# John Leonard

## REVIEW

## THINGS THAT COULD BE COMPARED

Timoshenko Aslanides. *Australian Things*. Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Australia. ISBN 0 14 012832 8. 72pp. $9.99.

John Bray. *Seventy Seven*. Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press. ISBN 1 86254 258 9. 70pp. No price given.

Anne Brewster and Jeff Guess (ed). *The Inner Courtyard: A South Australian Anthology of Love Poetry*. Kent Town, SA: Friendly Street Poets/Wakefield Press. ISBN 1 86254 261 9. 100pp. No price given.

Debbie Westbury. *Mouth to Mouth*. Wollongong: Five Islands Press. ISBN 0 9587972 5 0. 64pp. $8.95.

The ninth poem of Timoshenko Aslanides' *Australian Things* is entitled "Things that could be compared" and this is the method for the sequence of forty-eight unrhymed sonnets that make up the book; the poems are lists, concatenations and juxtapositions of things, opinions and events, heaped under such headings as "Inspiring things", "People who seem to suffer" and "Things which won't always be". The structure is that of pairs of contrasting poems, the answering poems to those already mentioned are: "Depressing things", "Exasperating things" and "Things which will always be". Furthermore the inspiration for the sequence is said to be the tenth century Japanese classic *The Pillowbook of Sei Shonagon*.

Aslanides' style is jocular, urbane and impeccably non-poetic: "Purple cars with bald tyres and teddy bears on the mirror;/ drivers in sound systems with fingers up you;" ["Vulgar things"], alert to banalities, but sometimes wise: "Just as water is the best of things, beside which the bushwalker/ prefers to camp, so self-knowledge is the best of/ knowledge and most warming" ["A thing worth knowing"], without ever taking himself too seriously. But the problem with this sequence is, finally, that it is just a heap of things and none of the poems achieves any degree of success on its own. The structure of opposing pairs of poems is sometimes neat, but as a principle, jejune; nor are *The Pillowbook* and the

echoes and paraphrases of Catullus, Sappho and Pindar, meticulously catalogued in the notes, obvious or pointed enough to be of any structural use. Instead of objectivity the heaping together of things, in the way it is done here, produces a surview that is Australia-wide, but idiosyncratic to a fault. Aslanides' view-point remains Canberra-based and it is symptomatic of this that the places he mentions, in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia, or wherever, are tourist spots, National Parks: "The Kimberleys, yes; Stirling Range, Monkey Mia famed for dolphins,/ Kakadu and Cape York. Such lists are endless, incomparable." ["Inspiring things"], or perhaps not.

In contrast to Aslanides expansiveness Debbie Westbury's collection *Mouth to Mouth* is concentrated mainly on life on the New South Wales South Coast. Her spare, greyish poems describe well the personal side of this untidy and circumscribed existence. "The Message", for example, exemplifies the paradox of desire which characterises the collection: "i keep picking it up/ forgetting always/ what it is/ unfold/ recognise/ remember/ close my guilty fist". And it is certainly here, in the space between the littleness of this life and its unquiet securities, that the best poetry of the collection is located. The poem "Self Portrait in a Mirror", for example, where a smudge on the picture is "a sacred symbol in a secret picture/ ... amongst the relics and rubbish", or in the poems such as "target practice (the zen archer aims for himself)" or "Fraternoia", where the sudden depth of the writing suggests a different kind of poetry: "But, somewhere else,/ in the company of strangers,/ your scalpel carves me open,/ takes out my yellow heart,/ leaves the room dark and bloody/ where sleep enters at last,/ disguised as a friend."

The other side of the coin, however, the evocation of public life, is less successful, as in "Albatross Road" or the clumsily allegorical "The New Funeral Parlour"; and despite her occasional anger with the rituals of the existence she maps out it is clear that they are necessary to her poetry. Certainly, leaving them behind is very problematic; in "shane's farewell (at gerringong)" a poem of leave-taking uses the conventions of pastoral elegy to suggest that it is the equivalent of death; and yet in "Out of the Blue" the intensity of this inward-lookingness turns to unmediated apocalypse: "she leaves her dark glasses on/ but turns her stare inward/ just in time for the big/ flash."

Like *Mouth to Mouth* Anne Brewster and Jeff Guess's anthology *The Inner Courtyard* sets out to delimit a particular area in which to operate. The idea of an anthology of South Australian love-poetry

is perhaps a ridiculous one, but the editors are at pains to explain their rationale in the Introduction, whilst also pointing out they have included poems on "celebrations of domestic life, of parenthood and childhood, of relationships between friends and between teachers and students", which is good. The problem I have with this collection is neither "South Australian" nor "love-poetry" *per se*, but in the type of love-poetry included. It is, largely, the sort which remembers and reenacts, where the problem is Time, not the Other. We are talking, in effect, of the genre of "libertine verse" of which "The Ecstasy", by Flexmore Hudson, is a good example. In contrast to Donne's, this poem uses the present tense, rather than urgent paradox, to underline its memorializing imperative: "Together we lie till the spent lamp dims/ and stars reach through the dark to touch your hair, &c". Within this tradition the anthology is remarkably consistent, even as regards non-sexual love, where sentiment replaces sensuality. However, there are poems which stand apart from this, like Eric Beach's agnostic "untitled" or Kate Llewellyn's "Finished", a strong-minded rejection of a lover, ending "there's no more/ love love". *The Inner Courtyard* includes poetry by fifty South Australian poets and, in the tradition it works with, is a successful anthology.

John Bray's collection, *Seventy Seven*, consists of original poems and "adaptations", mainly from the Greek lyric poets Archilochus, Alcaeus, Ibycus, Theognis, Anacreon and others. This division does a disservice to both parts of the collection; the translations are colloquial and neat, sometimes felicitous, but not sufficiently so to stand by themselves — a thicker volume of them would read better and be a more useful anthology of the archaic Greek lyric tradition. As for the original poems — there are only twenty or so in this collection, and the occasional nature of many of them serves them badly in such short measure.

Bray's classical interests continue in his original poems; the influence of Ovid is apparent in the mock-heroic fantasy of "Visitation": "Athena wrapped in warfare and technology,/ Artemis testing patents in toxology." And Horace stands behind the world-weary calculation of "The Fig Branch Song". As with Horace, so with Bray, there is something dislikeable about much of the poetry in this collection, including the choice of Greek poems for adaptation. The poem just mentioned is a good example of this; so too is the patronising, *de haut en bas* "To the Feminists": "In all public and social areas you are accepted as gender-free citizens./ Behave as if you were.", or the sentimental sadism of "The Crested Pigeon". Bray's strengths in *Seventy Seven* are his interest in

metrics and technique and his wit. For some these qualities may excuse the persona set up by both parts of this collection.