

"caused by too rapid a change in pressure in the ascent" (85).

These, however, are comparatively minor reservations. It is true to say that I both enjoyed *Reefscape* and learned from it.

Rebecca Edwards

## RUNNING UP THE FLAW

R.A. Simpson, *The Midday Clock; Selected Poems and Drawings*. The Age/Macmillan 1999

This is a beautifully produced book; clothbound, on thick, cream paper. Simpson's poems luxuriate in the centre of generous pages, interspersed with his brush-and-ink line drawings, mostly of female figures. It should be a delicious book, a book to savour and treasure. In his foreword, Andrew Clark of *The Age* writes: "A Poetry Editor of *The Age* for 28 years Ron fostered the work of numerous young practitioners ... His deep love of poetry, helpful disposition, unfailing courtesy—spiced at times with irreverent wit—created a literary oasis in a world where this literary form has too often been relegated to the bottom of the creative food chain." This is high praise. Although Clark's

metaphors are mixed, what he has to say makes me like R.A. Simpson very much. I don't, however, think much of his poetry.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe introduces these "dry, wise, historicist poems," and claims that "Simpson's artful pen runs up and down the flaw in creation." I agree that what Simpson has to say is drily witty, even wise. However, too often the lines themselves are flat and uninspiring. In "The Final Clubroom," for example:

Australian writers who have died  
wait impatient in the final clubroom  
to ask if they're read by those outside

They welcome you then say "So life is  
over"

Even in more lyrical poems, such as "Down's Syndrome," there are line breaks which put unjustifiable pressure on certain words: *The stars are always there/ thinking serious/ between/ the sun going somewhere/ and when it comes back here*. Potentially strong images are betrayed by weak verbs, as in *At the edges grow/ today and tomorrow/ coming out like spider's legs* (Interior Restoration). "Grow" is fairly ordinary, but "coming out" is worse than ordinary. Surely the poet has a responsibility to his craft which includes finding verbs that carry the image he wishes to create, rather than dropping it flat on its back.

The drawings, like many of the poems, are unremarkable. Simpson's figures are for the most part faceless,

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