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Copyright: 2014, Axon: Creative explorations
Axon’s commitment to publishing new research in creativity and the creative process is highlighted in this issue on poetry. Lucy Dougan, consultant editor, introduces its exploration of ‘how poetry constitutes knowledge; how it is made; how poets think about their work’, and one of the exhaustive questions in the academy: ‘how poetry may be understood as research.’ Like Text: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, Axon’s open access enhances ‘the free exchange of ideas’. Since many of the same writers have been published in both journals, Axon reads like a more techno-savvy sister publication.

While the more experimental pieces leave a lasting impression, this is dependent upon the success of the writer negotiating a hybrid form. At best, it is liberating; at worst, it becomes an exercise in navel gazing. Andrew Melrose’s compelling essay opens with the clever lines, ‘I can’t write poetry. Or perhaps that should be, I don’t write poetry.’ However, while it may fit thematically, the hyperlink to him singing is a little self-indulgent. David McCooey’s poetry soundtrack and links to SoundCloud are slicker. Antonia Pont reinvigorates the dead art of ‘learning by heart’ by arguing for the ways it can ‘act as provocation to thought’, and essays from Dan Disney and Jessica Wilkinson are fresh and rigorous. Philip Salom’s brilliant ‘free-wheeling reflection’ on heteronymy concludes with the pertinent line: ‘Knowing through poetry is why I am a poet.’

Many of the best poems contemplate mortality, like Peter Rose’s suite of poems, which read as memento mori. Kevin Gillam’s, Marcella Polain’s, and Tracy Ryan’s poems are haunting, and Will Eaves’s witty line ‘I should stop writing / about my childhood and move on’ is a lesson many writers should heed. Poetry is solicited by the journal’s editors, but I would like to see the process opened up for general submission.

Cassandra Atherton

CIRCLE WORK
by Cameron Lowe
Puncher & Wattmann
$25 pb, 76 pp, 9781922186232

Just over fifty years since the death of the great American poet William Carlos Williams, it is pleasing to see so much of his spirit still alive in Cameron Lowe’s third collection, Circle Work. Williams was often short-changed by poets who, mistakenly, thought his short, ‘photographic’ poems easy to imitate. Lowe, by contrast, fully understands the importance of close observation and imagination. He understands, too, the necessity for skilled syntax and how a poem may consist wholly of details which are not in the least ‘poetic’.

Williams prided himself on being American, but Lowe demonstrates that the techniques work just as well in Geelong or Fitzroy as they did in New Jersey. Lowe, too, is interested in how the quotidian, if considered attentively, has the transcendent within. The end of Lowe’s long, six-part poem, ‘The skin of it’ is a compelling example: ‘a tiny bird emerges // upon the ruined fence, a finch perhaps, eyes intent / on the pane of glass, / its lemon breast // so vivid, / for just a moment, in dull light –’.

The episode recalled is small and short-lived but, nevertheless, of great significance. Lowe’s verbal music reinforces this (e.g. the assonance in ‘bird emerges’ and ‘lemon breast’). The syntax, part of a much longer sentence, follows the mind’s movements. We see a bird; note that it is ‘tiny’; then surmise that it is ‘a finch perhaps’. The ‘perhaps’ is important too: it is all too fleeting.

Not all the book has this purity of lyricism. There are also sardonic moments, as in ‘North Shore pastoral’ and ‘Rise and Shine’, but it is in the sharp-eyed, minimal, lyric mode that Lowe’s work is most characteristic.

Geoff Page

THE UNSPEAK POEMS
and OTHER VERSES
by Tim Thorne
Walleah Press
$20 pb, 96 pp, 9781877010439

The Unspeak Poems, Tim Thorne’s fourteenth collection, is characteristically politically engaged and international in its scope. The best of these poems make use of Thorne’s acute ear for everyday speech. ‘Gettin’ there’, for instance, sad and memorable, creates through jumpy fragments of wry observations and narrative a picture of misguided hope against loaded odds: ‘The saddest place I’ve ever seen / is the bus shelter outside Risdon prison. / You lose about one teddy bear per eviction / on average.’ The same talent is used to different effect in recording the incoherence of racism in ‘7/11’.

The presence of the political in the everyday and its influence on language run throughout, especially in the concluding section, ‘The Unspeak Poems’. This ‘unpeeling’ is not refraining from speaking but speaking actions (and people) out of existence, the old game of changing the meanings of words to make ugliness more palatable. ‘Surgical Strike’ works through the implications of a common phrase, and ‘Acute Willingness’ looks at the death of a father and his two-year-old child, hidden behind the words ‘an acute willingness among insurgents to die’. The Unspeak Poems is at its strongest when engaged with the details of oppression and with the viewpoints of those who lack agency.

Less effective are the poems about poetry which tend to lapse into a victim-outsider pose: ‘Advice to an Emerging Poet’, for instance, and ‘Self-Portrait: The Poet in his Maturity’. Thorne’s humour is for the most part a strength, as in ‘Mondagreen: Wordsworth, Sonnet 33’, which amusingly mishears its victim. ‘Chaste Around the Cloisters’, by contrast, never rises above a succession of lame jokes, easy shots, and clichés.

This is a solid collection from an established poet. Its best poems are well worth the price of entry, and its anger and sympathy are timely.

Graeme Miles