

Rebecca Edwards

SPEAKING OUT OF SILENCES

M.T.C. Cronin, *Zoetrope*, we see us moving, Five Islands Press, 1995. 32 pp. ISBN 1 875604 34 0

Marcella Polain, *Dumbstruck*, Five Islands Press, 1996. 72 pp. ISBN 1 875604 52 9

Carolyn Gerrish, *Learning to Breathe Under Water*, Island Press, 1995. 79 pp. ISBN 0 909771 55 3

Kristin Henry, *Stingers*, *What If the Plane Goes Down?* and

Doris Leadbetter, *The Fat Lady's Song*, Pariah Press, 1995. 108 pp. ISBN 0 949 245 21 6

If, as Doris Leadbetter writes in "The Critic," words are for chewing on, then these poets have served up a rich and savoury feast. But culinary metaphors can't match the potency of many of these poems. They are much too alive, and equipped with their own sharp teeth.

Three of these books are first collections: Cronin's *Zoetrope*, Polain's *Dumbstruck* and Leadbetter's *The Fat Lady's Song*. Cronin's is a less self-assured voice than either Polain's or Leadbetter's. Her poems tend to be crammed together onto a single page (e.g. "Teocalli & Tepee" and "Gordon [im-brol'yo]"), as if they may not be able to stand up on their own. There's a tendency towards overstatement, as in "Behind the Wire," where special

effects—a heavy dotted border and wavy font—distract from content. There's also some very ugly phrasing: "once capable / of a fantastic curl, the wavy opalescence / of its cymophane eyes now settled into / a waxy degeneration" ("Dead Lizard and Rococo"). The attempt to reflect a "debased" form of architecture in this description of the lizard doesn't really excuse the indigestible image.

Stronger poems include "Spawn," "Buson's Dead Wife's Comb" and "The Natives Came Bearing Gifts." Cronin's terse line-breaks and devastating imagery hook their claws into the reader's mind, as disturbing and elusive as an imaginary animal (see "The Silence After" and "Spawn").

A "zoetrope," or wheel of life, gives an illusion of movement by setting up a sequence of images inside a slitted, revolving drum. In *Zoetrope*, Cronin is very much concerned with setting up truths which are then broken down to reveal another, deeper kind of truth about human existence. In "Bouillabaise Her Image of His Head," Cronin appears to be telling us something about her "self" through a memory:

	... Maya was my
Mother's name—it means	Illusion, as if her
Image of his head was	Shallowing as the
Water drew apart. Drew	Them apart? The sea
Is a codicil, cold and	Wet enough to arouse
The sleeper. I look into	Her recipe books and
There are no loaves and	Fishes ...

In the last four lines of the poem the mother denies everything the daughter has presented as truth; the reader is not permitted to lapse into complacency of belief, even within the framework of a single poem. This snatching up and setting down of poetic voices doesn't allow the poet to focus or probe with any depth; the broken lines of "Bouillabaisse" aren't quite able to bring out the potentials of Moses dividing Red Sea / death dividing mother and daughter / sea dividing mother and lover / woman stirring fish stew / memories stirring. The advantage in this disassociation from any constant sense of poetic self is that Cronin is able at times to enter gaps in the language that ego—in this case, preservation of a "real" memory—is too bulky to squeeze through.

Carolyn Gerrish has an excellent sense of the way in which broken lines can be used to convey fractured structures. *Learning to Breathe Under Water* conveys a sense of the poet's own experiences informing the poems; unlike Cronin, Gerrish does little to mask her "self." Of course, this may be as much illusion as the shifting tones of *Zoetrope*. It's an ambivalent voice, one which speaks almost despite itself, or as if each utterance causes pain to the speaker:

things never end

you swallow them

—later

they can choke you

"Notes on Androgyny"

Poems are shaped on the page in the manner of Chinese calligraphy; as much value is given to space as to the words themselves. As Gerrish writes: "Blessed are the Poets who work with the silences between words amidst the foul din of the world." ("Lamentations of the Poets"). Silence is given both negative and positive value: it exists in the physical shape of the poem on the page, and speaking out of it is one of Gerrish's primary concerns:

i won't come out of the box
 you won't let me talk unless
 i am well behaved you want
 to unwrap me (yet again) &
 set me on the mantelpiece where
 you can look at me but can't
 hear my mute cries

"Asylum"

Relationships in which love may not be expressed are set against images of water: "the immaculate ducks / floating on silver their backs tidy baskets" ("Knowing You Are Watching"). At other times speech becomes a deluge which threatens to submerge the psyche (see "Mother to Daughter" and "There's Some Terrible Things Happen"). The tension between breath and breathlessness, speech and silence, is expressed through images of flood, flow and, in "Cousins," of learning to breathe under water. Gerrish looks into a world where humans scar rather than nurture each other, where isolation is the norm and voices are drowned out. It's undeniably pessimistic, but never maudlin or soul-destroying. "Lamentations of the

Poets," for example, is a miracle of gentle cynicism.

Dumbstruck, as its title suggests, is very much about experiences of being silenced, and the need to speak out of enforced muteness. In "Pink Water" a small girl's experience of sexual abuse is also one of silencing. She hears her mother singing about the house as, stanza by stanza, Polain builds up the horrible inevitability of what is being done to her by a neighbour. In the final stanza "she hears her mother's voice not singing / shrill thin uncontrolled to her father / hears his resonant croon lapping / she hears their silence their pact / swell through walls."

Polain's Irish-Armenian parentage informs her work with a genetic memory of another kind of muteness, as in "immigration": "our tongues split as timbers salvaged from some other place / each schoolyard taunt another hammer blow." In many of her poems, Polain deals with a sense of memory stored in the cell walls, knowledge that is "as physical as blood" ("Immigration"). Her skill is to spread this "cellular knowledge" out as living words, with cadences that immediately take root in the reader's own cells. In "Astronomy" for example, the act of cracking an egg into a basin reverberates through European history: "there are women in my marrow / whose bones were cracked / for alchemy / like this."

Dumbstruck contains many fine images. In "missing persons," thematically linked to Kristin Henry's "To a Son," the loss of a brother takes on an elemental quality in images of clouds spreading "too tall and dark for mid-november sky / they disappear like bruises into night." This is a first collection of great intellectual and emotional depth. Like *Breathing Under Water*, it succeeds in its attempt to put experiences of speechlessness and silencing into words, a paradox expressed in Polain's image of a "jaw / wired up like radio."

Stingers is a double-yolker. Kristin Henry and Doris Leadbetter have combined their two books, *What if the Plane Goes Down?* and *The Fat Lady's Song*, into an extremely satisfying read. I've heard Henry perform one of her poems, "St Kilda Song," and it's the only one in this collection that I found trite and predictable. The rest of the book was a very pleasant surprise, and Henry's lilting Southern cadences are perfectly audible throughout the collection. With the possible exception of "The Concert," each of these poems is about human relationships, how they grow, and how they wind up. Most are underscored with a sense of loss. The images in "A Miracle," which longs for a second chance to nurture a son, are particularly beautiful: "Now he's a garden in my arms ... / He dream grows / gleaming angles now / my brown rose ..."

In "The Unwording of Women" Henry explores the way women have been disenfranchised in the language in which she herself must write. It's a suite of three poems, each of them dealing with a different stage in a woman's life: as a young girl, talking about sex with friends; as a woman learning to negotiate sex; and as a woman going through menopause, having outlived "euphemism and taboo" ("The M Word"). In "Sleeping Over," Henry observes that women "learn / a language for foreign parts / *his this, his that,*" but notes how strange it is "that none of you / begins with the mother tongue." Particularly in Australian society, where names for female genitalia are amongst the crudest of insults, it's a pertinent issue, and one which Henry has worked into very successful poetry. The far more savage suite, "An Unnatural Kindness," depicts a passionate, abusive relationship, and ends *What If the Plane Goes Down* with a whiptail sting.

To publish with a friend is to invite comparison; Henry and Leadbetter enhance each other in the way that the right wine does a nourishing meal. The sequence is just right; *The Fat Lady's Song* has a surefootedness, a substantiality, that would make anything following it an anticlimax. It's a delight to read, whether you've been reading poetry all your life, or think that you don't like the stuff. "Aunt Emily" and "Travelling in Country Victoria" had me laughing out loud, while others—"A Time for

Prayer," "Night in Rosemary Avenue"—were like a shock of cold water.

In "Where Dancers Move," Leadbetter writes "Between music and the stillness of listening / is the space where dancers move," and it is in just this way that her images move on the page, monumental, effortless, with one ear tuned to "the space" which Gerrish perceives as "the silences between words." A popular performance poet for years (Leadbetter), takes her place with the other poets in this selection as a fluent speaker of "the mother tongue," the language that admits space, and values it as a presence with its own powerful energies.

As for Mrs Arthur P. Craven, size 22, time-traveller extraordinaire, her show-stopping appearances are the highlights of *The Fat Lady's Song*. She is a character who possesses a physicality that is rare in poetry. She ranks with strong women in fiction—Rosie Scott's enormous *Glory Day*, Kerewin Holmes in *The Bone People*, Jeanette Winterson's giantess in *Sexing the Cherry*. In each of her poems there is a build-up of mystery and anticipation, a setting of scene; the reader never knows quite where she is or what's going to happen until part-way through the poem. Leadbetter's gift for witty, genuinely funny aural imagery is apparent from "The First Poem About Mrs Arthur P. Craven":

She slid into the frock. The chivalrous
cheval glass

shaded her size 22 to size 18 in the late
afternoon light.
She smoothed the soft fabric over
her bust and
pulled in what she could to a smooth
alpine slope.

The Fat Lady explores—at her own pace—the big issues; death, love and the absence of God. Mrs Arthur P.'s throaty laugh will insinuate itself into your imagination, just as gracefully as she does into the arms of—ah, but that would be telling. And like these five extremely talented poets, a critic should know what value there is in space, and silence.

Vivien Maloney

DON'S BEST?

Anderson, Don (ed). *Contemporary Classics: The Best Australian Short Fiction 1965-1995*. Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1996. 678 pp RRP \$19.95 ISBN 0 09 183075 3.

Couldn't get the washing dry with everyone screaming for clean clothes, the puppy had chewed my new shoes, the biggest tree in the back garden fell over and hit the roof, the swimming pool pump broke down, the downstairs freezer was accidentally turned off

and I didn't know about it for four days. So it was with an audible sigh of relief that I settled down to read Don Anderson's recent anthology of Australian short fiction, *Contemporary Classics*. Not all at one sitting, of course. Even my highest levels of relief could not prepare me for 670 pages of short stories.

I began with the introduction and enjoyed a silent chuckle as Anderson explained the genesis of his anthology. As he tells it, he asked a group of "literate" first year students at the beginning of a tutorial in 1994 if they had read Helen Garner's short story "Two Friends." The question was met with silence. So he made the next one more general, asking if anyone had heard of Helen Garner. Again silence. In the next tutorial the same questions met the same silences.

Being myself halfway through a thesis on contemporary Australian women's short fiction, the response to Anderson's questions did not surprise me. What did surprise me, however, was that Anderson took unfamiliarity with Garner to mean that his students, most of whom were straight out of high school, had not experienced the joy of reading short fiction *per se*. Anderson's assumptions about the responses to his questions *may* have been accurate—or perhaps the students didn't answer in fear of his next question. Maybe they thought they'd turned up at the wrong class. But he might have unearthed a very different