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WHEN PUBLISHING NEW POETS

Judy Johnson, *Wing Corrections*.

ISBN 0 86418 507 3;

Jane Williams, *Outside Temple Boundaries*. ISBN 0 86418 496 4;

Alistair Stewart, *Frankston 281*.

ISBN 0 86418 513 8;

Lucy Dougan, *Memory Shell*.

ISBN 0 86418 506 5;

Jane Gibian, *The Body's Navigation*.

ISBN 0 86418 512 X;

Ric Adamson, *Steel Bone Notes*.

ISBN 0 86418 100 6.

Since 1993, Five Islands Press have bravely given 30 poets the opportunity to publish a first book under their New Poets Program. Each series produces six poets, both with an individual book and as a collective. Looking at Series Five produced in 1998, each poet tackles a different approach to the restraints and challenges involved in putting together 32 pages as an appetizer of their work. So what do these poets do in the way of language, content, and form?

Judy Johnson's *Wing Corrections* involves mostly portraits of people, "Butterfly Collector," "Alzheimers," and the natural world "Umbrella Palms," "Waterlilies" or "Beetroot." These portraits usually use an extended metaphor to both describe and then sum up their subject. The language is descriptive and crafted, with the same voice maintaining a

formal, somber tone and viewpoint. The Poem "Gemstones" dedicated to her father is an example where she combines her father's work on these stones with his unforeseen tragedy to come:

... and in turn your
own fault line
was uncovered-as deep inside the cut
and polished halves, the runes
thrown down with hand grenades were
reading your fatal heart
attack to come
in the shattered centre of a
thousand crystals.

Whereas Judy Johnson's book involves set pieces where the subject is encapsulated without question, Jane Williams's theme in *Outside Temple Boundaries* involves an exploration of Christian beliefs. Her concerns involve family ties and their obligations from a woman's point of view, "My Mother the Saint," "Sister Leaving," "Prodigal Daughter/Sister." These are explored along with sensuous love poems: "the time your mouth/ slow danced/ with my breast." She mixes both serious and light tones with long, short and prose poems in free verse. "Walled" is an example of the warmth and power she can convey:

... on Saturday
I am made impossible
by confession
my soul a blank
sandwich board
advertising
free space

She is not heavy-handed but sincere in presenting a poet questing towards certain ideals and virtues.

Taking the one-theme book a step further is Alistair Stewart's *Frankston 281* where he has a series of poems all related to exploring a community's reaction when a killer is found amongst them. He takes us through diverse language, combining reportage "The mayor commented that a person/ 'would have to be pretty game to commit a crime with this many police around,'" with colloquial interjections and vivid descriptions of this suburb. And while this combination looks to be promising, he doesn't develop it further. The book starts with a killing and ends with a cliché: the captured 'was the nicest person you could ever meet,' a 'nice bloke.'" Other than the received media reports, the viewpoint is that of the husband/father worried about the females in his life:

She starts work at 5a.m.

and I walk down the driveway
with hockey stick and check the car
just in case yer know?

I've been watching my daughters
like a hawk, no-one's ever left alone
day-or-night doesn't matter,
if someone's finishing up at four
then I'll be there at 3.30.

While the language juggles between playful and serious, it never goes beyond the surface of what happens to this community under threat.

Memory Shell by Lucy Dougan starts with a disparate series of poems related to the process of learning as part of growing up. This learning is received first from the family and then from lovers. Although the poems about love, such as "Demon Lover Suite," "Scar on the First Day I Met You" and "The Novice Embalmer's Art" generally fall into disappointment. The language rhythms, verse and melancholic tone remain the same despite the different poems. In "Notes Towards an Impromptu Garden" she continues in this vein with: "... I turn and leave the tenderest / petunias to it,/ and then, delighted, wonder if our souls become perennial/ from sheer neglect." The "I" can get cryptic as in: "I want feathers in the dark again and a halved tomato you tell me/ is Nelson's eye." She also uses the obscure "you" leaving the reader feeling somewhat excluded. This vagueness of address also figures prominently in Jane Gibian's *The Body's Navigation*.

Jane Gibian, while experimenting with form, has the most enigmatic use of language and content where little is specified and there is no way of locating the poems. An example of this is from "Friday morning": "The light has drifted sideways/ from your exhausted eyes/ and your pixelated face is haunting/ a corner of our minds." There are four poems for abstract ideas, "Poem for: Dissolution, Distraction, Possession and Retrospection" that remain abstract with little understanding

about why they were selected for such attention. In "she takes trembling" she ends with this puzzling conclusion:

... / how is
this effortless submersion
deviant/ you are
scattering flaked almonds
in her glazed-dark bowl
and your mouth is warm
in the face of her dissolution

This lack of specificity distances the reader. It is in sharp contrast to Ric Adamson's *Steel Bone Notes* because he is not afraid to name names.

Adamson's poems are directed toward his wife, and general life experiences (work, travel and city life). His openness gives this collection the most personality and individuality by inviting the reader in and not being afraid to express emotions that are deeply felt, as in a poem about his wife in "The Stuff of Statues":

... and there she is
in sunlight
lynne
naked
stirring coffee
somewhere in her body
a teaspoon measure of my sperm
shapes into a candle flame

His poems play with form, and have a colloquial easiness, mixing both levity and profundity, which gives his book a balance and diversity that make it a pleasure to read.

Looking at the six poets collectively, the main shortcomings are a lack of excitement in language usage and of risk-taking in subject matter. Still, for these poets, who have taken years to get to this career stage, with the invaluable assistance of Five Islands Press, you might see this as an entrée to a diverse meal of poetry.