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**Terror Down Under? A review  
of Todd Turner's *Woodsmoke*  
(Black Pepper Press, 2014) and  
Melinda Smith's *Drag Down to  
Unlock or Place an Emergency  
Call* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2013)**

FOR MANY INHABITANTS OF THIS great southern continent, sublime fear forms part of a healthy respect for the environment. As we are often reminded, Australia is a place of environmental extremes, deadly creatures, and vast, flat distances. For those of us that are non-indigenous, this dormant terror can also take the form of a dreadful certainty—a firm knowledge that, even if we have been born in this country, we remain its trespassers. Indeed, this may be the only land that we know; and yet, if we were to be confronted by its spirit or will, we may feel that this land might resent or reject us. It is therefore not surprising that much Australian poetry entertains some thematic consideration of place. Often, Australian poets engage with a beautiful scene: a creek that twists around a gum forest, or the iconic larrikin image of a cheeky sulphur-crested cockatoo. But among these tropes there also appear the worldlier concerns of ecopoetry. Poems in this genre are often imbued with a sense of approaching doom, a sense that forebodes the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

While conventionally Gothic approaches to place are now uncommon—at least of the kind that Henry Lawson and Kendall might have written—the hauntings, doublings, and uncanny elements that pervade these early Australian poets’s works have arguably been revived by a new generation. Known as the “new lyricists,” this group of Australian poets has been celebrated in two anthologies, both published in 2011: *Thirty Australian Poets* and *Young Poets: An Australian Anthology*.<sup>1</sup> But the emergence of Gothic traits in this generation perhaps also suggests a return to the Romantic tradition as well, for these poets, like the Romantics, seem to envision themselves as sincere, intimate individuals who reject larger techno-capitalist narratives of progress—except that, where the Romantics rejected the Industrial Revolution, this new generation abjures the *digital* revolution. However, it is more likely that, at least in regard to the articulation of Australian place, these Gothic concerns never really left. Indeed, many Australian poets *outside* of this new generation utilise aspects of the gothic on occasion, including the poets I shall review here. Perhaps it is the case that there is no other way to conceive of this *unheimlich* or “unhomely” home than gothically.

In keeping with the sense of anachronism often associated with the antipodes, this review focuses on collections that have been published in 2014, and may thus be regarded as dated. Yet, since the reach of contemporary Australian poetry is limited, it is also very likely that I am introducing these collections to the reader for the first time. The first of these collections—Todd Turner’s debut *Woodsmoke*—is set largely in the rural Australia of the poet’s youth.<sup>2</sup> The title suggests a transformation from one state to another—one that is both mystical and practical, alluding to the “smokiness” of a chimera and the commonplace burning of wood. Over and over in the collection, Turner’s poems underscore nature’s inexorable process of entropy. The collection opens with a poem titled “Shelling Peas,” which describes the poet’s farmhouse routine thus:

Snap off the ends, tear open the strip,  
split the hull and with a run of the thumb  
rake the peas into the pot. Repeat.

Descriptions of an eerie familiarity with death, decay, and life’s transformative processes recur throughout *Woodsmoke*, whether the characters are weeding, observing bush fires, or wandering in abandoned lots. In “Homecoming,” the poet offers details about the sudden death of his brother and his trip home from England for the funeral:

I wanted to shut his eyelids  
 but they wouldn't close. I placed my hand  
 over the scar the seatbelt made [...]

Dad invited the driver to sit beside us in the pew.  
 That was eighteen years ago. Mum, she was gone  
 within six. She rests alongside her youngest.

My father, there's a spot, we'll lay him there too.

At times in Turner's collection, the poet expresses a macabre complacency that appears typical of the affective experience of rural Australia. This is a latent but ever-present melancholy that suggests habitual terror, hardness, and emotional distance, all of which seem the almost inevitable characteristics of a people whose lives are tied to a rugged landscape. This profound sense of unease is amplified in Turner's "Fieldwork," a poem for which the poet won the Cecily Jean Drake-Brockman poetry prize in 2013, and received high commendations from the Blake poetry prize judges in 2011. "Fieldwork" begins with the poet's discovery and subsequent burial of a dead magpie. While this process begins tenderly, the poet goes on to exhume the decomposed bird with all the enthusiasm of a pre-teen boy:

I stepped back and stood staring  
 into the hollowed out eyes, the gone brain,  
 spiralling and turning it upside down,  
 prying the underside with my eye, thumbing  
 and spinning it into a circle thinking,

and even speaking: I know what the cycle  
 serves, but what is being served by  
 the cycle? It's arguable, I know—best  
 to just walk and fall in love with the field,  
 the beloved range of the ubiquitous grass.

In these lines Turner cuts off his own metaphysical question to offer some seemingly pragmatic advice: it is better to love the landscape than to try to understand it, the implication being that the landscape and its complex, beautiful, and dangerous processes of entropy are beyond our comprehension. This attitude highlights the tension of Australian spaces: what is most

frightening about the landscape is not its volatility or danger, but its scale, together with its unknowable quality, which defies any reduction.

Poet Melinda Smith also deals with the unknowable in her latest work, but Smith is in many other ways Turner's opposite: while Turner is a new poet, Smith is well-established. In 2014, Smith bagged the Prime Minister's award for *Drag Down to Unlock or Place an Emergency Call*, a collection that leaves rural Australia far behind, and deals with the terror that arises when the public bleeds into the private in manifold urban, and even digital spaces.<sup>3</sup> The collection is informed by the cultivated culture of emergency and terror that was commonly associated with the 2013-15 Abbott government's sloganism, and the variously sensationalist media responses to it. Adopting the largely disembodied yet authoritative voices of certain public spaces, Smith's poems take place on Cityrail trains, in courtrooms, at hospitals and churches, and even in the digital "non-place" of a Skype conversation. Indeed, the banality of the title of Smith's collection—an unambiguous reference to the "unlock" procedure of the modern-day smartphone—reminds us of the unspoken barriers we must overcome, and the myriad instructions we must follow, so as to engage in acts of communication in modern society.

As a prize-winning collection, *Drag Down to Unlock or Place an Emergency Call* has been the subject of many reviews already. But many of these reviews neglect or underplay the genuineness of Smith's fears for the world—probably due to Smith's glib and playful tone, and the apparent banality of her poems. But Smith considers her poetry to be audience-focused, and identifies as the intention of her work her desire that it be "educating, informing and entertaining... but mostly entertaining" on her professional website. Yet Smith's poetry also demonstrates a confessionalist aim: her poems utilise personal experience to engender public engagement, and thus allow for a kind of catharsis whose effects are sincere. This aim is perhaps most evident in *Drag Down to Unlock or Place an Emergency Call* in the poems "Confess" (which deals with the tensions between the individual and society) and "Song of the Anti-depressant" (which praises modern mental health remedies). But even these revealing and candid poems find more explicit confessionalist precedents in Smith's 2012 collection, *First...Then...: Poems from Planet Autism*,<sup>4</sup> which relates the poet's many difficult experiences coming to terms with her son's autism. In "Confess," though, Smith incorporates material from the political landscape, albeit only ever in an allusive way:

*Information wants to be free*

Tell me  
 Tell the priest  
 Pent up. Repent. Released.

*We the jury have found*  
 Tell a hole in the ground  
 Tell yourself

The italics throughout the poem imply the use of a public voice—one that has some dominion or authority over the individual. “*Information wants to be free*,” for instance—a slogan generally attributed to the writer Stewart Brand—describes the paradox in which information, while having a high value when preserved, becomes less valuable the more it is circulated. So while the authoritative voice speaks on behalf of the information, this information is “free” only when it is more *freely available*.<sup>5</sup> In this way the phrase also expresses an objection to various governments’s surveillance and national security agendas, urging for the freedom of information.

The following lines—which accumulatively instruct the reader to “free” information by “telling” it to various people—thus imitate the ways in which many of us feel compelled to share and express our stories, as well as our personal data. The poem thus reflects shifting notions of personal privacy in the digital era, a period in which an individual’s personal information often circulates or is sold while the individual remains complicit or unaware. Information’s “desire to be free,” therefore, appears morally ambiguous, and in the context of the anaphoric imperatives deployed in the succeeding stanzas of the poem—where the reader is instructed to “tell whoever is in control”—this desire becomes all the more sinister and exploitative.

Of course, the reader is probably expected to identify with the “me” of the poem introduced in line 2, an agent whose curiosity and voyeurism spurs their participation in the information-extraction economy. Smith indicates that this culture of the confession, though, is not created by such twenty-first century phenomena as the digital “overshare;” rather, it has firmer originary roots in a more traditionalist and community-driven command: “Tell the priest.” The truncated, staccato process of the confession—which is limned by the trimeter of “Pent up. Repent. Released”—indicates the repressed status of narrow-minded communities, and sonically indicates that the reader will also “repeat” this programmatic cycle. The

collective voice that follows in “*We the jury*” invokes the confessor’s judgment by their peers, the poem sifting through the layered voyeuristic, religious, literary and legal dimensions of the term “confession.”

Gina Wisker has analysed the confessional poets, of whom Sylvia Plath is exemplary, in terms of their utilisation of aspects of the gothic, referring to confessionalism as a kind of “domestic gothic.”<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps also a useful way to approach Smith’s poetry, which is doggedly “everyday” in its language and thematics, and yet probes for something darker, lying beneath common experience. In “Passengers are reminded,” Smith blends the unwanted intrusion of the train announcement with her anxiety about being late for a funeral:

This service is experiencing a slight delay due to a sick customer at  
Town Hall  
I have been carrying the lilies too long  
This service is experiencing continuing delays due to a sick customer at  
Town Hall  
the petal edges fray to a bruised brown, like old lettuce

Here the euphemistic reference to a “sick customer” glosses over the trauma experienced by another person elsewhere; and it adds a sense of foreboding to the locked-in space of the train. But this claustrophobic outlook is also contrasted with the personal connection signified by the flowers, whose gothic imagery—with their bruised, fraying edges—now symbolises Smith’s own frayed nerves. The poem thus reads as the expression of a private grief, a ventilation of strain by a figure subjected to the commonplace traumas attendant to inhabiting a public space. In this space, public announcements, delays, and the inability of the individual to express their feelings of grief conspire to engender the speaker’s sense of disturbance—and all of this is amplified by the presence of her fellow commuters. Likewise, the allusions to hymns and children’s songs in “Dialogue” are borrowed, banal phrases, intended to exteriorise or “unlock” that which is hidden. For example, witness the following scene of a child being abused by a priest:

incy wincy spider  
here is my handle, here is my  
spout  
the Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not  
want

The child's voice in the dialogue begins with "let me out," which implies—figuratively or literally—that they are locked in a confessional box:

I want to go home  
 it's dark in here  
 I can't feel my feet

But perhaps the most chilling reference woven into Smith's poem is the Anzac Ode "We Will Remember Them"—an allusion here not to the servicemen of war but to the victims of child abuse. The allusion reminds the reader that it is not merely the priest who keeps the child trapped, but a complicit public that turns a blind eye. To "remember" the victims in this way suggests a generation of children "lost" to and traumatised by sexual abuse. And in many ways it might be startling to recall that "Dialogue" is part of a collection previously awarded a prize by a Government sometimes criticised for unjustifiably expressing support for senior figures in the Catholic church with regard to this same issue.<sup>7</sup>

Smith's and Turner's poetry depict Australian spaces that lie on contested ground, spaces in which the individual is never far from harm—whether that threat takes the deceptive form of natural beauty or the banal shape of bureaucracy. The tension of these spaces, Turner suggests, is ubiquitous—an inescapable part of human experience. By contrast, Smith's poetry suggests how the net of banal, often digital language that we continue to spin and circulate is closing in around us, and if not confronted soon, will constitute an emergency situation. But is it right to call these kinds of fears forms of "terror"? It would perhaps be easier to call them "dreads," for they are not unanticipated, but normalised. Indeed, both poets take pains to show how close we live to these fears, and how domestic they have become. Ultimately, I myself can only return to the Freud's oft-cited notion of the *unheimlich*—a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar—to explain them fully. While these gothic experiences might generally be understood to constitute the more terrifying aspects of an individual's daily repression, as well as their incorporation of a postmodern culture stretching back to 1945 (and punctuated by trauma, from the use of the atomic bomb through to the Holocaust), they also seem particular to the Australian experience. After all, Australia has lived with terror for much longer.

## Notes

- 1 Felicity Plunkett (ed.), *Thirty Australian Poets* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2011); and John Leonard (ed.), *Young Poets: An Australian Anthology* (St Kilda: John Leonard Press, 2011).
- 2 Todd Turner, *Woodsmoke* (North Fitzroy: Black Pepper, 2014).
- 3 Melinda Smith, *Pull Down to Unlock or Place an Emergency Call* (World Square: Pitt Street Poetry, 2014).
- 4 Melinda Smith, *First... Then... : Poems from Planet Autism* (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2012).
- 5 See Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at M. I. T.* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987); also see R. Polk Wagner, "Information Wants to be Free: Intellectual Property and the Mythologies of Control," *Columbia Law Review* 103 (2003): 999n14.
- 6 Gina Wisker, "Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic," *Gothic Studies* 6, no 1 (2004): 103-119.
- 7 See, for instance, Barney Zwartz, "Abbott's Response to Child Sexual Abuse by Clergy Angers Victims," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 November, 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/abbotts-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-by-clergy-angers-victims-20131114-2xjpo.html>.