replete up in the Judas Tree & I am that smiling cat. (54)
Of course the Cheshire has the last laugh, as it were, its smile persisting after its own erasure; and there is also a lovely joke on the poet’s own self-survival, beyond death’s rehearsals that were the three strokes.

Several of the ‘Other Poems’ included here beyond the ‘Brokenness’ sequences weave variations on the major themes of cataclysmic accident, suicide, survival and connectedness; they also consider in a philosophical vein the flipping of fact to metaphor, of homeopathy itself as a kind of cure via metaphor, thus extending the exploration of poetry as a singing out of aphasia. The aphoristic brilliance of the fragment:

‘This is Lazarus,
I need an outside line.’ (72)

works as a kind of synecdoche for the marvellous life-embracing achievement of Mal McKimmie’s collection. Lazarus here has not found a single ‘outside line’ but has triumphantly found manifold ‘outside lines’ of high resonance, daringly imaged, intellectually and emotionally transporting, and often blackly funny. But it is especially the way he has allowed his harrowing near-loss of self to register in the sonnet form, through his lineation and orchestration of silence, through the dynamics of enjambment and the strategic deployment of near homophonic chains, that plunges us to the ‘speechless centre of [the] wound’ around which the ‘carnival of Un’ does its devastating work. Five Islands Press is to be congratulated for making available through its handsome book design this boldly original and revelatory work.

Notes

1. The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 9 December 2011 return to text

2. Reminiscent of Donne’s line from ‘Annunciation’: ‘Thou hast light in dark; and shutt’st in little room, / Immensity cloiseter’d in thy dear womb.’ ‘La Corona: Holy Sonnets’ (Donne 1965: 246) return to text

3. McKimmie cites this reference in the epigraph from Robert Hass: ‘He wanted to get out of his head,’ she said, / ‘so I told him to write about his mother’s nipples.’ The Brokenness Sonnets I-III, 34 return to text

4. For example ‘Toute l’âme résumée / Quand lente nous l’expirons / Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée / Abolis en autres ronds // Atteste quelque cigare / Brûlant savamment pour peu / Que la cendre se sépare/ De son clair baiser de feu…” (Mallarmé 1945: 73) [The whole soul summed up /
When slowly we expire / In several rings of smoke / Dissolved in further rings // Testifies to some cigar / Burning knowingly / As long as smoke comes free / From its bright kiss of fire...]

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