

their gestures static or mute, even at times limp. Hands, which can be so expressive, are reduced to the merest suggestion of paws, or crab-claws, if they are drawn at all. A good figure drawing needs *hands*; even if they are not drawn in detail, their gesture echoes and intensifies that of the body itself.

The image of a pen running “up and down the flaw in creation” sets up an expectation of poetry that worries at sensitive or painful areas of the psyche. And there are many poems which deal with what it means to be human, and to know that you are mortal; the loss of a spouse (“After His Wife’s Death”), the loss of friends to death (“The Hollow Head”), the swift passing of each moment (“Looking at the Brickwork”). Simpson’s language itself, however, is not wild or forceful enough to really *touch*, in the way that a poem must. In “Perpetual life,” for example:

If after your death
there is everlasting life

it could turn out to be
such a fluorescent paradise

that you’re bored stiff
and think it’s purgatory

Is this really poetry? Does it sing? Does it surprise, or give a little electric shock now and then? If you recited it whilst shaving, would it make your hair stand on end? Female/beardless readers, are there

lines which make your shoulder-blades hum, or your nipples erect? For this reader, Simpson’s verse lacks the musicality and tension, the muscularity and tenderness, which make lines of words into poetry.

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Deb Westbury

VISCERAL EMBODIMENT

Marcella Polain, *Each Clear Night*. Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 2000, pp.84 ISBN 0 86418 556 1

Every Friday I travel on the train for two hours, from the mountains to the city. It is the perfect journey for reading poetry—and to journey while reading poetry is the perfect way to read it. Last week I travelled with Marcella Polain’s *Each Clear Night*: in imagination crossing the country to Perth and back, and through memory, to meeting Marcella in Wollongong in 1995 when her first book *Dumbstruck* was due to be published.

By the time my train had reached the city, a new poetry of my own was forming in my head. This is an indication, I think, of the power that fine poetry has, to call forth the poetry inside ourselves. More

surprising, Marcella's poems called forth a definition of osmosis that had somehow remained wedged in my brain since high school. Osmosis, as doubtless you would remember, is the "diffusion of solvent through a semi-permeable membrane." It is a metaphorical action—literally a "bearing across"—the poet's bringing together, a making of things new with words

what a porous language this is:
meanings run like confluence of
waters
strained through limestone

"ferocious speleology"

These poetic and metaphorical stirrings were set in motion I think by the sheer exhilaration of reading *Each Clear Night*. Every poem here seems to be its own expanding galaxy, all false imitations have been cast aside. Every poem affirms the unification of human with non-human nature, rejecting all dualism, even as it delights in paradox.

In "this dream car" the membrane between past and present, life and death, the life that pulses *inside* the skin and the life *outside*, seems at its most permeable. And these beautiful lines from "letters to belgium":

the beloved air
the shedding of a grafted skin
the pink and tender breaking through
of origin

and from the same poem:

i enclose a favourite photograph
taken in mid winter
but see how clear
how bright the air
see his hooded lids
his jumper's muted blue
see—my son is surrounded:
his breath his bubble pipe this
family of things
their bright wet skins
make hard the air
see how they are caught
as they rise slowly from him?
see his texture:
how does the presence
of such air undo his cells
& where (do you believe) is the point of
focus?

There is a sense in this poem, and in the collection as a whole, that the action of metaphor, the "bearing across" is continuous. Past present and future are in simultaneous motion.

To quote the epigraph to "ferocious speleology": "Nothing is sudden. Not an explosion—planned, timed, wired carefully—not the burst door. Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant." (47, Anne Michaels)

The child in the photograph will always be as he was: his mother's parents have not yet met; they are sailing eternally from Europe to Western Australia; they are setting up house in Kondinin; their children are still undreamt of. In "a

letter to another city" the narrator has already left and returned. In "disappearances" the father, long absent, is continuously present in reconfigured myth.

"letters to belgium" asks:

where does one place paralysis
& where the shock exploding in our
heads?

The poetic vision here is as expansive and fluid as the wordcraft is precise and finely tuned.

Always the pronoun "i" appears only in lower case. It reminds me of a point of light in a fractal field and it is not separate from the shimmering fields of W.A.'s wheat country which are beautifully worked in a series of connected poems "wheat belt poems."

Importantly, the book itself is as thoughtfully constructed as any one of its individual poems. The reach of the poems is wide and subversive. There seems little that is tenuous or ambivalent about what joins them to their energetic source—the poet's visceral life of embodiment.