Deakin Research Online

This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30033809

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2010, Poetry Australian Foundation.
Ghostly Subjects

by Maria Takolander
Published by Salt

ISBN 978-1-84713-540-0
RRP €12.99

REVIEWED BY CASSANDRA ATHERTON

In Ghostly Subjects, Maria Takolander invites the reader to view the world from the other side of the looking glass. Her exploration of the uncanny, the reflections and shadows that she conjures, are haunting. In fact, after reading Ghostly Subjects, it is impossible to look at the world in quite the same way. This is because Takolander is a magician with words. Something as ordinary as a tic tac or a game of canasta, becomes weighted with meaning.

Takolander’s poetry has been widely published in Australian journals and newspapers since she began publishing in 2004 and her unique poetic voice has not gone unnoticed. Her poetry has been represented in The Best Australian Poems every year from 2005 to 2009 and shortlisted for the Australian Book Review Poetry Prize. Takolander also writes fiction, creative non-fiction and literary criticism and it is fascinating to read the ways in which she can artfully explore a theme across all of these disciplines. This is most evident in her book of literary criticism, Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground (Peter Lang 2007) which investigates, among many other things, the allure of magical realism and the possibility of its political agenda. Her passion for magical realism is at the core of Ghostly Subjects.

Takolander’s Lessons Learnt from Literature highlights Jorge Luis Borges as one of her literary mentors. His erudite disambiguation in texts such as Labyrinths informs the entire collection. Takolander’s first book of poetry, Narcissism, was published by Whitmore Press in 2005 and the myth of Narcissus, with its emphasis on reflection and vanity, is an apt metonymy for this collection, beginning with ‘Geography Lessons’. The third stanza of this poem emphasises a secret and forbidden self-love at the core of a series of sublime moments:

How a river can feel small and dangerous, calling you by your secret name, the one only your mirror knows.

Takolander binds the immortality of nature: mountains, forests, rivers and oceans, to the transience of human life. There is envy and anger when the narrator tries to present the unpresentable. The repetition of the word ‘How’ as the first word of each of the four tercets is compelling:

“How a mountain can forsake you for the sky”,
“How a forest can feed you with its air” and
“How an ocean can rage at the moon.”
The long vowel sound of the word ‘How’ gives each statement a depth and longing; a kind of howl in the wilderness. This emptiness is replaced with ‘colossal anger’ as the second person address commands ‘you’ to take it all ‘personally’, breathing in the forest’s air and exhaling the ocean’s rage. The teasing use of the word ‘think’ in the line ‘until you think it might be enough’ alludes to self-delusion. There is no sustenance in trickery.

_Ghostly Subjects_ is divided into four sections: Geography, Chemistry, Biology and Culture. It reads like a high school timetable; Takolander is providing us with lessons in Science and the Arts. But there is nothing elementary about her lessons. Takolander is instructing us to re-think everything we have ever understood about ourselves and our relationship to the world. She presents us with a series of dismembered images, foreign and yet strangely familiar; a finely crafted exploration of the uncanny.

It is most appropriate then, that Frankenstein’s monster, is invoked in _Ghostly Subjects_. His body is created by the sewing together of a series of body parts from the Charmed house, his mind charged by a lightning bolt. He is alive but not composed of corpses. He is born out of death; a rebirth of sorts. And similarly, Takolander conjures Victor Frankenstein, his monster and their creator, Mary Shelley, in her poetry suite. She is building on a tradition of creators both imaginary and literary: Frankenstein created the monster, Mary Shelley created the narrative, Takolander creates the poem in which they are reborn.

In this eponymous poem, Takolander gives voice to Mary Shelley’s fears in order to explore, among other things, the monstrous. Shelley, like Frankenstein’s monster, is cobbled together. But she is composed of ‘lessons learnt from literature’. If Shelley is ‘haunted! Not by death but by life’, Takolander is haunted by the lives and oeuvres of Shelley, Kafka, Plath and Borges, the titles of the poems in this suite, and Kubrick in the suite entitled ‘Alien Signals: Poems After Stanley Kubrick’. These luminaries reach out to her from beyond the grave and they become Takolander’s literary mentors. She resurrects them on the page, breathing new life into their work. This is an exciting approach in which the voice of the poet and a series of literary masters become fused and diffused. One minute Takolander appears alongside her ghostly counterparts and then, she is indefinably gone, resting in the spaces between the letters on the page. She is everywhere and nowhere in these poems:

_Just when you think_
_I’m surrounded I’ll escape_

_Into thin air._

‘Lessons Learnt from Literature’ is an engaging series of poems in _Ghostly Subjects_ and the poem ‘Mary Shelley’, with its focus on the monstrousness of life, stands as a kind of signature poem for this collection. The word ‘flesh’ is used three times in ‘Mary Shelley’, as if, somehow, the narrator is trying to make sense of her humanity. But this flesh and blood, this body, is merely a shell. ‘I was given to this body as haphazardly! As the monster of Frankenstein’. Her body is unfamiliar to her, but her mind is ‘like fire’.

The layering in this poem is worth noting. Shelley writes literature and, in turn, becomes literature. In this poem Takolander presents
Shelley as poignantly aware of the potential of her life to become an enduring myth:

I grew in my dying mother. I grew
From the absence of my dying father,
Who lost himself in a milky instant
When he gave to life thinking
He was giving to himself,
Unaware he had forfeited everything.

Yet there is a baby under the sand
And a husband under the sea,
And there are these stone walls
Within which I live haunted
Not by death but by life,
Which wants nothing
But to keep on being born.

She understands that everything is regenerated and yet aches for an end to her misery and alienation. Takolander's poem, 'Misogyny' is also Shelleyan in its concerns about revivification and in the narrator's utterances:

I am not beautiful
But monstrous:
Science fiction.

Regeneration is no miracle.

Takolander has tapped into the deep despair that Shelley felt towards the end of her life when her husband and closest friends had all died, leaving her alone in the world. Takolander also points to the fascinating doubling in the famous birth and death of the two Mary Wollstonecrafts. In giving birth to her daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft's life was extinguished like the 'fire' to which Takolander refers. Life and birth are irrevocably connected and never more so in this instance.

Her poem, 'Prosthetic' is equally Frankensteinian. This time the creations are literally 'fucked' by their creator and the flesh is 'their pink-skinned flesh as fleshy as I his pink-skinned cock!'

He had fucked a couple of his creations, those red-lipped icons to
The enigma of tits and holes.

To clean up, he scooped their insides out
like an abortionist.
Their corpses barely bothered him. After all, what could be more
Natural than sex and death?

The sex doll is a perverted image of humanity, a plastic representation of the human form. These corpses are inflated, like their creator's penis, for his pleasure. When he 'explodes' into them, we are reminded that they are 'blow up' dolls; an explosive homonym. The theme of birth is equally warped as the creator breathes life into his creations. Sperm is not life-giving, it is merely 'scooped ... out' of them, a useless mess.

The poems in Chemistry are similarly orgasmic, but in life-affirming ways. This section is shorter than the other sections and intense, like the peak of an orgasm. Sex and death are married to create an intimacy and the waves of the refractory period are felt throughout the rest of the collection. 'Canasta for Lovers' demonstrates the way in which
love can be a game, replete with poker faces. Takolander says, 'your love is angular, a dark, cemetery stranger' and commands the reader to 'Look at your lover that way.' The narrator reminds us that after the 'orgasm of discarding' comes the 'afterglow' of solitude and spite. It is 'enduring' and one must 'endure' these feelings. The emphasis on postcoital reflection, is one in 'Minimalism and the Abstract,' that the poet finds she must excuse her'self after the 'orgasms of words:

Love corporeal and tragic

Orders this collage rushes
These electronic drafts orgasms
Of words from which post-coital
I must excuse myself.

The use of the word 'I' at the end of many of the lines of poetry is one of Takolander's signatures. It not only creates an emphasis on the first person, but the placement of this pronoun at the end of the line also gives solemnity, rather than egotism, to the 'I.' From something as mellifluous as the line, 'but we share this music you and I' in 'Minimalism and the Abstract' to the clawing desperation of 'Epithalamium' with its 'This thing of darkness, I,' this technique ensures that the first person pronoun reaches across the page, silently filling the rest of the blank line. This darkness in 'Epithalamium' can be juxtaposed with the shimmering silver of 'Sarellites' and the bride and groom references. 'You' and 'me.' blend in this poem so neither has dominance; they become one entity in the way they merge so that 'It's you and me lost' and 'it's beautiful.'

However, there is something more than truth and beauty in Takolander's poetry. Her representations of life and art in Ghostly Subjects are darker than a Shakespearean mirror that Hamlet holds up to nature; they can be likened, instead, to the taint of a mirror, with its shadows and inconsistencies. McCain defines the taint as,

the thin layer of silver backing on the glass that gives the glass its special reflectivity, that makes it a mirror and not a window. The taint of the mirror ... makes it possible to see differently ... [it] provides us with a metonymical relation to ourselves or mediates our metonymical relation to distant objects.

The taint of Takolander's mirror is gritty. This is particularly significant because without the grittiness of the taint, no image would be possible, it would simply slide off, too slick to reflect. In Ghostly Subjects this thin layer of metal behind the glass becomes a silver backbone for the collection, engaging in illusion and practicing legerdemain.

The reflective qualities of the mirror, like Takolander's poetry, appear to reflect a faithful image and yet the way the light bends to create the reflection means that we are viewing a metonymical image that has been recreated. This, in itself, is a reality check, as Takolander reminds us that there is no monolithic reality that, indeed, can be checked. Her poem, 'Reality Check' emphasises the way one person's words can become 'embedded' in another's, just as one body becomes embedded in another's during sex.

There is no way of defining where one person begins and the other ends; that is reality:

I also told you
that this was a love poem, and it is, your words embedded in mine and your last weighting me.
down to this ground as surely as any gravestone.
Reminiscent of Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Takolander asserts that, 'love makes death more certain and tragic'. It is a theme that is explored in the poem, 'Satellites'. Looking into a mirror, is like looking at a photograph in the way that we see a reversal of ourselves; we never see what another sees when they look at us. A photograph is often seen as a mirror of the world; a faithful representation of what we see and yet it is also subjective:

Close your eyes and  
Let me photograph you.  
Touch your eyes and  
coating yourself in silver  
like brine  
let me steal your soul.  
Let me look into your mirror  
when it doesn't know.

The second person address adds an intimacy to the poem as the reader is positioned as voyeur. These two lovers are soul mates. Takolander invokes photographs, mirrors and even eyes to emphasise the gaze in this poem and yet she inverts this when she tells her lover to 'close your eyes', and only wants to peer into his mirror 'when it doesn't know'. This moment is heightened by the 'silver' that coats her lover 'like brine'; he personifies the tain of the mirror. But the narrator sees past these illusions. She closes her eyes to them. There is a fragility and vulnerability in this self-imposed 'blind[ness]' as the lovers are 'strangers together'.

The poems in *Ghostly Subjects* are explorations into the shadowlands. Takolander invites us to look into the tain of her mirror to discover what lies beneath its seductive lustre. In this way, she ushers in a new era for a cerebral grittiness in Australian poetry. In *Ghostly Subjects*, Takolander is a Burtonian Alice, exploring the darker side of human nature.