Bruce Merry

REVIEW

Chris Mansell, *Redshift/Blueshift*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1988, 64pp., $8.95.

These thirty-seven poems by a recent winner of the American *Amelia* Prize show a considerable range of technique under the glowing epigraph '...remember your humanity and forget the rest.' One recurrent character who turns up in the titles of no less than six poems is a satirically named 'Lady Gedanke'. These pieces, longer than the rest, feature a speaking first-person character in the present tense who represents problems, always ironically stated, sensed by the writer herself. Thus in 'Lady Gedanke Speaks First', the composition starts out with the meta-lines: 'I find that I have to / look up books to see what / my style is', and these words are followed instantly by Mansell's characteristic unpunctuated continuation 'that's the advantage of being / a writer you've always got some other life to refer / to.' Indeed there are few commas in the collection, few poems with separated sentences or signposted pauses. Many of the poems refuse to sign off with a full stop and this helps to establish the implicit comparison of poetry with Lady Gedanke's avocadoes (at pp. 55-56) where the fruit have 'thin heads' and 'sit together friendly', have 'hard handsome skins' and 'definite flesh', ranged together like known and familiar friends (a parallel for the range of words waiting to be conscripted into verse), ancillary attendants like a row of topics for life and verse with their neat 'gleaming avocado teeth.'

Many of the key compositions in fact state what the writing act is *not*, and what the writer has *not* learnt today. Teaching a baby girl aged one to utter words, Mansell's poetic *alter ego* runs together cardinal numbers between one and ten in baby phonetics: 'ONE DO DREE FOUR / FAIV SIS SEBBUM AY' ("Body', p. 61), and the words become absolutely correct in their studied wrongness. If reading poetry is partly an act of subliminal recognition, then the fey rhythm of 'faiv sis sebbum' will enchant every parent who is a reader. Chris Mansell refers teasingly to many of the invaders which a modern intellectual has to cope with, those physical phenomena that conjure against the pure act of composition: an

office equipped with 'every demeanour of object lines pencils words / files'. They conspire to breach the poet's paramount struggle to 'let cleave / all the opposites of language into a pile'. In another poem, 'The Unquiet City' (p. 45), the writer is also taxed by the telephone page, which is implicitly blamed for devaluing things by forcing us to lay them face to face in a dictionary of emotions. In 'Dialogue' (p. 31) the forward gait of conversation is held up by the clanking interruption of the phrase 'people do it all the time', repeated seven times in twenty-four lines. This normally harmless padding from everyday *Gerede* (formulaic chatter) now encroaches in both directions from inside the small hiatus which it keeps making in the text. This comes about because it is not separated by commas, parentheses or dashes from the surrounding lines which are trying to drive a message forwards. The interruption is analogous to the pause of the typist or the copyist who has to 'feed push and wait and reload' to get the sheets of paper together, in 'Lady Gedanke Realises a Machine' (p. 22). The simplest machine that has to be reloaded is the manual typewriter and here there is a disconcerting echo of the most familiar and discounted of all the writer's background obstacles, the page and carbon that have to be re-inserted under the roller of the Olivetti 22, ripped out again if unsatisfactory, replaced 30 lines later if the intervening text 'will do'.

Some quiet tired notes of Feminism cross through the lines almost as a matter of ironic acceptance rather than anguish. An old gentleman follows the writer's first person narrating character in a suburb called Burwood, on an outing; workmen stop to stare and an accountant comments on her lunch (in 'Omens', p. 16). In the polemically entitled 'The Sisters' (p. 20), Mansell quite wittily proposes that because 'All men betray you' (of course, no argument, it is obvious), it is amusing that at times (by accident, chance or mere hitch, of course), you betray them first. However, the real 'traducer' (the learned word underlines a shift to a connoisseur's definition of betraying) is from your own side, because a traitor is actually someone who lets down the home team. Thus it is the sisters themselves who smoke and tap their fingers and act in the most exquisite comedies of rejection and emotional pilferage, in the eternal room that 'stays still on its axis' when the ladies turn (to tea, as in T.S. Eliot, to revenge from behind the shoulders, or to revolve in the universe?).

A menacing male threat is 'The Neighbour', an old contemptible (veteran soldier?) who lives alone, serves tea and has 'a spangled drongo lisping / out secrets to his legs' (p. 25). The immense curled-up threat of this outsider is carried in the closing lines:

You can hear him getting nearer to you
contempt begins to rustle in your own
clothes
like whispers in a house full of
strangers

The collection closes with a clear thematic resolution inside the flush and hum of motherhood, dislaying an apparatus of toys, the humanoid pair made by a 'wombat and bear', part of the new possession which is a small child. A series of internal rhymes and cool assonances confirm, beneath the field of meaning, that this is the resolving key to the scattered inter-action of time and space ordained by the title 'Red-' and 'blueshift':

she looks up *flushed* from the *flu*
and *sweet* I reach *deep*
into the *cot* kiss her
on the *hot* forehead.
(italics ours, p. 64)

Ron Pretty, *The Habit of Balance*, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1988, 64 pp., $8.95

This is the first collection by a senior lecturer in the School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong and is another of the inaugural batch of publications from the Five Islands Press, which was launched in July 1988 to cover work from the south coast of New South Wales. It contains forty-four poems arranged in three cycles, named like a ghostly itinerary 'Midwinter Crossing', 'On Wingdang Bridge' and 'Free Fall'. There is a good deal of pain in the poems of the first cycle, which could be variously sub-titled 'poems of disappointment'. A recurring word is 'lust', but this lust is aimed at the flickering start, or it powers a jungle or lures a father to 'belt the starlight' from his boy's eyes. It is a lust in which a fettered woman writhes, analogous to the feeling caused by 'unfathered children' (p. 15). It becomes a kind of free-ranging, unstated lust in the later sections of the book, a menace in heat and summer that gives rise to many of the poet's mischievously nostalgic pictures of the lost seasons of the past, of 'summers so hot / the park was freckled with living bodies / and young girls haloed in hair' (p. 59); these are contrasted elsewhere with the elders who '...peer through curtains / at generating youngsters on the grass, in pools' (p. 56).

The writer himself gazes at the elements of nature that gaze at themselves, in the self-entailing sufficiency which the Symbolist poets used to describe the rivers and fields of turn-of-the century poetry. Ron Pretty cultivates particularly the image of mirrors inside water, the reflection of leafless trees, the self-contained ecstasy that drives whales up into the shallows of Australian beaches. He is a very accurate observer of graffiti and he knows the language of BUGA, which was a movement to alter the sexism of public advertising billboards and took off from Sydney in the 1970s. There are various strands from this mural literature plaited inconspicuously into the poem 'Graffiti' (p. 43). The volume is also full of the 'daily defeats' of an anti-hero; particularly moving in this manner is the portrait of a dying father in 'Towards the End', where the subject is sketched in terms of his tartan rug, his oxygen cylinder and breathing apparatus, sepia photos and relatives elliptically 'wondering when' (i.e. when he will pass away). The 'shapeles was' of cities, parks and beaches ensnares the author's imagination in many poems, but returns in precisely stated cadences in the three segments of 'Ocean Cave', which has the restless and again self-mirroring slide of water pouring on and off the 'tessellated floors' of a sea grotto, the 'cunje' crowded onto a rock-shelf and the sunlight flitting in and out on its 'fugitive wings'. One of the many language tricks woven into the text of 'One Dark Night' (a Lowellian imitation of John of the Cross' *Una noche oscura)* is the character 'El Past It', who, fifteen lines later (pp. 34-35), is faced by 'the *last* of the whisky' (a long-distance *rima al mezzo).* Like Walt Whitman, the present writer seems to pass 'through a populous city' and meet a woman 'who detained me for love of me'. This American echo is in the opening of Ron Pretty's poem 'Meeting'.

> You meet a woman in the street
> and make her yours:
> you've never met before
> she's strange, opaque (p. 42)

The writer crafts both his reading, Goethe, and his travels (the Acropolis, Greece, London) into his short castaway texts. Most of all I believe that he casts himself as an observant and unbluffable anti-hero, concluding the volume with what I take to be its finest and most characterizing poem, 'Jean-jean as Rebel'. Here everything comes together, the writer as observer of walls, boards, gardens and graffiti, the author as lover in the wrong place at the right time, 'with Julie beside him / (...) / If this was

Judith' (vv. 20, 23), and the poet as teacher, confronting a class to which he yells the awfully bloodless threat of all teachers: 'That's your last warning'. By a powerful transfer of analogy this self-defeating threat turns into the cry of the prisoner at the dock: 'That's my last word', and then into the claim of the husband to his woman's sleeping back: 'That's the last time'.

The three tightrope walks of failure in this fifty-three line poem act as a preface to its closing congeries of epithet-plus-noun statements, of verbless utterances, capturing the biography of child, man, teacher and life-fighter as he fluctuates between the little victories and silences of

> ...the grand
> design and the petty discontent,
> the raucous class, the bungled capture,
> the harried flight, the limp surrender,
> the flights in the playground, the
> attempts
> at control, the slide into
> impotent silence; the walk,
> the pockmarked wall and the night.
> (vv. 43-50)

Ron Pretty starts as an observer of nature. In the opening poem, 'Wombat', the beast that lurks in the boy speaker's parents' car is finally juxtaposed with the girl who looks in and out of the poem, linked by the word 'mate' in its last line. For the interlocking discoveries of the boy in this story are the world of girls and the accidental discovery of a pet. At the end of the collection Ron Pretty only has himself to deal with, and as he shouts at the challenge or indifference of all other people in a life, we are reminded of that key phrase 'daily defeats' which is the other universal which every person among us has to locate and particularize.