

Sydney Writers' Festival 2006:

A Poetry Overview

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The Red Room Company
'Cabinet of Lost and Found'
Sydney Dance Company foyer,
Sydney Writers' Festival, 2006

Photo: Prudence Upton

A writers' festival is never fun. There are long days, chilly venues suspended over Autumn water (the metaphor of a Houdini aquatic caper is appropriate, not least in terms of struggling elbows), overpriced coffee, overlapping personal highlights. There is trudging, waiting and, sometimes, disappointment.

But the joys, like an opium addiction, rather outweigh any suffering incurred. There was, indeed, much joy to be found in new poetry featured at the 2006 Sydney Writers' Festival. Peter Minter's *Blue grass* and John Tranter's *Urban Myths: 210 poems [new & selected]* arrived in time to enjoy deserved Festival fanfare. Jaya Savige released his debut collection, *latecomers* in 2005 through the Thomas Shapcott Prize. The book has had a second reincarnation this year upon being recognised at the NSW Literary Awards.

Whilst Savige featured in the Red Room Company's 'Poetry Crimes' project last year, there were to be half a dozen more emerging poets recruited for the Company's SWF appearance – transported in a red magician's box to the Festival café. There, the 'Cabinet of Lost and Found' displayed mementoes and a work by each poet, for the duration of the Festival; encouraging an interactive element in the proceedings, and breaking up the favoured panel/launch/reading exposure of poetry at the SWF.

Poems by Ben Michell, Emily Ballou, Alicia Sometimes, Ella Holcombe and Luke Icarus Simon, copied onto cards and arranged in manual library catalogue drawers, walked away in people's hearts and pockets. Michell's 'drive through' is one of those poems that pounds with the ache and wash of a remembered place and time:

nice town that one,
real nice, to drive through.
can yer even remember it's name?
west wyalong mighta been it.

and the birds:
cockatoos galahs
pigeons parrots
birds of all descriptions.

the most torturous
thing was they flew
straight for the flaming
windscreen.
'cause that was wheat country
where the trucks leave
what birds eat
all over the road
when they
drive through
with romance on
their minds
& their hands
in their laps

'Cold Was The Ground' by Alicia Sometimes is similarly heavy with atmosphere, but it is a chilly, foggy one:

dark was the night
Blind Willie Johnson huffs in my ears
weeping into God. How easy to loop
the past into a soundtrack, light digestion
& here's Willie, scratching life into the air
carving out sight & sense in the squall

These are accomplished voices. Included with them in the Cabinet drawers were portable poet bios and inventories of the objects they had donated to the Cabinet: a crushed beer can, a vase, miniature animals and sexy snaps, playing on the poetic morbidities of passers-by (the Cabinet seemed to ask why the writers' festival exists in the first place as a spectacle: why are we drawn to the promise of *live*,

fleshly literati?). In the push and rush of the Festival food and rest stop, the Cabinet was a peaceful shrine and, perhaps most significantly, something of a Trojan horse that allowed emerging poets to take part in the programme.

More senior names like Tranter, nevertheless, could claim their place in the sun this year. Tranter's *Urban Myths* practically causes an eclipse. Appearing in the Festival's 'Poetry Around the Globe 1' panel, which included Gerry Turcotte and Canada's Jan Zwicky, Tranter has ensured that anyone previously unaware of his work (!) now has this omnibus to face up to. The retrospective selection included in *Urban Myths* is more thorough and precise than Tranter's *Selected Poems* (1990). One feels the poet's hand present in the conscious inclusion of extended sequences and careful shaping of subsections, as well as in the sequencing of the book's new content into movements such as 'At the Movies' and 'Europe'. It is, needless to say, a rather intimidating reflection of the last four decades of Australian poetry, and yet, Tranter's work does not present itself in fits and starts of various poetic 'phases'. This is surprising, considering that *Urban Myths* reveals his work as unceasingly driven by formal experimentation; when Tranter has alighted upon a new method, he has produced not one-offs but often series, almost mechanically (in the sense of intention rather than feeling), upon a compositional or structural experiment. Take, for instance, the well-known poems on continental critical identities in Australian settings: 'Leavis at the London Hotel', 'Sartre at Surfers' Paradise', 'Foucault at The Forest Lodge Hotel' or 'Enzensberger at "Exiles" Bookshop'. Each man's presence in Australia prompts a review of his career and a painful moment of self-realisation – for the thinker and for us:

[...] these
are the good times, Australian style,
this has become a new vernacular
and waits for my typewriter to turn it into German.
Europe is a ruined Paradise buried under
books; here, nothing important was promised.
I'm drinking coffee and writing
in English on a piece of crumpled paper;
soon I'll learn the native dialect and ask
Where are the ovens? Is it true that you never
Learned to kill each other? Are you happy?
(Enzensberger at "Exiles" Bookshop')

like the shanty song of the retired fisherman it describes, and yet there is a strangeness of recalled memories and childhood play.

He sang of old coins buried beneath the dunes,
to the north of the island, near the old artillery battery.
For forty years he rowed for mullet north, and south,
where the war-epic motion picture was shot recently.

To the north of the island, near the old artillery battery,
we played hide and seek as kids in acres of bladey-grass.
Where the war-epic motion picture was shot recently
no one was allowed within a thousand metres.

‘The famous pitch-drop experiment’, however, ranges over the many settings prompted by a mood, some objects, a location. It is almost Gothic with its ‘deadly black bird, nesting in a glass funnel’ and the refrain of ‘twilight’ that frames the verses. Savige nudges the form a little by recycling the last word of the stanza’s second line through rhymed associations as well as exact repetition: ‘our breath becomes absurd’, for instance, reappears as ‘your breath became a bird’, drawing in the earlier image of the bird. The poem is tight and self-sufficient; it makes its own sense, but that sense is watertight. ‘Neomenia’, on the other hand, is far less narrative, allowing the pantoum to work itself over the words and carry logic away gently.

‘Gently’ is an apt term for Savige’s work, which often targets exactly an image or an observation, but is just as often evasive. In his contribution to the Festival panel discussion, he drew attention to two poems in particular. Side by side, these pieces demonstrate those equal hemispheres of ‘gentleness’ in *latecomers*. ‘Desires are already memories’ opens the book, and is centred on an image of a charred bug and leaf fused together. Speaking with Minter and Page, Savige noted the fortunes of chance that his process uncovers: discoveries such as this literally arrive at one’s feet as if metaphor was organic, or blessed. Yet the poem is careful not to push its analogy too far; rather, the gripping bug floats within a motile, sorrowful tone:

And now I recognised

in its tough, unprisable grip,
the grasp and clutch and grab

and quip of everyone
who’s ever known

what it means not to let
go the only thing to come

their way amid the salt scrim
and vicious sprint of the wind.

The roar of fire seems to fill the spacious pauses between the poem's sparse couplets, but Savige's speaker avoids the roar itself. Instead, we get this bug and leaf, the knowledge of a distant 'burning island', and this poem; in a way, its gentle quiet is chaos so thick it is unrecognisable, 'begrudging each our tiny fire.'

'The dreamworld murders' might appear to be the poem that does, in fact, step into the eye of the flames. However, even in its committed entrance into the voice of a serial killer, this sequence is a dance around horror. Savige bases his monologue on the imagined murderer of a real child abducted from the Sunshine Coast several years ago, and whose body was never recovered. Not even the abject evil of the poem's speaker, however, is indicated: 'The moment I saw / his body on the news, / I suspected myself of murder.' Like 'Desires are already memories', 'The dreamworld murders' contains a visual and tonal space distinct from the formal experiments and more rhetorical concerns in *latecomers*. There are unsettling images of 'Time's bride yawning / in her wedding webs' where 'Spiders camp in her mouth', and 'In the red house across the road: a family of raw meat.' They are cryptic, however, so that we suspect their horror is not literal – and yet, the suburban setting that Savige has chosen is simply, believably rendered:

Step with me into the massacre
Of shadows, my carport, where

Thick sweaty ogres of darkness
Elbow unremittingly.
[...]
this then is the wardrobe
where the darkness begins,

and out there are the many things
the summer day discloses, things

the light touches and lends
existence to.
[...]
Someone else's comics
in the letterbox –

planes blink in place
of correspondence.

'The dreamworld murders' reflects a quality in all of the poems mentioned here, poems that display voices deeply engaged with the wonders of their work – dramatic forgetfulness and complete expressive involvement. We can see in them the richness that is the stuff of the Sydney Writers Festival – and perhaps this is the answer to that question put by the Red Room Company's 'Cabinet of Lost and Found': we come because we want to understand the process and success of good writers; we listen and watch because it is like seeing the books alive. Dialogue and the fizz of development in and between Australian poetries, are what makes expensive coffees taste so good.