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SIX NEW TALENTS

Keri Glastonbury, *Hygienic Lily*.

Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 565 0;

Gina Mercer, *The Ocean in the Kitchen*. Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 571 5;

Ted Nielsen, *Search Engine*.

Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 577 4;

Martha Richardson, *In an Empty Room*. Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 583 9;

Rob Riel, *For as Long as You Burn*.

Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 589 8;

Michelle Taylor, *First Language*.

Five Islands Press, 1999.

ISBN 0 86418 595 2

Over the past six years, Ron Pretty and the team of poets who have helped in the decision-making for the Five Islands New Poets series, have presented a range of highly talented, innovative and exciting new poets. I, for one, always look forward to this publishing event because it indicates the richness and vitality of poetry in Australia, and that things augur well for its future. For each one of these books that have been published by Five Islands (and there are 36 now), there are many more manuscripts that didn't make it to the final stages. Given more money, time and resources, you wonder what else might have had the opportunity to awe and

delight readers. This new series, Series Six, contains work by six poets as different as you could imagine, and attests to the depth of the work which must also be out there (and as yet unpublished). For this review, I have chosen to deal with the poets' works separately, as it is really economy, generosity and expediency which brings them into a shared space.

Keri Glastonbury in *Hygienic Lily* has remarkable control of voice and tone. The poems seem to constantly undercut their own sensibility, allowing a cool and witty detachment to work alongside a self-deprecating irony. Glastonbury is often at her best when turning her observations upon her self: "I have a fine wool jumper patterned with diamonds/ that cross-hatch my systolic heart./ You may mistake me for my own fifties husband,/ in corduroy pants that should be worn outdoors." ("Murmur"). She refuses to take herself too seriously, constantly playing the drama of a poem out against quirky mannerist attitudes, as in these closing lines of "Shoiu Ramen":

I have no etiquette with the noodles,
picked from numbered polaroids.
As the Hotel Nikko types
siphon them into their mouths,
as if it was of the noodles' volition.

Her poems have a sharpness and precision which enter the corporeal world at peculiar angles, often making inventive fun of the body as in "Ablutions," rife with images from a Japanese bathhouse in which no-

one escapes comic treatment; or in "Pulp" with its tender masochistic close: "I'm a citrus orange/ plunged chest first/ onto a stainless steel juicer./ Waiting for a pure form/ of domestic violence/ to turn delicious."

Glastonbury scrutinises her subjects at arm's length, holding them at bay with linguistic tongs, so that she can pick over some of the more unsanitary aspects of desire and love. Mostly this detachment works to her advantage, but at times it is a little too clinical, the metaphors a little too stretched or straining for effect: "I litmus-strip you./ The moisture of my mouth/ yet to evaporate./ We relinquish to the molecular/ and take from each other/ in a liminal autopsy." ("Palliative Poem"). However, her inventiveness and expedient sense of how to shift and pace a poem through nuances of tone and image make her work rewarding and refreshing, as in the poem "Lure" which makes its point about desire and intimacy by deft shifts of scene and statement:

At night, unlicensed fishermen light
their boats with a single flare
and drop nets into the water.

Still awake, I am caught by the spin
of a separation, not quite
carnal enough. We have spent the
day fishing with lines.

The wooden slats of the jetty
underneath my bare feet
and the gentle pull of the lure
underneath the water.

With her collection *Hygienic Lily*, Kery Glastonbury has given us poetry which is scintillating in its power and inventiveness, and its ability to interlock the personal with the social and cultural into an exciting, unique poetic texture. It marks a poet of considerable talent.

The most striking feature of Gina Mercer's *The Ocean in the Kitchen* is its dynamic, earthy sensuality. Language is very much used for its verve and energy. Often Mercer will launch straight into the immediacy of an action by commencing a poem with a verb: "gorging two wine-poached nectarines" ("well i don't regret"); "slice firm to open flesh" ("Eat Your Vegetables"); "speaking to you—my sister—" ("Why I Prefer Mangoes to Families"); "mind your step/ watch that drink/ eat up/ pack your swimmers" ("hurdy gurdy").

It is Mercer's style to be direct and upfront with the reader. She is playful and conversational, unpretentious and honest. These are appealing features of her work, as well as the way she can turn many moments into celebrations of sensuality, as in the comparison she makes with a difficult family member in "Why I Prefer Mangoes to Families":

for consolation
I eat a mango
gracious buxom resplendent
deep golden smell
juice to the wrists
this mango knows more about
generosity

than you ever will.

The sense of festivity, of celebration, of delight are at the heart of many poems, and this is reflected in the way Mercer will often use a long, almost over-engorged line in which words themselves become tangible, delectable morsels:

is there space for luscious profuse lush
sprawling pumpkin-vine fat strong
rococo

curls and lots of tendrils lascivious
repetitions

sensual sensuous sinuous phrases
that wind around and around and
round

your senses until you are dazed dizzy
dreaming you are the poem and it is you
in a fertile smoke a tropic-humid
haze of pleasing pleasurable sensations

("Away with Espalier")

At times her work is over-done, too intoxicated and heady, too intent on creating surface rather than depth, or relying too much on anecdote to propel the poem, as in "Unfurling" which doesn't offer much beyond humorous reportage, or "a glass of water and a bed with clean sheets" which, though written in an open readable style, doesn't engage enough with the poetic elements of language to make it more than light entertainment. In contrast, "Epidermis of a Writers' Festival" moves through a humourous, inventive and skilful articulation of similes and metaphors to reach a powerful, yet disturbing end: "I am a woman who knows this man/ who knows what he seeks as he plots the room avidly/ as a 'Rockspider' at the school gates of 3 o'clock."

Mercer's poems about motherhood speak with candid precision about the conflicts and the joys, as in this beautifully rendered image of the mother/child bond: "integral as 'e' & 'r' in mother daughter" ("She's at School"). The way the sounds gut-turally articulate the dynamics here is marvellous. There are also two equally strong poems about sexual abuse ("First Wound" and "I turn on you I burn you up") which add weight and gravity to this book, and which help to balance the heady deliciousness and evocation of sensory pleasures which this book so delights in offering. Mercer's book introduces us to an enterprising, vibrant and generous new voice.

Ted Nielsen's *Search Engine* is written with a cool, ironic yet vulnerable voice. It is this vulnerability which gives the work an authenticity, and which sets the emotional agenda for so many of the poems. It's a poetry of tease and wit, of style and voice; a poetry which takes its own self-consciousness to heart and sets it against the larger and more dominating forces of technology, commerce and market operatives. In this arena, self-doubt, uncertainty and a quizzical ambiguity become pivotal. A sense of questioning pervades the book. The first poem "Managerial" takes this to an effectively exaggerated degree:

animals stare at the camera, becoming
extinct.

where is patagonia, anyway? will those
half-baked

memories of youth become the basis

of everything we do in later life?
what about iguanas, misquoting darwin
for effect?
am i a critic or a programmer?
what will my friends say to mike munro?
a boa constrictor attacks and swallows a
caiman whole.
giant snakes? there in paradise? wow.

Nielsen's poetry seems to broach the important issues of what happens when a technology-centred, de-personalised world becomes the experiential source for our lives; how can poetry be resourced from such material? In "Sonnet 60" and "Sonnet 61," the tone of voice is despairing, yet resigned: "poems have dressed me like this,/ have cut my hair & not my nails./ they're the reason i've/ twelve dollars thirty/ in the bank/ my beautiful excuses, come back." In others it's cynical and fatigued, as if artistic effort will always be undermined and displaced: "even your tender hands are starting to shit me" ("Sonnet 128: Eternal Beauty").

Nielsen's poems, while trying on their cool ironical stances, often undercut themselves by an unexpected emotional engagement, laying vulnerabilities bare. Typically, Nielsen begins his poems with a broad assertion ("acrimony is too much with us these days"; "epic beckons your sense of direction"; "production is driven by the dialectic"; "the postcards are getting tiring")—then works through a rough logic of rhetorical questions, associations of thought and image

to emotionally charged conclusions ("on the graph of my heart/ a curve is descending"; "somewhere a bookshop is always closing"; "i think the morning light's sorta sexy"; "but the sunsets/ sure are beautiful this time of year"). Taken as lines by themselves, these emotions seem trite and sentimental, but they work extremely well in context because they deliver much irony.

So much of the style and execution of Nielsen's poems owe a debt to John Forbes, but the poems do speak very immediately, and mostly what may have been borrowed comes back with its own urgency and force:

"my lover has a great big arse," she says.
dishes collapse in the sink.
the tv sulks, alone & unattended.

is that a bird or a heart attack?
look at your lips on mine, isn't this
bizarre?
a thigh passes over the sun.
("Sonnet 106: Pillowtalk")

However, perhaps one of the problems with this book, or with work that becomes very comfortable with its own style, is that there is not much digression beyond an established tone or register of voice. The poet has to work hard to avoid monotony or predictability. Nielsen's work is inventive and exciting, and I'd be interested to see how his work expanded, varied or carried over in a lengthier volume. *Search Engine* is an engrossing and highly articulate work full of much freshness and flair.

Martha Richardson's collection *In an Empty Room* is polished and elegant and gives the impression that Richardson has been writing for some time, because this is a voice which is fully established and realised. Her poems move with unaffected poise through understatement and through quiet, incisive insights. Her subjects are memory, family, grief and loss and she has an acute awareness of, and how best to use, the subtle persuasions of her own voice.

The opening poem of the collection "In Silence" is a fine example of how she achieves her emotional and tonal shifts and of the intricate modalities which characterise her style:

There is the little instant—
like the shiver of a shaft let fly—
when the indistinct silvering
in a fading mirror rouses, shifts,
and then resumes its place.

There is a formal moment
when the resonance of the rose
dropping its quiet petals
from a bowl of Canton blue,
signals their last repose
on the polished table top.

Richardson has excellent control over her line and never lets a poem slacken rhythmically. She has a keen and pervading sense of a poem's architectonic weight. She builds her poems with attention to the overall resonance of their design, keeping in mind that each

line must uphold the integrity of the poem. Her poem "A Way Through the Gate," through its formal poise, mirrors the mind as it travels through various perceptive levels until: "Almost sightless we stretch toward a structure/ reaching to us as its noiseless hinges swing,/ and a still white voice at the aperture whispers,/ 'Here is the way. The gate is open. Go'." Richardson's poems are elegant structures in which the mind can discover itself through metaphor.

On one or two occasions, however, I found the poems not quite inventive enough in the reach of their subject matter. "Colours of Pain," which while it portrays an emotionally moving situation, is perhaps too reliant on the idea (which has now become a cliché) that pain can be visualised as differing colours; and similarly in "Faraway," where Richardson portrays her mother as a woman unsatisfactorily domiciled by responsibility and routine and who dreams of far-flung places—there is not sufficient development of emotion or intent to make it memorable, or carry it beyond a certain predictability. Richardson's poems about family tensions and dissatisfactions, however, are among the most poignant in the book. "Keepsake", "On Discarding my Mother's Love Letters", "The Quiet Country", "Seconds", "Belated Explanation" are all fuelled by dark, menacing undertones and feelings that some childhood innocence or trust has been breached.

In an Empty Room is a quiet, yet potent collection by a poet whose work is beautifully assured and highly accomplished, and it deserves space among the work of younger and already established poets. It is mature, exemplary work.

Rob Riel's collection *For as Long as You Burn* is subtle, fresh and delicate. It is full of memorable touches, turns of phrase, and it constantly brings warm, human tones into surrealism's ambits, as in these lines from "Balance": "Thin smoke rises, insubstantial, to form a transparent toilet seat supporting the soft grey bums of Botticelli clouds." Riel's poems are immediately likeable. They convey their emotions mainly through imagery which always works in the elements of insight and surprise. The poem "This Heat" is worth quoting in full:

Two days after the stroke
which tossed him thrashing,
foam-flecked
and blind across the hardwood floor,
I remember my dog
coming home from the vet, innocent
and doomed, his wide brown eyes
filled with apology
for how his hind legs
now worked so badly,

and how the shame burned me
to be loved like that.

Those final stresses have the
strength of hammers; and I love the
way Riel can work an image into the
rhythmic structure of a poem as in

"On Falling Asleep", "Glass",
"Evolution" and "Love, Mid-afternoon"
in which the metaphors are not
separate from the musical progress of
the poems. In fact, so many of the
poems rely on an ability to fuse
thought and image to create resonance
and emotional depth: "I thought of
you/ on the ferry to Fraser Island/ as
my rumbling diesel finger/ stroked
the belly of the water/ and set these
signs/ as spindrift myths of ache/ and
innocence, shivering/ through the cool
blue flesh/ of the sea." ("Message")

Rarely do Riel's poems resort to
anecdote or a reliance on content,
however the least successful of the
poems are those in which Riel uses
the humour of a situation to propel a
poem (such as in "A Brief History of
Risk") rather than letting the humour
become more organically embedded
in the imagery and movement of the
poems. Riel does achieve this in
"Millennium", "Pome" and "Vespers",
but any power in "A Brief History of
Risk" is undercut by Riel trying to
extract too much from a situation
which does not seem to be deeply
experienced or felt, but rather simply
observed and reported upon. As a
result, the closing seven lines seem
trite and unconvincing:

The warning is useless now, except as a
reminder

that scars left by a kindly mutilation
remain indistinguishable from those

made in fear or hate. I apologise to the
cactus,

and on my way to the carpark,

the cup and its red advice
go into the bin.

But for the most part, Riel's work is highly accomplished, and has a wonderful sense of play and bonhomie. *For as Long as You Burn* will be a delight and revelation for many readers.

Michelle Taylor in *First Language* has a laudable flair for narrative lyricism. She can move her poems easily through the potent use of images, as in "The Lamb That Ate Sunday," a nightmarish tale about a child's discovery of a brutal truth. The poem has a fairytale quality to it, in the way that the narrative implicates evil and disorder within an initially benign and idyllic background and warm coterie:

Winter is a quiet time
when my bedroom window
mistakes itself for the world
and my father goes padding
on Sunday morning
dew to the shed.

Then, the way the poem moves towards its shocking end is quite compelling, as Taylor imports her images with more and more power:

I hide my face in the wind.
The grasses are sweet
and oily
and all the animals wear fleeces
that fool only children.

Taylor's narratives often inhabit that ambiguous space made more

available to dream, than to anecdote or sequential inquiry, so that she can conjure up so many implications within the deft stroke of a poem. "How To Count And Drown At the Same Time" is a prime example of how the narrative successfully layers revelation and memory, so that the poem enacts its story of power and fear within its different perspectives and shifts of time.

Taylor uses her images to make exploratory inroads into the relationship between language and perception, into the way language yields revelation and insight. *First Language* is a book about the power of poetry, about what can be made nameable and attainable by the poetic image. In "bringing tulips," Taylor skilfully lets the tulips become the symbols through which the emotional dynamics of the two protagonists are revealed, so that the poem's lines: "I have never brought her/ tulips before/ —they're hard to find/ this time of year—/ so when she asks/ if I will bring tulips/ for her funeral/ I do not know what to say" become all the more poignant. It's a pity Taylor didn't end her poem here, as they seem to me to be the culminating lines.

Sometimes Taylor's images can overshoot their mark, as if she hasn't quite pulled off the hazardous thin-edged walk her poems would risk. "Stone Baby" strains too much to effect its tropes, and lines such as "Even stones have mothers" and "Stones too must die" seem forced,

and contrived, and the emotions too imposed and assumed, rather than being embodied or enacted. However, *First Language* is full of many finely executed poems that show Michelle Taylor certainly has earned her commission to deliver poems of power and illumination. Her book shows that she has the skill to take the narrative and lyrical elements of language a long way, and through its use of the image to reveal and enact, reminds us of poetry's enabling and transformative principles.



Mervyn F. Bendle

AUSTRALIA AS LOST CHILD

Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.
ISBN 0 521 59499 5.

Pierce leaves readers in no doubt about the import of his inquiry. It is not of mere academic or literary interest, rather it is an analysis of an anxiety that runs so deep in Australian culture that "the next generation is set at hazard." Indeed, "Australia, 'the country of lost children,' may become the place where the post-medieval Western notion of childhood dies first." (xviii)

Pierce focusses on the second halves of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which were, incidently, the two great (post Gold Rush and Post-War) baby-boom periods in Australian history. There, Pierce detects two moments in Australian history when a widespread sense that the nation's children were at risk existed. A century ago the danger lay in the bush, the vast wilderness that could so easily swallow up the wandering innocent. At present, the danger lies elsewhere, in the cities, our institutions, the playgrounds and the programmes of social engineering that governments have unleashed, with all their allegedly "good intentions." For Pierce, "a nihilistic wish to deny them a future seems to have inspired the actions of many who held responsibility for the young." (xvii) Indeed, there is "a will to thwart the chances, or the very being, of the next generation." (xvii)

These are profound fears indeed: what *can* Pierce's book be about? What can he *possibly* have detected lurking beneath the veneer of Australian civilization?

The answer is complex and can only partially be provided from Pierce's text as it presently stands (indeed, the present edition can be seen as a powerful first foray into this territory). To begin with, an essential distinction must be made between the reality of the threat(s) and their representations. The book describes many actual events but doesn't seek to offer evidence that the actual loss