

## “SO YOU MAKE A SHADOW”: AUSTRALIAN POETRY IN REVIEW 2006–2007

Forty-five volumes of poetry published in Australia over the last twelve months have been turning up at my place, in little gangs, or singly, every week for the last six months. And they have stayed, perched on my desk, defying me and my work schedule, prompting me to read them late at night, or first thing in the morning, to make room for them. Most are by individual authors, others are by couples, or in anthologies and “Best ofs.” It is astounding and wonderful that in this land of footy and telly and popular culture, forty-five poets (and many more I’m sure) have managed to write, publish and disseminate their work. Of course there is poetry *about* footy and telly and popular culture, but let’s face it, poetry writing and reading is not the main game.

I had, after all, invited them, or at least left the door ajar. This crowd (mob? congregation? enclave? flock?) of poets was welcome. Many seemed, after all, like old friends: Bruce Dawe’s *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954–2005*, the latest Friendly Street volume, Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune: a Novel in Verse* reissued after its first appearance nine years ago; the revered elder statesmen of poetry (yes, mainly men, 20 to 9 in the single-author volumes) – Geoff Page as anthologist and poet/novelist, Julian Croft in the lovely new John Leonard Press edition, Tom Shapcott’s spikey, terse and crafted poems, David Malouf’s *Typewriter Music* in a beautifully produced little hardback volume from UQP, and Dennis Haskell’s *All the Time in the World*, with its alphabetical romp “A Defence of Poetry” lauding

All Poetry’s perceptive, pointless pleasures  
– In all the horror, a thin piece of light  
Like a weightless parcel adrift on the doorstep. (13)

So for the thousandth time I asked myself, what is poetry? Who reads it today,

in Australia, and why? Does poetry, as Auden and now Malouf suggest, make “nothing happen?” Is it just “a weightless parcel adrift on the doorstep”? It is so much more than that, I insisted to myself. I was thinking of the conversation I’d had a few days before with a group of friends, when the topic had been Harry bloody Potter and the final episode. I don’t really mind Harry, or his popularity, but I had asked some friends, probably a little haughtily, whether with all their Harry reading late into the night they had any time for poetry. A glaze came over their collective eyes. It was caused, I imagined, partly by nostalgia for the experiences they’d had in the past of reading poetry; or was it partly guilt for not reading it “much” anymore, and partly preparation for fleeing from the perceived rigours and demands of poetry reading?

Then and there I realised again something about poetry: at its finest it is the richest, most probing literature possible. It is craft and meaning, it is intellectual, aesthetic, political, humorous, deeply moving, self-questioning, self-reflexive, steeped in memory, traditional and experimental. Yes, it does ask something of us. It is brief but not in the way of sound-bites and camera shots. Its brevity asks for our attention, our wrestling with meaning, our responses. Poetry is capable of opening up a thousand possibilities and counter possibilities in the human mind.

But still, why do poets do it? And *Australian* poets, far from the centre of cosmopolitan literary cultures (this isn’t cultural cringe, it’s reality), and two centuries out from Shelley’s legendary pronouncement that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The motivations are multiple of course, but in reading through these volumes I want to investigate what they reveal as the main spurs to poetry writing and publishing in twenty-first century Australia, and to ask how – if – the culture is challenged and transformed by such writing. Does poetry make anything happen?

It seems to me that what we encounter, in the private and public impulses of contemporary Australian poetry, is an engagement with aesthetics and the craft; politics; metaphysics and ontology; and love, sex and the body. These impulses interweave, and in some of the truly fine poetry being written today in Australia we find several strands at work simultaneously. And always there is the pressure of unique, individual (though sometimes, rarely, collaborative) voices.

### **Aesthetics: craft, language, the medium**

Australia boasts poetic crafters who have dazzled the world. Les Murray is recognised and lauded across Europe, in India and, more ambivalently, at

home. *Fredy Neptune*, a blockbuster combining story, character and a loose-boned plot with an idiosyncratic aesthetics, draws many admirers and perhaps just as many detractors. To call Murray's language "Australian" is to set more than one dingo amongst the sheep. Suffice it to say that when Fredy leaves the farm "outside Dugong" and heads out for adventure into the early twentieth century pre-war world, the irreverent, humorous and demotic is set loose:

Soon after, the Kaiser came on board  
with crowds of heel-clickers. He wore a resentful snobby look,  
electric whiskers in his pink grandpa face, and a helmet like a finial  
off a terrace house. We'd to change our caps, he said,  
and put on fezes. We were now the Turkish Navy.  
Enver Pasha had a haemorrhoid look on him, at that part. (14)

Wearing its historic and cultural knowledge lightly, even jauntily, *Fredy Neptune* takes its aesthetics seriously and subtly, submerging it into the stream of narrative, the long, conversational lines spinning a yarn which is expansive enough to entertain, but which can deepen, almost imperceptibly, into horror. Two stanzas after Fredy's disrespectful meeting with the pink grandpa Kaiser, he watches a group of Turkish women being entertained by unidentified foreign men:

Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it.  
The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance –  
then pouf! they were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames,  
whopping and shrieking. (15)

Aesthetics here is at the service of inquiry, through language, into personal and national identity, into gender, and into human ethics. The notion of cosmopolitanism is here being stretched and played with in multiple ways, as the German Australian proletarian *hochstapler* Fredy steps into the wide world. Many do not concur with, or even have nightmares about Murray's ideology, as they see it, but the poet can write. His language is chock-a-block with the colloquialisms of place and time. The long prose-like lines are limber and rhythmically buoyant, embracing a cosmos of places – Dugong, Messina, Constantinople, the Dardanelles, the Russian Front, Shanghai, Cairo, Berlin, LA and Hollywood – and languages, as Fredy tells his story. In his "Afterword" Murray laughs, as he so often does, at "the lofty class-terminology of literary studies" as unable to cope with the poem's "defiantly proletarian" language.

Nevertheless, in fatherly protective mode he worries that his book is “vulnerable to the control which jargon seeks to impose” (267). Ah, jargon. That most damning of words from a poet’s mouth. As a literary critic I would only reply by accepting the *other* invitation of Murray’s “Afterword,” to approach the poetry without the author “instructing people how to read it or interpret it” (267).

Thanks Les, for that freedom. *Fredy Neptune* is indeed “your brand-new myth,” and it adds to the potency and reach of Australian language in a multiple of ways, proudly drawing with it Murray’s “first language ... that of Australian rural workers and small farmers” into “unlicensed disobediences, fresh imageries, fresh turns of speech and thought” (269). But give us a break, poet. Don’t make it a competition all the time between your authentic farm-speak and that “standard Bohemian high vernacular” which you say despises your language. Surely your own work is evidence that those two old war-horses have been mingling in each other’s paddocks for a while now. You are one of those who let them loose, giving each new vigour.

That cornucopia of randomness, multiple paths, languages and characters which is Murray’s verse novel stands in counterpoint to the aesthetics of David Malouf’s poetry in *Typewriter Music*. Most readers know Malouf as a fine novelist – a poetic novelist – rather than a poet. In these poems his language is distilled, prismatic, graceful. It probably qualifies in that category of “high culture” disparaged by Murray, for here we have a world of wine, music, visual beauty, nature as passionately Edenic: “Grace notes, promissory / glimpses. Could paradise / be a colour?” (2). This is a world where language is used to conjure up beauty from simplicity, “the crisp air a scent / of last month’s pears in straw, sheets folded on their laundry smell / of soap and sky...” (5). It’s a world you might want to inhabit, but know you can’t, except perhaps momentarily in these sensuous gem-like poems.

Brian Edwards is also a seasoned poet, fiction writer and literary critic. His knowledge of language and language games is evident, and in fact is the theme of many of his poems in *The Escape Sonnets*. After Malouf’s lovely “pears in straw,” we read Edwards’ witty and ontologically suggestive “Just Another Pear Tree Poem”:

How many languages does a pear tree speak?  
Chetwynd’s *Dictionary of Symbols* goes from ‘pattern’  
to ‘pearl’. Pear is pearl without the ‘l’.  
What does it take to justify a place?  
‘Apple’, you may be sure, is there,  
enshrined in Christian iconography,  
bedecked with decking.

But if, as the story goes, The Fall from grace,  
into knowledge, into language, holds offer of Redemption,  
what better fruit figure to signify a chance  
than a pear, almost pearl,  
yellow and green, smooth,  
shaped like a breast, like a body,  
a source? (104).

Edwards, a poet after all, throws his lot in with language, but with a wry gesture of hope towards what might be beyond language and signification – Redemption, grace, justification. It is hardly a manifesto, more a witty desire that language might be transcended, but not before it honours the pleasures of the material world – the pear, the breast, the body.

Christopher Kelen̄ who lives and works in Macau deploys his language in the service of place and time, those material realities he seeks, haltingly, sometimes diffidently, to enter. The poetry of *Dredging the Delta* is supple and reflexive, fitted to the waterways and tidal movements of Macau and Hong Kong and beyond, to China. There is a reserved, observing wit to Kelen's poems which are accompanied by his own anarchic but contained sketches. There is a double action to the poetry, the fittingness of observation of place, and "the unfitting of pieces":

ashore I am  
as stray shipping come

part of the wall, part of the paper

a doorway painted red  
of birds raucous

streets end in harbour, mast, grimy moon

on all fours find me  
dot to the day

the town comes apart  
in my hands ("The World is a Wedding" 11).

A deconstructing aesthetics is at work here, a conjoining of the traditions of the lyric with a much more brooding, dirty eye. Language gets pared and precise in this aesthetic which does not want to simply lyricise:

this is the city of charcoal fume trapped  
how many last breaths have been in this cause?

still they're building  
I can't think what could stop them

but while I have breath  
I will witness. ("incense is the rice of the dead" 22)

The language here is almost Blakean: watching, noting, pared, judging, but unlike Blake never judgemental. Beneath the slim, cut lines there is a plangent, elegiac appeal to forces which might be moral, but which are in no hurry:

the moral note which air holds high  
fixed stare

there's gridlock on a bridge of light

too much colour  
too much rhythm to the sea,  
this grinding glare of day's still middle  
sweat of the year's

and ambling centuries let slide... ("where the long beach was" 44)

Could this be considered political? There is an astuteness of judgement infusing the verse, but it is certainly not political poetry, if by that is meant a poetry which seeks primarily to awaken, even direct the reader to issues of injustice, the violence of history, and the need for change. Reading Kelen's seductive, witty verse, one knows that humans bring about change, but that all effects will slide seaward, subject to "ambling centuries" and the processes and layerings of air and sea and time...

## Politics and Poetry

Anita Heiss's *I'm not racist, but* is most definitely political poetry. It is a volume to set your head spinning. Heiss, a Wiradjuri woman, writes poetry which is overt, in-your-face, uncompromising. Here, race politics are uppermost, akin to those of Murri poet and songman Lionel Fogarty, but less concerned with the politics of language. By this I mean that the genres and linguistic forms

of the poetry lack originality, even as they pack a punch because of their political stand.

*You're sorry! You're sorry!! You're sorry!!!*

Well not half as fucken sorry  
as I am  
at having to listen to you  
in my office  
at writers festivals  
at dinner parties  
after lectures. ("Apologies" 1)

This is the opening poem of *I'm not racist, but*. There is humour built into the genre of diatribe which catches the ear with its paradoxes, its listings. The "you" being addressed is white Australia, obviously, and we better fucken listen. Well, yes, I'll listen. But I wonder how widely or how well this sub-genre of poetry/abuse or shouting will be listened to? There is no doubt that such a stance comes from unbelievably gauche meetings between racial others, with white do-gooders unloading their "spiritual experiences / at Uluru," never having had "the opportunity / to hug / a blackfella" (3). Yet to ask that question again: does poetry make anything happen? What will this poetry make happen? For whom?

Part 11 of Tom Shapcott's *The City of Empty Rooms* is a suite of political poems which work through a slow-burning white heat anger about Australia's political present. In poems such as "The Ballad of Razor Wire," "Creative Writing Class," "The Unwanted" and "Seven Refugee Poems," Shapcott proves himself one of our more astute poetic critics – along with J. S. Harry, Jennifer Maiden and the late and much missed John Forbes – of current-day horrors. In the second of the refugee poems, "Illumination," Shapcott's precise, scouring voice states simply:

Tonight, on that TV coverage of abandoned refugees  
Behind razor wire threatening the Xenophobia of Mr Howard  
And the paperwork of Mr Ruddock  
I saw the young man raise his left hand in despair.  
'Brother', I thought, and my complacency burned  
in the small illumination. (37)

This is poetry as protest, speaking from the position of so many Australians caught in the grip of political realities they cannot believe, or believe in.

While some may dismiss the stance as middle-class guilt or impotence, surely the poetry in its eloquence is making something happen, voicing a strong impulse for political change. A poetic how to vote card? An act of prayer which can well be a prelude to many actions? Itself a truthful, passionate action.

## Love, Sex and the Body

Another, very different kind of arena in which poetry makes things happen is that of the body, and sexuality, though this of course is also a political arena. Terry Jaensch and Cyril Wong have produced a hard-hitting collaborative volume entitled *Excess Baggage and Claim*. That Australian wizard of sexual confrontation, Christos Tsiolkas, applauds the volume saying “these poems are odes to longing and desire, sung at 4am from the back bar of an impossible city where the borders have yet to be created and have yet to be dismantled.” The setting is never pinned down but is various sites in Singapore, the characters gay men enacting or failing to enact their fantasies, racial and sexual politics rumbling often ominously below the surface wit:

To keep my cock limp I recite poetry. In  
this heat endless, availability and relative  
safety it pays to sharpen one’s mind, if

not to stiffen one’s resolve then to let it lie –  
knowingly ... (“Karaoke Booth 2” 29)

Now *there’s* something that poetry makes happen, or not happen. Quite a lot of the poetry in this volume is confrontational, placing before us not just the body, but the violence of desire, the longing and need of the characters. The final stanza of “Do you still dream of that night?” presents the image of a young boy, victim of incest, pincered bodily and emotionally by a father,

a man who insisted he loved him  
again and again

till there was no choice but to feel it  
surge from the center of him,  
springing free like an animal out of a fire. (49)

The language is spare and dramatic. There is moral grief, but the focus of anger or disgust is not simply the father as perpetrator. There is also,



stunningly, some understanding offered toward the man “who insisted he loved him,” even as the child/man looks back, measuring with grief the effects.

In a very different mode, the exquisite *Vertigo: a cantata* by Melbourne poet Jordie Albiston is written in the form of a cantata with a series of aria and choruses, telling of lost love. In lesser hands it may have been yet another mournful and extended love poem. Here, the rhythmic power of the changing verse forms, from the longer, controlled iambic lines of the aria (“in which the formal song serves for extended soliloquy”) to the block like energies of the recitative (“in which the narrative voice alone takes the stage”) captures the reader:

Aria #7

forever forever and forever | I tongue the sounds  
around my mouth as though saying were believing |

it was an enormous day | the old Lear sea intoned  
in peaks its certainty of change | while you and I

placed arrhythmic repeats of all our faith in love  
||: *forever* :||... (15)

The high moment of grief and loss is refigured in the different forms, the language probed and reprobed, to visceral effect; ways of representing the unimaginable loss of love are sought, backwards and forwards, through the different registers of self-pity, loneliness, self-deprecation, stoicism, and finally, a kind of peace, as the solitary singer gives way to the community of the chorus and the realisation that “there / were billions of us in // millions of queues,” all suffering, all needing healing, a reconnecting or life to the present:

... she raised  
her hand! as though we

were one | and laid it  
upon our brow | she

closed our eyes and in thousands of tongues

sung out the sole word  
*Now* |(49)

*Vertigo* can be read at one sitting, and needs to be – a formal, dignified, trenchant year’s experience of lost love articulated in a musicality of language which embodies but also transforms the pain and grief threatening to annihilate.

And now for something completely different, but still related to love, sex and the body, we have Geoff Page’s funny, irreverent, black-tinged *Lawrie and Shirley: the final Cadenza (a movie in Verse)*. In clipped, bouncy rhyming lines we are introduced to the autumnal phase of two aging singles, slightly used, slightly needy, heat-seeking at the local dance club:

The ladies sometimes dance in pairs  
but men, it’s clear, are much preferred.

And so they halt their talk and smile  
and see that it was never chance ...

as Lawrie, with his eyes, is asking  
I wonder if you’d like to dance?

4. EXTERIOR NIGHT. The carpark now ...  
with soundtrack still from opening shot.

Lawrie’s arm around a waist  
suggests they’re headed for the cot. (5–6)

This is a love poem, a Canberra poem, a satiric look at late-life, suburban sex and love. Lawrie Wellcome’s choice of a woman this night, from among the widows and divorcees at the dance, is Shirley – “I’m in my seventies but, hey, / so far it seems to feel OK.” – who invites him home to her “snug retirement flat.” We meet the sons and daughters and grandchildren, wince at the bruised world of family life, wince again at the children’s condescension at their mother’s “playing around.” The poem is timely – a poem for baby-boomers perhaps – a biting, funny, groan-inducing romp through old-age and its sad, noble limits:

We had them both in bed forthwith  
but that would not be quite the style.

Better hear them through a window  
with Shirley’s Mantovani strings

than get too close and re-discover  
the sheer mundanity of things –

the way their faces sag somewhat  
with all the coarsenesses of age,

the way their necks are withering.  
Young readers shouldn't turn the page. (31–2)

One of the thrills in reading this very readable verse is in trying to catch the exact register, or rather the multiple registers in one short passage such as this. The inescapable withering of old age is blackly and clear-sightedly given to us, but so too is a certain dignity and beauty to the protagonists “moving to a different music / against the circle of the dance” (33). You care about these characters in this, their “final cadenza.”

### Poetry with ghosts and angels

Which brings us to death, and related issues: metaphysics, ghosts and angels. Poetry has for so long been the medium of eulogy, epitaph, scripture, memory and loss. Australian mouths that have never uttered poetry are often surprised at finding themselves full of it at funerals, or quoting it in consolation letters. Aileen Kelly's superb, almost rap-like rhythms in “All down darkness” offer a kind of anti-ritual, a hymn to death or dissolution:

Darkness rises  
hub of the filament's arc.  
Here is unstoppable blood, the punctured wrists,  
the gaped chestcavern.  
Darkness. Strike it.  
Darkness answer,  
play the prophet.  
It does not answer. (31)

Is it an “anti-ritual” or words for a very human, contemporary ritual? There is a terror in the voice here, but also an insistence on something being given, or given back, from the darkness. There is at once a gauging of darkness and its power to make us more than bow down, *and* a plucky human insistence that this must be answered for, that justice should always be sought even in the very jaws of violence and death. Easy sentiments in the wrong hands, but here they convince and strengthen in context.

In Kelly's glorious ballad "Next field" the language sings with a beautiful poise and openness to the energies of being alive, even as "Fear climbs me / upwards from the soil / tendrils grope me." This is a harvesting song of sorts: corn is cut, "fallen, bagged, carted," and the poem broadens out into a contemplation on the brevity of life, a prayer rising up from the earthiness of human need:

Lift your feet woman.  
Shake it, the dust  
the shadow of crumbled chaff.  
Take back the scattered stalks,  
weave a Brighid cross  
and pray her in, the healer  
the singer and the crafter:  
how we work the straw,  
how it glows well within itself  
a hearthlight. (95)

That's the kind of poetry I would like to have written myself. Brokenness is a fact, in the dust and tiredness – "Lift your feet woman" – which ushers in prayer and hope. What the poetry makes happen here is prayer inextricable from daily labour and fear of mortality, but with no skerrick of self-pity. Rather, confidence in embodied and transcendent possibilities is evoked, a beauty which "glows well within itself / a hearthlight." These poems do not represent the scope and richness of Aileen Kelly's volume, *The Passion paintings (poems 1983–2006)*. There is much much more to be enjoyed.

The wonderful poetry of Greek Australian Dimitris Tsaloumas is full of eulogies, though they are different to most. Though infused with memory, nostalgia, and the approach of death, they are also muscular and decisive. They weigh in strong hands a life-time of absence and of living far from home, but they also refigure – in masculine, sensuous lines – the glory of what was felt and savoured over a long life:

My nights forbid questioning,  
please come before dark  
and come clean. What is it makes you think of me across  
the waste plains of time?

*the lithesome limbs*  
*the chestnut fall of hair*

*over the curving throat  
the cross between the breasts  
her laughter – all as it was*

Yet if I let you in,  
if I sing, it is but my due  
to your stubborn absence. (“Come before Dark”)

Tsaloumas’ 2007 volume, one of ten he has published, is entitled *Helen of Troy and other poems*. This particular poem may well be read as addressed to Helen, that apocalyptic beauty, but it can also be read as a paean to memory, to past love and pleasure, and perhaps most importantly to the sustaining powers of the poet. The male poet. After all, across the “waste plains of time” it is the aging poet and his poetry which have conjured up the wilfulness and desirability of she who remains stubbornly absent. You can hear her taunting laughter.

Tsaloumas has a gift for hauntedness conjoined with earthy observation and humour. In “The unrepentant dead,” which is translated from the Greek, the speaker leaves the wake for his old dead neighbour and difficult friend, “lest he should say something to embarrass me.” Yet he doesn’t escape the taunts of his friend:

He spoke to me later though, towards midnight,  
his voice as usual hoarse  
through the side of his mouth.  
‘You feared that I might shame you’  
he said, ‘as if we never shared together bread  
and salt. (58)

How good for Australian readers to taste the wit of this ghostly exchange, to take in something of the Greek world of heavenly shades and earthly communities entangled with such edgy and humorous decorum. Old protestant bifurcations – of God and human, heaven and hell, afterwards and now, spirit and earth – simply melt away.

There is more self-consciousness and anxiety in the voice of Petra White’s poem “For Dorothy.” White dedicates the poem to her grandmother Dorothy Marchesi, 1908–2005.

Ninety-six and nearly dead of a snapped hip but they bob  
in the shrinking pool of her vision, her seven children.

They peer into her as if into a plug-hole, grasp at her life  
where it trembles in her moth-eyes ... (44)

White's human and natural landscapes are keenly observed, not haunted exactly, but aware of the strangeness in the familiar, seeking it out, unthreading it: kangaroos "emerge in the dissolving light as if they carry / the Earth in their skins...their telepathic here now / group hesitation. As if something's deciding / whether to let you in, or through..." ("Kangaroos" 33); the highway across the Nullabor, beside the Bight "sheer as the path of the whales / who sailed straight down from space to shape / the plains with their bodies, their starry vision // rolled in sand and crusted in salt." ("Night-driving" 29). There is a transformatory effect in White's exploration of place, but it's an earthy magic, a feeding of the land with "As if ... as if," and being fed in return.

Something of the same earthed imaginary is at work in the very different poetry of Brendan Ryan's *A Paddock in his head*. "Catholic daydreams" is spankingly realistic in its notation of a Catholic farm childhood:

The kitchens of large families  
humming with Hail Marys  
the wind, like a semaphore

tunnels down chimneys.  
My father's dairy farming fingers  
slip down the beads

as if each bead was a grip  
on the Joyful Mystery  
of ten children ...

To some ears this may be odd, this calm, almost prosaic conjoining of farm life in the paddocks, working with the cows in the dairy, the ordinariness of labouring to survive, with the ancient rituals of an imported religion. But the very acceptance of it, the way the learned rituals and the presence of the land both seep into the consciousness of the speaker, is what is fascinating:

Silences you enter  
when the last run has just left the dairy.

Something stops you – wind and light shifting.  
On the boundary fence, cypress trees darkening.

All around you ... ("Naringal Landscape" 63)

Ryan's is an earthy mysticism populated by farmers and farmers' wives and farmers' children: "Our photographs were out of focus / fringes, innocently crooked, / like cow shit on a farmer's elbow at Mass / we couldn't get away from / other farmers in hotel lounges" ("Tourist in My Home Town" 61). So, *A Paddock in his head* is as much about dreams of escape as it is the realisation that the dreams take you back, again and again: "He takes the paddock into the city / imagines the streets in knee-length rye grass, / a single eucalypt, over-arching the sky" ("A Paddock in His Head" 54).

Poetry, as the title of Mark Reid's volume suggests, is *A difficult faith*. Reid was not specifically referring to poetry in his title, or perhaps he was, after all. In his tight, pithy lyrics one finds a struggle to eschew the merely Romantic, a probing at the surface of things as the poet seeks more than what is visible to "the prostrate eye" ("A Difficult Faith" 12). There's something foreboding, often, in this search:

In the movement towards,  
the movement away,  
the tides of the body,  
an encrypted rhythm.

The citizen has a heart,  
raw & visceral ... ("Civil Sonnet" 57)

Reid's poetry is its own kind of encryption, a worrying over the loss of the self, a struggling to evoke the energy and drive of the body against time and impotence. This often creates a paradoxical motion:

You find squares of sunlight,  
the four panes of a sash window  
laid out on the tablecloth.

So you make a shadow;  
as if to confirm the body  
you reach with your hand  
& make a shadow. ("The Desire of Angels #2" 29)

And this is the way it is with poetry, as with human subjectivity: a continual seeking of the right word, the flawless signifier, a probing at the edges of the material world in order to catch angels. You might glimpse them – angels – in

the squares of sunlight; you reach out, needing to affirm what? Your own body's solidity, "the hand itself / imposed on light." This is a necessary imposition, a mortal blocking of the light, just as it is also a desire to share with angels this place "into which light streams / through clear defenceless glass" (29). Reid's is a brooding, uneasy art, open to epiphany, constructing it, but also measuring its constant retreat.

Australian poetry is flourishing in 2007. Its more experimental, postmodern language practitioners – Pam Brown, Ken Bolton, PiO, John Tranter – are not represented this year. It is a year for the consummate craft of the elders; for the terse and earthed metaphysics of many new voices; and for colloquial Australian wit. Some would vote with Dennis Haskell's "Ars Poetica" and its optimism about poetic writing as "the hologram torch of language, shining on our lives." But I prefer the humorous, unresolved tensions of the poem's first stanza, taking "incompleteness" to be what, thankfully, keeps the poets reaching beyond the world of words:

The quick brown fox fucks the lazy metaphor  
stressed that anything from the keyboard is absurd.  
Even the keys are depressed. Hoarse and vexed  
from thinking "*Il n'y a pas de hors texte,*"  
how can we cope with the world of words  
without voting for its incompleteness? ("Ars Poetica" 5)

## POETRY RECEIVED 2006–2007

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

\*Albiston, Jordie. *Vertigo*. Elwood, VIC: John Leonard Press, 2007.

Berry, Robert James. *Sky Writing*. Charnwood, ACT: Ginninderra Press, 2006.

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\*Croft, Julian. *Ocean Island*. Elwood, VIC: John Leonard Press, 2006.

\*Dawe, Bruce. *Sometimes Gladness. Collected Poems 1954–2005*. Sixth Ed. Melbourne: Pearson Education Australia, 2006.

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