LETTING THE WORLD RUN ABOUT:
POETRY FROM ALL OVER


Collections of poetry from the far north of Queensland to Melbourne and from Perth in the west are among the beautifully produced and well edited volumes received by LiNQ in the last year. Poems by poets who have not yet established themselves, rather than the confirmed achievements of those who have demonstrated beyond question their mastery, always have a special interest for this reviewer. The pleasure of reading them lies in the moments of sudden excitement and even brilliance that await the reader who has come to expect these things from the first-rankers.

To begin however, with the better-known poets, whose work has excited many readers in the past, Doris Brett’s In the constellation of the crab, John A. Scott’s Selected Poems, Barry O’Donohue’s Portrait of a Survivor and Philip Hammial’s Just Desserts contain poems which achieve originality, complexity and insight. Brett’s most striking theme is the emotional, intellectual and indeed spiritual accommodation of the fact of cancer, and the poems that stand out are those in which the speaker addresses her own body. Body and soul dialogues and poetic farewells to the body comprise almost a minor genre in themselves, and Brett’s simple “Uterus” is a true companion for the best of them with its address to that “old wanderer whom the ancients/ knew, the seat of emotions,” ending with the poignant, unsentimental “I don’t know/ how to say good-bye to you/ little
mother, wandering bowl/ of the soul.” Remembering how the uterus “took care of my daughter” and “when the time came pushed her into the world,” the speaker ends “In every birth/ there is a dying.” In the constellation of the crab is not the first Australian collection centred on the experience of facing cancer, but it is one of the most memorable. The second section of the book, “Going into the Woods,” examines fairy tales, while the nine lyrics of “Pterodactyl Country,” relate to the earlier sections of the book through their depictions of experiences apprehended in reality and through myth.

John A. Scott’s Selected Poems includes pieces from his best known and often controversial earlier publications, like “Flooded City,” “Celebration,” “St Clair” and “The Chicago Blues Style.” Scott’s work made its mark in Melbourne’s lively 1960s and 1970s scene, and revisiting extracts from the St Clair Narratives, for example, reminds the reader how consistently strong his writing has been. The idiosyncrasies which excited young readers in the 1980s—and perhaps annoyed others—have not dated, nor have the dramatised commentaries on the confrontation between the personal and the totalitarian which form part of the St Clair narrative:

What were your thoughts
on the mud-shod journey to truth? When you came,
dugged, into these last turrets of nationalism.

Scott, like Alan Wearne in The Nightmarkets, is one of the Australian poets who have over recent decades reinvigorated the nineteenth-century form of the verse novel. These extracts in various poetic forms and styles should send readers back to Scott’s complete poems.

Surprisingly Portrait of a Survivor by the Queensland poet Barry O’Donohue has something in common with Scott’s work: surprising because O’Donohue tends to write occasional poetry which is lyrical even when it campaigns against injustice. However, this collection, based on O’Donohue’s tour of duty in the combat zone as a Vietnam conscript, forms a novella with the narrator as the central figure. The appendix provides information for the younger generation about the Vietnam War and some issues raised in its aftermath, like Agent Orange and substance dependence among Vietnam veterans. The poems are reflective, wise, but sometimes taut with terror and tense with irony. The jungle is a realised presence. For those who know southern Queensland, there is that sudden shock of quiet completeness in the poem “Mt Tambourine/ Bin Ba” when the Vietnam jungle merges with the rainforest of Mt Tambourine where “leaf mulch and old bracken/ . . . lie quietly in their millenium”: 
The leaf garden and dark air
crying out for the adoration they deserve.
no guns ring out. No napalm . . .

American born Philip Hammial prefaces Just Desserts with a quotation from
Robert Desnos: “Poetry may be this or that. But it shouldn’t necessarily be this
or that . . . except delirious and lucid.” Just so. Hammial’s poetic prose and
verse pieces have a delirious sound and their lucidity is the lucidity of a
contemporary impressionist painting. Experiences emerge and their impact is
exciting. The strongest emotion evoked is perhaps a sense of relief that the
poems refer to a world which the reader needs to know only through Hammial’s
poetry. The cover, depicting a dark-skinned face holding a razor blade between
its lips, thematically has nothing to do with the poems, but it certainly
establishes a suitable ambience.

Several anthologies appearing over the last year represent straws in the wind
indicating the directions taken by younger, quiet achievers and beginning
poets. Going Down Swinging 15 is dedicated to the poet and editor Barrett Reid
who died in 1995, loved and respected by those whose work he assisted, most
recently as poetry editor of Overland. The long and honourable history of Going
Down Swinging proves that it is one of the hardier of the ephemeral little poetry
magazines that sprang to life in the 1960s and 1970s. No 15 is packed with
new and better known poets of all persuasions, including performance poets
Lauren Williams and Eric Beach, Chinese poet Ouyang Yu, familiar faces like
Lyndon Walker, Kevin Brophy, Michael Scammell and Stephen J. Williams.
There are names less familiar to this reader but whose work I want to revisit.
Emma Lew’s “Before Heraldry,” Jordie Albiston’s love sonnets, and Peter
Bakowski’s “The dictionary is just a beautiful menu” include unforgettable
lines and images in well-proportioned and coordinated poems. The
achievement of Ouyang Yu, who has been writing in English for a
comparatively short time, is remarkably sophisticated:

but I translate myself
from Chinese into English
disappear into appearance
of another existence
looking across the barrier of tied tongues

of the concealed image of the other body

“Translating Myself”
Going Down Swinging 15 includes reviews, commentaries, a brief interview with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and a lively literary essay by Stephen J. Williams. The issue is highly recommended for poets who like to know what is happening at the grassroots level of Australian poetry, where it all begins and where some of the most fastidious and demanding readers congregate.

Youngstreet Poets 5 edited by Peter Skrzynecki is also dedicated to a loved and staunch friend of poetry, Jean Stone, who died in 1992 and was the co-founder of the Youngstreet group. Skrzynecki explains that the title of the anthology, The Breaking Line, comes from Hilarie Lindsay's "Hanging Out Washing" in which she remembers her "mother's cry of anguish when the line broke." The analogy Skrzynecki finds is in every poet's experience of "the moment of 'the breaking line,' when realisation or awareness has suddenly catapulted them into a confrontation with that part of themselves where they've had to retie the ends of experience and create a new world with words." Poems which endorse this notion do not necessarily take the poet as their subject. A striking example is Ron Stevens' "Neighbourhood Watch" in which the narrator describes his next door neighbour, a veteran of Changi whose letterbox is wrecked by vandals and who may read in the paper just offered by the narrator that the British hold the 8th Division culpable for the loss of Singapore.

He's almost fixed the letterbox
and whistling
as he creaks about on stiffened legs . . .
converting daily pain to little victories.

Some of the poems handle images very dexterously. This is from Louise Wakeling's "Now you see her, now you don't," about the mood swings of a woman suffering from pre-menstrual tension and her effect on the speaker:

You sink into the bleak places
and the future looks dusty
where you run your finger
down its planes

an hour later maybe less
she's light descending a staircase
to utter something kind . . .

In Vera Newsom's "Frogs at Midnight," an elegiac tribute. The image envelopes the poem: "When you were alive we never quarrelled,/ almost never—hated dissonance." The speaker wishes that there had been some slight "disharmony..."
in loving" to ward off the jealousy of the gods. The sense of loss and mortality is created in the image:

To their ears, if frogs have ears, they make immortal music. It distorts my sleep, shatters the fragments of a dream, gives intimations that outside this world there are other worlds I have no key to enter.

The breaking line, not surprisingly, has a sombre tendency. No lines are more resonant with the sense of what has been and never more will be than Jean Stone's brief opening poem "Barometer" which ends: "Once, even on such days, the sun when it broke through/ was full of possibilities."

Welcome new collections from North Queensland are Capsules by Phil Ilton and Enter Your House with Care by Connie Barber, both edited by Lynette Wilson for Delynne Publications in Kuranda. Phil Ilton's poems are terse statements, the best of them going beyond the ideological point which the poem endorses. Most memorable is the aptly titled "Indelible" in which the child's father nails slats across his cot to keep him in bed at night. The child is at first delighted—"Never had his own cage before"—until he realises he can no longer escape from the cot "and seek warmth in his parents' bed." The poem ends "Forty years on/ the little boy is still crying." "Pedalling in the Past" uses neatly controlled rhyme to describe cycling beside an ageing hippie who proudly explains that he "was at Aquarius" and at "the Terania Creek Protest too." Sympathetic to the man's views, the narrator remarks wryly on the bong protruding from his pocket and his belief that communal living "would catch on fast": "Well, he may not still be tied to a tree/ But he sure is chained to the past!"

The fact that Melbourne poet Connie Barber's Enter Your House with Care is published in Kuranda suggests an interesting reversal of the usual publishing practice and opens up unlimited possibilities for northern participation in the literary scene. Barber's are very accomplished poems, some personal, some commentaries on local and international events, but all moving outward from their specific subject to wider implications, like "Poem Written on the Day a Woman aged Ninety was Hit on the Head in a Nursing Home." Nothing is said about the incident and the poem centres on the exploits of a celebrated rodeo bull named Chainsaw, but it makes its point. Understatement and allusion are part of Barber's poetic practice and her poems have a notable clarity. The poems skilfully convert everyday phrases into cadences, as in "Domesticity" which ends with a comment on a woman completing alone an unwieldy household task because she is reluctant to impose on her husband:
A blanket too vast for the machine.
Unable to ask for assistance which means
do this for me I don't want to, you have folded
the plug into woolen mouths, rolled
the whole lot with damp arms into the basket
draining until it is light enough
to carry on your own.

The poems avoid simple protest or criticism and, as in this example, suggest a mind practised in self-sufficiency, whether it is physical or intellectual management of the resources of body and mind. Coping with inherited realities like Anzac Day in the poem of that name, and contemporary international concerns like the Gulf War in "New year 1990/1991," or recording a moment in the natural world, the speaker's stance is always independent, observing and deciding for herself, although open to the flow of fact and opinion from the outside world. "Crow" is two stanzas about one of the most celebrated and deplored birds in Australian literature, but the usual approach to the cry of the crow is replaced by a new insight:

He calls, rises on fingered wings.
Glossy as a peacock, he shines
like a rainbow, keeps his bounds
of his territory, living within desolation.

**Birds, Beasts and Flowers**, the collection of poems for children by William Hart-Smith, one of our most substantial poets, is included here because unexpected moments of brilliance are essential to children's poetry, and what the adult reader finds brilliant and unexpected may be rather different from the child's response to the poetry. Hart-Smith's poems, however, offer many delightful and thoughtful moments which would be enjoyed alike by child and adult readers. The poems are sufficiently demanding to engage a child's mind and simple enough to attract attention. Particularly attractive are poems like "Shell-Collecting" in which the speaker observes "a small brown octopus" who stares at him in surprise and then "extended/ the tip of a tentacle/ and pulled back over his head/ his multicoloured shellpiece/patchwork quilt." None of the poems in the collection is bland, none patronises young readers, but many will make them laugh and gain their support. Surely one of the best is "Relativity" which describes a dog's perspective on travelling in the car:

The main reason why dogs
love to sit in cars
is becaus
when a dog's inside
a car doesn't move. . . .

With his nose thrust out
bang in the eye of the galloping wind
his right ear streaming

like a strip of rag in a gale

he for a change can sit still
chin on the window-sill

And let the world do all the running about.

That last image sums up the position of a reader who has spent several days immersed in these collections of poems. It must be admitted that some of the poems are far from first rate and probably the poets themselves have a good idea about which are not successful. But each collection includes some poems which make the world stream by while the mind sits still and delights in the flow of the experience.