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DANCE, DIALOGUE AND DEATH: POEMS BY SARAH DAY, KRISTIN HENRY, JILL JONES AND TONY PAGE.

Sarah Day. ***A madder dance.*** Ringwood: Penguin, 1991. 78 pp.
Kristin Henry. ***One day she catches fire.*** Ringwood: Penguin, 1992. 81 pp;
Jill Jones. ***The mask and the jagged star.*** Melbourne: Hazard Press, 1992. 56pp.
Tony Page. ***Satellite link.*** Milton, Queensland: Jacaranda, 1992. 82 pp.

Sarah Day's book, *A madder dance,* has a separate mini-collection of poems entitled,*Beyond Thresholds,* and because I started reading these poems first, I think that this title could have been an equally appropriate title for the whole book.

If I am allowed to take the risk of generalising my reading under a single theme, I will suggest that the poems of Sarah Day's collection are about "thresholds", margins and boundaries — boundaries between the micro- and the macro-world, the miniature and the mega world, an image in the mirror and the source of that image, chaos and order, and between the body and that which is outside the body. They can be read as an attempt to construct and then deconstruct that which is beyond thresholds: "the threshold is the game's narcotic lure, 'going in' reveals the huge within the miniature." The poems are remarkable in the way they bring into vision a whole world of the miniature: a grain of sand, atoms, electrons, shells, crabs, fish, spiders, lizards, ants, snails, oysters, canaries, leeches, fronds, poppies, plums, legumes etc. But this world of the miniature does not stand on its own, it is a key-hole through which the larger world can be seen because "in the refuge of the miniature the vast takes shape" and because "concentration" can magnify to discover solar systems in atoms."

The thresholds and the margins are not fixed or permanent, because the "house in which you inhabit the world is inhabited by it" and because "within the nut, the tree, within the mind, the garden and in the shoots, the thoughts and from the thoughts, the roots." In fact the miniature world is not engrossed in some tranquil inertia but is moving, dancing, jumping and thereby revealing and opening that which is beyond it. Chaos is both ordered and disordered depending upon where one is located: "chaos is no unordered mass except for those in its welter." In order to construct some meaning out of this chaos and to map a meaningful design one has to come out, because "it is hard to see the pattern when you are lines that construct." But this stepping back can itself be slippery because "a foot may whirl into the gyre of a madder dance."

In the section, *Beyond thresholds,* I found a very "Buddhist" poem. In the poem, "Animal vegetable mineral," the "body" has been metamorphosed into "a topographic landscape contiguous to river, hill," on which, "a

lizard lounges on what is warm and still — stone, cement, skin." This metamorphosis of the body can perhaps be a step towards emancipation because this is a way to "relinquish the protagonist's role in cosmic drama" and "to be part of the set."

The "body" does not metamorphose only into a landscape but transforms into a cow ("Plenary"), a tree ("Plenary"), a plant ("Four dreams on becoming a plant"). In this case it is a female body and as a vine she is dreaming and listening "to my husband and children discuss in even tones how they will cut me down." When the whole body does not transform fully, it becomes half plant, half sea, and half human — "women and sea shells. A shell in my womb that opens and shuts, opens and shuts."

The book has two types of poems. There are poems which have a clear narrative line and in which the protagonist, represented through "I" or the subject of the poem itself becomes the narrator, such as a prison warder ("Reflections of a prison warder"), women in paintings ("Trompe l'Oeil"). Such poems open up as if by their own intention. The other poems are very dense in their imagery; one image moves into and transforms into other images, creating a complex kaleidoscope. For such poems a patient gaze is required to make the images glow.

Kristin Henry's collection of poems, *One day she catches fire,* has an interesting cover illustration, in which a young woman is looking outside a kitchen window. On the kitchen-shelf, close to the window, there is a tea-pot with cups on saucers, and on the window-sill there is a small flowerpot with a single red flower. Through the window, with white curtains pulled to the sides, there is a landscape, with a purplish meandering river. The woman is dressed in green and is not aware that we — the spectators — are watching her; that, for us, she is a part of the painting — a painting itself. While she is an object engulfed within the circumference of our gaze, she is not aware that her own gaze — her own act of looking — is also circumscribed by our gaze. The situation reminds us of a Bakhtinian act of perception in which she, at every moment of the act of perception, is being defined and finalised by us; we at each moment of our perception are creating and recreating her as some definitive personality. But though at each moment we can see her from her back and we can see what is in front of her, we are unaware of her face, the expressions on her face, her eyes, the colour of her eyes, and many other such details. As a result the question keeps on appearing — who is she? What is she thinking about?

Most of the poems in the collection can be read as an attempt to establish the contours of the "being" of that woman who is lazily gazing outside a window. In the first poem of the collection "On learning that mothers die," one comes across the line, "I love this new green dress especially." In another poem the dress reappears as "Mother's Easter miracle ... that

matched precisely the roses on her hat." In the poem, "When the wind fails," the painting is recreated once again with the words, "I live in candid rooms, and am soon learned. Mine is a flat land. From my window the grass repeats itself right to the edge of the world."

Almost all poems have "she" as the narrator and the other speaking or listening subject is more often a female. Whenever a male figure enters the narrative space, he is often reduced to a subject devoid of action. The males are identified with the devil — the guilt; husband — the god; father — the king, although the poem, "Father come and dance" has a sweet longing for a loving father. This and most of the other poems in the collection have some nostalgia for childhood, which is created and recreated from one poem to another. It is the childhood of the "broad brazen" and "the left-handed-ink-dirty girl" who is "sick for their far ago home," or of the five-year old girl whose mother has been taken away for ever by the fire and who herself metaphorically catches fire "rubbing, rubbing, till smoke seeps between her fingers, bursts into flame." It is not very important whether the girls in every poem are the same girls connected by some biographical detail, sketched in bits and parts by each poem. In most of the poems "she" and her "mother" seem to be involved in a dialogue, although the dialogue is highly asymmetrical — "she" doing all the talking, i.e. occupying the active, creative or defining position and the mother always present as a defined, objectified person.

The poem, "Her generations," is very illustrative. It creates a trans-generational narrative between four different women, but even here, it is "she" from whose narrative space-time coordinates the dialogue is conducted. The other three women — the mother, the grandmother and the daughter — are present as passive human objects. This poem makes an interesting use of the italicised words. In fact there are long italicised stanzas which are blocked by "normal" stanzas. The poem represents a dream — a dream seen by "her," i.e. again it is "her" dream, which acts like a cinema projector and throws glowing and revealing light on the other women, making them visible: "On the tenth anniversary of my mother's death / her mother bent weak-eyed over a sepia portrait, her grand-daughter fell into her first love and her daughter's dreaming began." In this dream sequence there is a game of musical chairs played by the four women. In this game, "when the music stops" all the three women find "their places" and only "she is left standing." She feels stranded outside the "grand narrative" — which is "life" — quite often, be it by an invitation of the "Highschool reunion" or the Vietnam war or the anti-war demonstrations in the poem, "The understanding that passes all peace."

Postmodern literary discourse has been concerned with the failure of words and of language as a system to

convey meaning. The "speaking subjects" feel helpless at the profound opacity of language, and every protagonist, be it in poetry or prose, not only feels misunderstood but metaphorically becomes voiceless; voiceless in a sense that the voice is lost without reaching sympathetic ears. A situation of finding oneself stranded outside the "grand narrative" of life stems from this position of mutual deafness and dumbness. Some poems of the collection foreground such a concern about the status of words. "She" in the poem, "The quick and the left," knows this, and that is why she tries "very very hard to make them mean"; or in the poem "The big ones come with music," "she" tugs "at your shirt sleeve but can't make you hear me," complaining in the same poem that "she" has "been trying to get you to listen for years." The act of talking becomes such a pain that Emily in the poem, "Nourishing the desire," quits talking and takes up feeding friends because "words had become such a burden that she shut her mouth forever and got them to listen with theirs."

Jill Jones's collection, *The mask and the jagged star,* can also be read as a dialogue between the "I" and the "You." In almost all poems, "I" is the protagonist, the reciter, the story teller. These poems use the second person "You" in two different ways. In some poems "You" represents a second person, a partner in conversation; whereas in other poems "You" represents a sort of a cross between the third person — "He/She" — and the first person "I." In many poems this "You" is the "I" projected outside, an "I" addressed as "You." In such poems, although the narrator is present, her/his presence is not objectified as "I." This "You" of the poems takes up different identities in different poems: it is mother in the poem, "Mother i am waiting now to tell you"; Katherine Mansfield in the poem, "For Katherine Mansfield, one hundred years away"; and a "lover," a husband or a friend in most of the other poems.

In some poems, scenes from suburbia or from the inner city become the focus of the poetical gaze. In such poems, the dialogue between "I" and "You" — sometimes both addressed jointly as "We" — is used to present these scenes. These scenes constitute that landscape where both "I" and "You" reveal themselves to each other. But this process of revelation is not very symmetrical — it is "I" who is talking and the "You" is a kind of listener who is sitting, walking or sleeping. In the poem, "Soap opera salad," although it is "You" who is involved in direct actions — shouting, packing of bags, crying etc., it is "I," the one who has "finished the unfinished greek salad," who has been given the sovereign authority to construct "our last fight." Only in the poem, "The coming of the death star," is this "You" given a true right to speak, and the voice of this "other" is italicised. In the poem, "For Katherine Mansfield, one hundred years away," Katherine Mansfield finds her voice in the form of a few italicised phrases. This poem carries a date as does the

poem, "the square is full of people," which reminds us about the events in the Tiananmmen Square. In both poems, dates do not only specify some past time. Nor do they signify the time at which the physical act of writing the poems finished. These dates are signifiers which have started functioning as parts of the poems.

In Tony Page's collection of poems, *Satellite Link,* there is a poem about Keats, "The room in which Keats died," which uses very traditional images — "choking your song in early fight" or "you hypnotised death with words" — but which reveals a doubt in the protagonist's mind about his own life and death. He records: "before coming here, the body did not doubt its permanence." Death appears again in the poem, "Relativity does away with death," where death is somehow tamed into something which, if it cannot be controlled or stopped, can be reconciled: "moving with a different pace, his birth and death would flash as one event. This formula turns us all into god."

This concern with death, destruction, and the ultimate end appears in a large number of poems in this collection. In "Halley's comet comes out" this realisation about death is present in the words, "the next time you come, I expect not to be here but gazing at a new light — closer to the source." Is this a comparison between the perishing body and the permanence of the stellar wanderer?

The notion of a journey, a voyage, be it in some "tenuous craft," a truck or a four-wheel van in which the "butcher" is planning to go for a "desert holiday," can be read as an attempt to test the permanence or impermanence of the "body." In these poems, the earth itself is read as a shrinking and fragile body, whose "shrinking back to human scale" is made more visible from within an aircraft. This is an earth which is shrinking because each "year the Atlantic steals several inches from both continents, adding to its waistline" or because of the cannibalising weed, who is "a better imperialist than anything on two legs." Death is read at its most dramatic in the poem "Flight before the ice age," where "the city's miasmal plain" has "ribs of skyscrapers picked fleshless clean," which "describe a splendid carcass from which warm blood flees." Apart from death of the mega-scale bodies, the poems of the collection reconstruct the "deaths" of very closely related persons. There is a dying father in the poem "The poet forgives his father," and a dying mother for whose death this alcoholic father is held responsible, then forgiven.

In the subsection, *The flight before the ice age,* there is a poem, "Global war report," the title of which can be very easily read as "Gulf war report." Perhaps it is not very important to know if this was a part of the authorial intention, but the mere presence of such words as "collateral damage," "pre-emptive strike" and "carpet bombing" fosters such a contextualised reading of the poem.