"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.

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