

In "Well? Says Mavis," it is Ian who must make a decision about whether he needed to belong to the straight world of Bill and Mavis, or whether he would "come out" and face rejection. While he lived with Steve in "a good oldfashioned strong safe partnership" which resembled that of his parents, his response "o my god it's my parents" (90) to Mavis, Bill, and their "extended family of tupperware" (90) suggests a more uncertain relation to this model. The decision facing Ian is one which the collection insists must be faced.

Straight worlds and fixed identities may avoid the challenge posed by queer practices by ignoring them, by refusing to make the decision, but in highlighting the destructive-creative potential of queer practices, the collection asks how long they can be continue to do so. Like the Net, the queer community is continually shifting, and its refusal to be fixed—the fact that queer is easier to describe in terms of what it is not than what it is—makes it a threatening opponent of "straightness." In "Still Unfinished," the narrator compares his and her friends' lives to the unfinished house plans Jane and Luke have inscribed all over the walls of the net space, and muses "if you ask me which no-one has because I'm out here smoking and watching while they're in there laughing talking touching being the world into life but if you were to ask me I'd say we and tonight work because we're un-finished and badly

planned and that's the real" (7). It is the aspect of practice which gives queer its disruptive potential, and as an enactment of this practice, *and that's final* is a challenging text. As the narrator of "Ladies Gentlemen" puts it, "We're here, we're queer, and it's much worse than you ever imagined" (142).

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Lyn Hatherly Wilson

POEMS FROM THE EDGE

Hale and Iremonger's *Contemporary Australian Poets* (Sydney, 1997). Available from the Publisher at GPO Box 2552, Sydney, NSW 2001.

Peter Boyle, *The Blue Cloud of Crying*

Jill Jones, *The Book of Possibilities*

John Leonard, *100 Elegies for Modernity*

As the end of the century looms, poetry's diverse chorus reports the desires, regrets and symptoms of modernity or postmodernism. Its voices are intent, courageous, imaginative; they touch the minds and hearts of humanity.

The tragic undertones of Peter Boyle's second book of poetry, *The Blue Cloud*

of *Crying*, recall what Noel Rowe dubbed "hungry calling" with reference to his first collection, *Coming Home from the World*. Boyle's poetry is often extraordinary, and extraordinarily powerful. Lines such as these, which strike an image of a child in Manila scrounging on a smoky mountain of rubbish, drag at the sight and soul of the reader:

No matter how thin the poet
wants to get
his lines
they will never be as thin
as this child's
wrist.

Boyle's lines are thin and finely crafted, but they can flare as they invoke the lives of those whom society neglects and forgets. His settings vary from Sydney and Asia to Europe and other twentieth century sites, and his scope is correspondingly broad, encompassing heroes, politics, art and war. Within this wide span of "landscapes and figures," his focus is frequently moral, as he pries open social injustice and places its effects before the eyes of his reader. Much of the strength of his poetry lies in his ability to move from the universal, or macrocosmic, to the microcosmic, the intense world of personal experience:

The stars are friendly exploding
meteors
calling to each other
down the long alleyway ...
A man with an empty tray

stands on the cafe terrace
mindful only of the glow within
weary from carrying so much light.

In "First Shift," Boyle delicately opens out the dim life of an "absent woman" whose "loveless day will drag against her eyes." She is one of those for whom "The earth's cold has many names./ To walk and to breathe/ will have to count as living." His quality of perception is as acutely formulated as it is accurate.

As could, however, be expected from a poetry that describes and laments social and moral collapse, a refrain of blame echoes through these sharp portraits:

The golden orbs of pennies roasted
in an oven
removed by tongs
glisten on a child's skin
as she screams and screams.

But, as we see in "Death and Funeral of the Count Orgaz," the elements of blame and criticism in the poetry are softened by the poet's awareness of the complexity of living and suffering:

In darkest night
when light was shining on all roads

his heart ugly and innocent
reaches for the peace of one
who lets go

in Toledo of the barren hills
above this river that can never find
a sea

so green and lost and black—
his body draped in the costume
of an inquisitor,

his soul a twisted sheaf of smoke.

Sensitivity to and compassion for those who inhabit a stricken world is uppermost in Boyle's work. Those such as the boy "in the child's pain ward" for whom "Sugar, stained pink,/ travels through his throat into his eyes/ and rises/ as a blue cloud of crying." In marvellously thin lines, via leaps of association that flash like meteors through the imagination, Peter Boyle delivers a lyricism that touches and affects his readers.

Jill Jones, like Boyle, is from Sydney. She has previously published two collections, one of which, *The Mask and the Jagged Star*, won the 1993 Mary Gilmore Award. *The Book of Possibilities* is written from an awareness of the impending *fin de siècle*, or, more momentously, of the end of the millennium. For Jones this time is both fraught with the terrors and triumphs of the past and caught by the possibilities of the future. Jones concentrates on strange and subtle nexuses of everyday people, usually city dwellers, whose shared lives and desires are shaped by the urban landscape. Enhanced by a meditative tone and a quiet wisdom, her poetry celebrates the textures and the highlights of their living, catching hold of the magic of moments that, in "a still world," "can make you dizzy."

This chorus of urban voices is accompanied by music:

Instead of the tinkle, jingle morning
music,
new age soporific, floating through
incense,
there was the jangle, sliding,
sweet home Elmore James,
bluesing over the sweetness with
gritted energy—

It is a music that mingles traffic with tears, other music with other emotions, all confined by the unrepentant roar of the city. In "Songs of the evening air," smells ("waves of leaves, exhaust, sweet jasmine"), sounds ("a laminex thud, spoons, knives, glass-/ a medley swings out into the cool/ dark, shadows sway, rich in layers") and sights ("a single candle in a front room") are transposed to form a pastiche of city living. The lyricism of Jones' poetry is peculiarly modern, almost brutal. She peers insightfully over her rosy glasses, but still contrives to forge beauty out of concrete, exhaust fumes, and "the blunt blades of picket fences."

Deep in the city, echoed by the "suck" and "soundtrack" of the ocean, there lingers a further sensuality, one that preserves what Jones has called "the most common and difficult of conditions," love. Love swells "in deep, down past sleep," where:

I breathe you, back bare
as a beautiful open country,
pale surface

for my lung's warm wave, to draw
 as my pen,
 like words that don't dream but stir.

Sometimes, "when the damned radio plays/ Sweet Sweet Love," it slips half-humorously into a memory that once wasn't needed; other times it congeals in the grief "we suffer because we run/ with whatever limbs and senses/ we love or use up on the years." The particular lyricism of these songs inheres in the way they expose the ambiguous, bittersweet quality of love, as they slide across the vulnerable undersides of Jones's urban individuals.

As you might expect, given that elegies are typically more taken with death than love, John Leonard's first collection, *100 Elegies for Modernity*, deals clearly and accessibly with the horrors of modernity and the death of "our way of life." In "Modernity" (1996) Leonard examines "the era of capitalist economic development in which we currently live" to argue against "modernistic social, economic and political arrangements." His explication of political thought in elegiac form is unique—passionate and admirable, reminiscent of Swift, Pope and Dryden, as he forcefully maps out his reasons for apprehension at what modernity has done:

created hungry masses,
 to witness its own necessity;
 smitten everyone else with madness,

so that progress can be achieved;
 maintained unjust peace,
 to keep up appearances;
 started wars at second hand,
 so as not to have its sons killed;
 created a global market,
 in pornography, drugs and crime;
 cleared every last forest,
 for worthless ranch-lands;
 trawled every ocean dry,
 so most fish can be wasted ...

This view of modernity, as some monstrous mechanism, is a terrifying one:

for increase of production,
 for production of desire,
 for production of desire
 for production, for production
 of desire for production
 of desire ...

After the lamentations of *The Blue Cloud of Crying* and the warnings in Leonard's gnomic utterances, I can't help but feel dispirited about the possibilities of the new century, let alone the new millennium. Is this the purpose of poetry? These poets—particularly Jones and Boyle—share a subtle, lyrical beauty of cadence and a facility for the imaginative interweaving of image, design and idea, even as they suffer from what Fredric Jameson names as signs and symptoms of the postmodern—pastiche, fragmentation, schizophrenia. In recent poetry, the condition appears endemic.

Nevertheless, after more than a millennium of extraordinary poetry,

these books do contribute something of the essence of the end of the twentieth century as, amazingly, they add exciting new images and ideas of their own.

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