FABULISTS AND PERFORMERS


Do I treat these poems as six books or three—two complete collections and a “collation” of four voices in one volume? For purchase, the Penguin is the best buy, with its bold vermilion cover, flaming around a figure caught up in an engulfing whirlpool. And certainly as with other Penguin “new” poet collections, this provides “depth, diversity and richness.” But for reading and reviewing, I decided to treat them as six.

Three of the poets have a strong “performative” aspect: Jenny Boult, Sue Moss and Komninos; whereas a more distilled complexity characterises the work of Louise Crisp and Chris Mansell, while Coral Hull’s poetry is more visual—distinctive on the page for its use of the slash.

I need to declare my own bias: I have met and talked with some of these poets. I have published poems and artwork by Coral Hull and one of Jenny Boult’s poems mentions me by name. I have worked briefly with Komninos in a couple of performances and I have often admired the poetry of Chris Mansell. There, that lays a few cards on the table. But what does it mean? That I’m well-disposed towards the work of writers I’ve met—or the opposite? Will the work of writers not known to me have a greater impact because their voices will be fresh, uncluttered by expectation?

Chris Mansell’s *Day Easy Sunlight Fine* (her fourth collection) is “hot”—deft and suggestive poems that wind their sinuous ways through language, thought and experience: “elegant abstract passionate” as Mansell writes of part of our human capacity in “phased in space.” (This poem also has the book’s deceptively bluff title phrase in it.) Athletic leaps of thought and imagination combine to create an oblique, confident, suggestive verbal texture. Taunting, “Dirty realism” for example, begins:

there is nothing meta in this fiction
no fabulists live here           no pretty
words and delightfully experimental pictures
with a structure as difficult and elliptical
as camel humps . . .

Yet Mansell’s poetry is suffused with meta-perspectives, fabulation and elliptical experiment as R. D. Fitzgerald’s “The Face of the Waters” or Slessor’s bleak “Stars” and “Five Bells” are.

Her collection is organised into four sections beginning with “Poems to eat”—but how? Any way you can—nibble at, taste resolutely and fully, plunge into voraciously. In some ways these poems are both hors d’oeuvres—tantalising, promising further satisfactions while ample in themselves. Thus “The garden” is a beautifully precise imagining of a letter being sent as it were by the garden where the writer sits, and “Mother us” (is the title a noun, a verb, an invocation?) is a poem exploring as Rosemary Dobson has done, some skeins in the relationships of the self to (m)other.

The second section, “Poems with no breathing”—tends toward politics, history, science and these seem often to be pushing onto the reader, crowded with thoughts and impressions. “Black,” for example, explores a difficult distance:

where trees are all trunk and you and I
lie face to face without caring
without moving making and not making love

The third section “Poems for singing” expresses an emotional intensity like that of an aria. “The launch” with its prismatic images of the poet’s aloneness or the eccentric “The cat machine” are not easy or easily accessible but meditative and often oblique poems of grace and insight. The section ends on a “Soliloquy”:

is it possible to have
your voice again to come gently
into your night as if you were still a lover
your skin palpitating in my sleep

Finally, in “Poems to say while walking”, there is “Caves”

we exercise our cool minds
in the cool air
and try for unpassion
but the ache of the red
desert sings silently
like a cicada before
emerging from the night
And “On the edge of Toowoomba, 3” speculates:

and you wonder why god needs
so many houses unless
he’s a property developer too

Mansell captures in *Day Easy Sunlight Fine* a cosmic dance aspect to human existence as well as the more mundane aspects of being caught up in family relationships, writing letters, feeling lonely: “there are none of us who are not mice/ caught somewhere in a flesh pink maze” (“Dirty realism”). More than anything it’s this sense of undefined and unrealised “otherness” that Mansell’s poetry explores: our connectedness to and distance from things, people and experiences, even when the whole picture is unclear.

*pearl & sea fed* is Louise Crisp’s first book-length collection. It “travels” around Australia in four movements, from the coast to the centre, through various relationships and meditations, to enact an exploration of the self’s understanding of knowledge, language and the land. The poetry has a distilled intensity as it makes reading a multi-layered satisfaction that “sees” landscapes through the physical body and the imagination, thinking and mythology. The book is framed by “Kurnai littoral” and “Koolpin” where a female locus of perception is defined and located labially—in terms of layers of skin, flesh; an awareness of inside/outside “or a hole in the ground/where the story comes out.”

The first section moves from an embrace of the Blue Mountains as landscape, art and experience, through Omeo, to tropical monsoons. In “Kurnai littoral” the women dream the land through their bodies:

   the sun swells
   like an idea inside
   a membrane/ all along the coast shine
   small translucent pods:
   . . . the wind . . . dilates
   . . . the Yeerung river stops: the colour
   of old blood . . .

Its history and exploration are felt as the canoe feels the water:

   we are
   skin and bone
   the hollow cavity
   and the canoe.
In “burn or the buddhist sect” there is an almost zen sense of moving to extinction as another way of knowing:

till finally the eagle
which has been watching me
for 3 months, curls up
its wings on the underside of the sky
like a cigarette paper
on the inside of a spiral:
burns then vanishes.

“rock map” (a poem that would have been better placed on a left hand page as it runs just a few lines over and would be better seen as a whole on an open double page) shows both fascination and bonding with the land as well as some distance from a white appropriation of it. The poet sees both her own sexual connection with the land and her foreignness:

from the region of Crystal Falls
is the single white one
she is as skinny as lightning
her breasts & genitals enlarged with sexuality.

While “skin” proposes the impossibility of separating thought from thing, shape from object—an idea which permeates the whole book:

it is impossible
to peel back the skin
of a mango
without the flesh
attached. . .

In section II Crisp explores relationships—with both men and women—again she is preoccupied with maps and roles: “maremidw” combines a (perhaps historical) sense of a woman being brought to a remote settlement with a more tentative sense of an imminent pregnancy. There is distance and closeness as the woman sees herself both as uniquely individual and as a participant in a series of roles (see “twice”: “being as is a kept woman . . . & lovemaking is no isolated toy,” “lilith” or “woman-in-effect”:

the tits of the two women
keep pointing at me
from the painting
— where have I come from
& how many?

By contrast, “codeine libretto” uses the experience of a headache as an equally legitimate way to explore the world as the previous meditative clarity.

Section III focuses on pregnancy, gestation, birth, see especially “labiata,” “second child?” and “the bath.” This writing is suffused with a sensual/sexual maternity, an erotic embrace which takes in the land. But there is also delicacy as in “pearl” (“oyster child/curls.../no fingers”).

Section IV travels around the Centre:—Cooper[b?] Pedy—Kakadu—Koolpin, not just geographically but mythically. There are so many good poems in this section where journey and sensation are intertwined, “moving on”: “the white reflecting sky/ offers unlimited prospect” and where mythologies are redefined so that the “sugar plum fairy” becomes the “billy goat plum hard & bitter.” The title poem persona has become a female littoral dreaming “I watch through a slit in my belly.” But in “Koolpin” she is “luckless”:

I fall back on intellect. . . .
shelter or secret
place. . .

The final poem resolves a quest implicit in pearl & sea fed:

I understand now
the point of connection. . . .
story/dream/changeling
the spirit makes an offering
& I grow my own dream

Crisp is preoccupied with questions of how to speak about what is perceived and known when intellect is so faulty and language so slippery and she uses her body—especially during pregnancy—as a site of interrogation and a means of describing a generative relationship to the landscape. There is a fineness about her poetry that both confronts, seduces and transfixes the reader.

Coral Hull’s, In the Dog Box of Summer as its title suggests, focuses on imprisonment, pain, brutality. Hot? Yes, if hot means plenty of tactile and imagined violence, (see for example “The Weapon” with its suggestion of
sustained child abuse) alienation, dissociation. There are no moments of
delight, however brief, not much beauty or sweetness. The poems articulate a
marginalised existence in terms of gender, class and perhaps ethnicity:

in this world
the third world is a sucked-out nipple—
for my western child that eats five people

The language is often harsh—Hull delights in cumulative excess, such as
"ribs/gizzards/chunks of fat/& small bones/". This is writing with punch (chili
rather than vodka?) and very “hot.” Hull’s use of the slash enacts a sense of
oppression, nausea, panic. While there is much stylistic and typographical play,
unlike Mansell and Crisp, Hull seems not so much interested in artifice as in
message. This is the language of confrontation rather than exploration or
meditation (although see “Chrysalis” and “Linen at Midnight”).

Hull’s writing is particularly sensitive to the imagined feelings and sufferings of
animals (dogs especially—see “In Blankets in Newtown” and “Dying Dog
Mantra”) where an old dog is put down:

there was nothing i could do/except chant the
mantra/ good dog you’re a good dog—
the poison gripped his heart the death gripped him
his eyes sudden & large it was not gentle it was a
punch he stopped breathing he left his place to
me he left the universe.

or ”Rabbit scream” with its affections and anxieties pulled in two directions:

dogs in the background/ smelling the body/
feeling sorry for bringing the rabbit to me/ yet not
knowing why they are sorry/
   silent dogs/ city dogs.
watching me/
   the rabbit is dead/ its warm body hangs
in my hands/ its neck long & broken/ belly fur
tangled with grass seed/ its body lean/
     no puncture
marks/ no blood/

Hull’s poems also focus on the situations in which women, especially herself and
her mother, find themselves. Thus, “Chrysalis” locates suffering not so much
inherently bound up with being female so much as in terms of the responses of men:
& the chrysalis was a woman/
stirring from half-formed sleep/
beneath the crakie of skin/
she was weeping/ she was my
mother/ with me inside her/
a chrysalis bleeding darkly
maroon/ we oozed between the
legs of men/ sacred fluid
covering dirt . . .

"White linen at midnight" is an almost gothic meditation, a sonata using an
icon of her mother folding sheets as a narrative motif. And "Tell the women"
mimics the language of caution used to women about public dangers while
disguising a more pressing domestic threat. "Waratah" articulates an
emblematic occasion of remembered suffering—her father's, the land's and
her own.

There is in fact a pervasive sense of pity and repulsion for her father as "In the
Pool," where she knows that her father's violence in punching her breast is
unconscionable as well as a measure of his own self-hatred and anguish. As
well, in "Brewarrina Tip" Hull recounts her father's drunken return:

    dad stands over the bed/ & empties his
tip findings/onto the heads of myself & sleeping
partner/
    pieces of dried grass/ catheads & pebbles/
paper & socks/ & the mangoey taste of sour tip/
falling onto my face/
    i say half-awake/
    fuckoffdadfuckoff/
    dad says/fuckyathen/ & stomps
out to the kitchen/ . . .

Hull likes immediacy and shock. In these powerful, often harrowing poems
there is a sense of life's claustrophobic grip on an individual, leaving her
choking, helpless and angry. Hull's persona is often on the edge, on the
receiving end, never dishing it out and certainly never triumphant. Reading
Hull's poetry is not in a sense a pleasant experience but it is one of intensity
and empathy.

Jenny Boult's Abrasion begins the "meal" of Hot Collation: savoury but not
delicate vol au vents. Rather, like a first performer in a reading, this work struts
its stuff in a wry, tough, lonely series of pieces. For my taste she is the best of the
"performance" poets in this medley, partly because there’s a consciousness of ageing and its consequences—a maturity that gives resonance and uncertainty to her poems (see "desire": “you make love like a husband/ i have never been a wife”). Nearly always, disappointment is the prevailing flavour here—beyond the anger, amusement, gritty realism. Thus “bedtime stories” begins:

so here i am  
in another lousy  
lonely bar  

i can’t afford  
to drown sorrow  
i dampen it.

There is a world weariness that is elsewhere in this collection suggested by “acts of contortion”, “at the end of lane 8” and “dada”:

so much for love  
we learn about ourselves in mirrors  
decorate for svengali at the opera . . .  

i never was a “beautiful young woman”  
am congenitally afflicted with an overdose  
of soul & an overnight bagful of surprise.

These are not “hot” so much as “cool” and caught in Boul’s unsentimental gaze. Deadpan, cynical, ragged with experience. This is poetry that’s been through the hoops. These songs of experience show the ladders in their pantyhose: “in the kissing academy/ decorum is a pair/ of leotards.”

Some have an up-tempo rhythm, showing their links to the performance circuits (“the car” cf. “The House that Jack Built” or “caffeine addict” with its short two-word lines, four line stanzas and incessant chorus “can’t relax” which just about takes over the poem). Irony, sarcasm and varieties of black comedy pervade, for instance in “advice” [to a poet]:

listen. i can tell you a story about a man  
with a wooden leg & a dog that whistled  
you could write a poem about that. . . .

or, from “beat”: 
if you must drop names
first
learn the correct pronunciation

or, from "music is the art of the spirit kirkegaard (& all you can hear are words)"

you remember the man with
the pornographic dog that sucked
itself off while it watched.

Many of Boult's poems suggest damage control after some physical confrontation or difficulty. The titles seem apt for broad swathes of her work: "spillage", "abrasion": "abandon/ call out the lifeguard/ don't try to swim for it/ that horizon's illusion." The poetry seeps out from experiences, not with any sense of victory or revelation but as a matter of course. There's no certainty even of the most modest of claims: "there must be more to life / than losing it."

Much seems to depend on mood and sometimes her poetry has an elegaic quality to it:

let there be no meaningless conversation
only the wind's serenade
as it rolls over the barren country
between us.

At other times it's more mundane "I worked as a cleaner & lived every line on every sink in every room." "geographic" is quite good, with its deliberate confrontation of the difference between people in a momentary relationship:

we tie off loose ends like tourists
as our senses focus on the landscape

of each other's flesh. in a few hours
it will be history. i don't ask

questions. you tell me i make love
like a ballet dancer. i don't know

what you mean. i deify the act of sex
salt slicked & slippery ready to drown
in the quarry of your eyes. these
are writhing couplets. . . .

The virtue of Komninos' poems is their accessibility and a delight in colloquiality by simple tricks of language. He both eschews and embodies the role of travelling bard. Komninos' forte is as a teacher, a performer, an entrepreneur who can rescue poetry readings from the brink of boredom. He's a popularist and has inspired many who are marginalised by age, occupation, social status and ethnicity to try to forge new and appropriate languages, in the process doing as Salman Rushdie is reported to have suggested: "defy [your] gods—for a writer that is the only way."

In Komninos By the Kupful the gauche title sets the tone: brash and attention-seeking. Unfortunately here, the road of excess doesn't lead to the palace of wisdom so that although many poems are good to read (aloud) and there is a kind of honesty in the cluttered, loquacious, constantly observing consciousness of the poet, sometimes the poems are sprawling lists:

- a double-breasted businessman dashes,
- a couple of wild head-bangers, men's men, unbuttoned flannelette shirts expose
  metallica t-shirts, torn jeans, headbands, greasy long hair, sway their dance-walk.

On other occasions the poet seems to be constantly searching for clever similes and the result seems bludgeoning as, also from "the ballad of king street":

- writers as fresh as raw tuna, as together as sticky rice,
  encompassing as seaweed wrappers, as embracing as wasabi.

And sometimes in the focus on both loneliness and crowdedness—the reader is swamped by words "cathartic scatological art" so that you want to challenge Komninos and say "Hey, that's bullshit. You're not so much 'shedding personal baggage' as seeking to acquire more." Often these poems (eg "man about the house/ on turning forty-three") read like creative writing class exercises (write what you can in 20 minutes on "blue" or "pink" or a self portrait or pick a particular rhyme or structural device and work with it).

The poems in the first section—busy, metropolitan scenes of Melbourne & Sydney—urban blues stretching language over culture (like a condom?) are worldly, witty, lonely. To me they are too crowded on the page, almost begging for editing.
I did find evocative the poems “riverina—hay plains” and “hillston welcome” but perhaps that’s my geographic bias.

Some pieces in “diary of a residency” eg “day 15”, “day 16” are suggestive of more than their surface texture but on the page annoyingly glib. Without the forceful presence of the poet in performance these pieces seem incomplete “scripts.” Conversely, “noura from narooma” sketches a life story which is all too plausible and emotionally draining. Here Komninos uses the vernacular to good effect.

However, while “Venus of Marrickville” shows Komninos’ desire to experiment, to play with techniques and forms (here it’s Shakespeare) I don’t think he pulls it off (as it were):

Adonis: i bet you couldn’t even drive a car like this
let alone know what makes it go.
your slagging is as weak as piss
why don’t you try to slag something you know.
this car can blow any car off the strip
and you know shit, so shut your stupid lip.

—this must surely be a nadir of Australian poetry.

Sue Moss’s *The Upwardly Downwardly Mobility Blues* begins with a wonderful evocation of a remembered sex-education evening, “The annual mothers & daughters night”:

Our bodies emerged in garish slides
sun-yellow uterus, sky-blue fallopian tubes
& a magenta vagina, all connected by
blood-red broken lines.

“glamorgan goose” is evocative of her grandmother:

... swan shot out of season...

A bosomy woman she shoved them down her dress
the warmth too late for nurturing stolen shadows

\ withered within the shell. Through windows
the sky shot to pieces hangs in empty tatters.
And many of the other poems begin anecdotally from memories, scenes or occasions: “Yabbying,” “The Over 40’s Rap.” Much is gently ironic, cool and reflective. Some are fond, eg “Uncles.” But not powerful. Even “kerouac” remains flattering despite the irony:

kerouac beat poet
on the off beat/ hardly
noticing the women gone
hearing in dreams a high thin
snap his anti-hero’s chest
compressed by the slow weight
of ice

“Rapunzel Speaks” from her tower “on the 40th floor; one-way glass” to the importuning prince:

Go away! Go and find
a different head of hair to climb.
I’ve had enough. All these years
hovering indecisively between
earth and sky, snivelling
and gazing at my tower.

For me this is too polite (perhaps it would seem different in performance).

Moss’s poems seem often to pull their punches, the justifiable anger and rejection is too gentle, too nicely amusing (see “Motherhood Statements” or “UBDs”). On the whole they didn’t really grab me, even after four readings. They seem tepid rather than hot. Anecdotal. Off the cuff. Transient—like rap. A tad preachy too. Mild rather than hot.

There are no threads to tie up here—such patterning would impose even more violence than my “readings” have. And there are other “flavours”—of 1994 and since—which reconstitute the meal/quest/performance. Other fabulous artificers await.