

JOHN JENKINS

Felicity Plunkett, *Vanishing Point*
 St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press Poetry Series, 2009
 84pp, ISBN 9780702237218, RRP \$24.95 pbk

Jordie Albiston, *The sonnet according to 'm'*
 Melbourne, John Leonard Press, 2009
 54 pp, ISBN 9780980526936, RRP \$24.95 pbk

Philip Hammial, *Skin Theory*
 Puncher & Wattman, Sydney, 2009
 66 pp, ISBN 9781921450136, RRP \$24.00

Susan Hawthorne, *Earth's Breath*
 Melbourne, Spinifex, 2009
 96 pp, ISBN 9781876756727, RRP \$23.95 pbk

Twin themes of loss and renewal converge sharply in Felicity Plunkett's *Vanishing Point*, its seventy pages of poetry neatly dove-tailing into three approximately-weighted sections: *Flakes of a Dream*; *A Flake of Your Life*; and *To Break into Flakes*.

The repetition of "flakes" speaks of things being chipped away – just as they are made sharper and more essential – a process old as shaping flint.

In *Flakes of a Dream*, this theme of natural attrition wearing us down to the grain is placed in a universal context, with nuclear fission the ultimate dividing in "Journey of the Dead Man", which begins with J. Robert Oppenheimer's well-known quote from the *Bhagavad Gita*, summoning Shiva the Destroyer: the sublime cosmic guru, who sunders identification with ego and material form.

After establishing her vision of entropy and the atom's terrible destructive power at the heart of matter, Plunkett then counterposes the life-affirming possibilities of rebirth or renewal, always hard-won and risky, whether the actual birth of a child, or any sort of individual or symbolic flourishing.

The poet's task is to nurture a vision beyond the lost horizons and vanishing points of childhood; and later, survive motherhood's traumas and repairs.

The book's middle section, *Flakes of Your Life*, comprises a series of erotic love/hate poems, all reflecting a quote from Catullus, "*Odi et amo*" ("I hate and I love").

A bracketing nod to Catullus ends this middle section, as "Vivamus" embraces the human warmth and comfort still available to us, never mind the cold cosmic musing of gods. The Roman poet might have said, "*while we have life, let us live*". And in Plunkett's affirmation of the sentiment, two lovers sprawl abed, deliciously reconciled to carnal love under soft cover of night, where – at least, for a while – ripeness and reward is all.

In the concluding section, *To Break into Flakes*, eroticism is reconceived as nature's "tender trap", its bait hooked and sharply painful. For individuals, the ultimate "vanishing point" is death; for species, extinction; and behind pleasure's bribe is life's ruthless project of procreation.

Thus we are driven to stay one precarious, generational step ahead of the scythe, even as runaway human reproductive success now threatens the planet – an irony indeed.

This logic conducts us to the birthing wards, a scary place and historical vanishing point, at which untold millions of women have died in childbirth, and where Plunkett's "flakes" are surgical *stitches, slices and amputation*.

No wonder this thought hovers ... Women who don't want children are not less essential, or without achievement, but might be just sensible, and better out of it.

A poetic tour de force from part three of the book is "A Short Knitted History of the Uterus", which takes us – from classical times to the present – on an often uneasy tour of competing medical models of female reproductive anatomy. On the way, much is exposed and dissected, before surprisingly and affectionately celebrated, all with fine insight and control.

Another very strong sequence is "Four Chambers: A Philanderer's Manual", which is witty, cynical and entertaining – with very clever use of technical language to distance emotion. A philanderer's how-to, it illuminates the predatory

calculus of a certain type of man: egotist and fly-by-night conquistador, who proves not only feckless, but reckless and treacherous.

"Soft-Tissue Stitching" next presents a view of husbands childishly clowning outside the main arena, while their women recover from caesareans: "as if on a school excursion ... invited / to take turns inhaling gas and air: / to keep them interested and distracted".

Not all the longer sequences are equally successful. "Your Violent Past" soon loses itself in a secondary pattern-making of a purely gratuitous kind; while "The Negative Cutter" and "The Geometry of Vanishing" both seem "calculated virtuosic display poems", a little too eager to impress academic or poetic peers – like overly complex mazes merely challenging the hermeneutic explication of imagined examiners.

Shorter poems, however, are uniformly good. "Venery", for example, an erotic sonnet about love and sex, hunter and hunted, and how these roles might reverse, is exactly right; while the lyrical "A Flake of Your Life", about longing for and protecting yourself against desire, and how we "fabricate" the worry of all this "into glitter", or a form of spurious glamour, is sympathetic and perceptive.

The film-like "Dissolve/Eviction" is innovative and interestingly abstract, about moving on after failed love; then, in mini-narrative mode, "Restraint" is succinct and sure: about a doctor's wife, whose memory and lost being mysteriously ghost up from a dress, from "mothball, mint and lavender".

Vanishing Point is an impressive first book, the point of which is never lost, but wielded with sensitivity, insight and intelligence.

*

After Raymond Queneau wrote his *100 Billion Sonnets* – the founding work of the international literary movement, *Oulipo* (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) – it seemed everything that could be done with the sonnet had now been done.

Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (French title) was originally published in 1961 by *Éditions Gallimard* as a flip-book – arranged so any line in 10

sonnets could replace the corresponding line in any other. And it was calculated that it would take 190 million years just to read all possible permutations. This work has now been realized on the web (Google "Queneau sonnets") where a mouse click generates each new poem.

Given Queneau's definitive piece, I was skeptical that Jordie Albiston's *the sonnet according to 'm'* could offer anything new, or of value.

My doubt quickly changed to delight, as Albiston's renovated and modernized sonnets revealed a layered narrative across three generations of women, showing great economy in the writing, yet rich with historical, biographical and rhythmic possibilities.

This book's achievement is in inverse proportion to its mere fifty-four pages: full of brisk, innovative and dove-tailing sonnets, and each a model of concise verbal invention.

Individual poem titles begin with the letter "m", except for "em" (short for Emily) and "embyro". Immediately you see both Albiston's delightful playfulness and relentless formalism; but not in service of simple-minded naïveté. *Make it new!* is promised, and delivered throughout her maze-like "m"ini-tour of the alphabet's thirteenth letter.

Everything old or new here gets thrown into the poetic mix, to be masticated and re-made: "the cobra shakes his jaws as you carefully / chop chop the eagle's belly swells as you / stop to gather up the Chinese dragon cries /out quietly more! courage more!" ("*masticate*"). Meanwhile, diction and expression can be very direct, cutting through quickly to the poem's main concerns and emotional core.

There are three characters, or voices: the authorial voice ("me" or "I"), that of the poet's grandmother ("Marsi") and of Albiston's great-great-grandmother ("Em" or "Emily") all part of the "m" (read maternal) *line*. Each of these characters has (m-for-) multiple roles, and provide context and continuity for the others; the older women speaking from and for the past, with a recognisably appropriate diction.

The two ancestral Albistons act as a figures or tropes for the historical continuity and lineage of the sonnet itself – which the poet "inherits". The book then is a sort of sassy, matrilineal history of the sonnet form, as well as bonsai family tree. Sonnet production itself is equated with dipping into the greater resources of life, and a wished-for future well-being in human affairs, which the author would also like her own, actual children to inherit. Simply, the aim is to be life-affirming, and resourceful.

It is not lost on Albiston that this could be quite a challenge, given present global ills, which is one possible meaning of the birth-horror "machine", in the sonnet of the same name, in which the poet descends into a nightmare submarine, a claustrophobic incubator with no escape hatch – as self-contained as a planet or sonnet – in which regiments of menacing bird-like creatures crowd from bunks and hatches, and the poet must "... feel the pulse of this hidden canal & / do our little / dance of repugnance..." ("machine").

The poems are also full of true feeling: as if one side of the poet's brain engages technically with language, in terms of its elaborate pattern-making, while the other is released to be fully imaginative and expressive.

The sonnet form acts as a vessel for, and abstract counter-weight to, psychological venting and emotional role-playing – preserving a fine balance, and making of the self a theatre for dramatic display. The two forces at play – formal container and contained emotion – don't neutralize each other, but bring each other into being, as mutually dependent.

These tuned tensions and forces are like a suspension bridge, or taut strings of an instrument exactly strung and pitched. This produces a wonderful energy, and word-perfect economy.

If art is therapy, as Freud believed, then it seems to work. As the book advances, poems become lighter and more playful, the nightmarish sequences, inner turmoil and confusion retreats, with insights more easily won, and tone more devil-may-care or resigned: "... it is time to lay it all / down the burden the beast ... " ("*mantra*".)

The poet's elaborate formal grids help articulate, govern and shape very intense, and potentially overwhelming or self-destructive, irruptions of emotion. But a fine intelligence also mediates, transforming everything into lines tempered by insight and playful wisdom.

Albiston's fourteen-line fountain seems inexhaustible and poems are, at times, very boldly innovative. Yet remain attentive to nuance and fine detail. They reveal private emotion, with content balanced against artifice, and showcased for aesthetic reward. The best sonnets are self-sufficient, and stand-alone – each its own little world.

The weakest poems, however, such as "*miasma*", "*mandatory*", and "*mutation*" are throw-away – runts of the brood, as it were – only interesting because they reflect the light of others. And the five "mural" poems soon wear down with repetition, collectively fading back to the concrete.

Albiston is also a musician, a cellist, and it shows. She appeals equally to eye and ear, and rhythms of some poems can be pretty wild and insistent, and rhymes *very* frequent – as in a sort of slangy yet elevated rap music. Or repeated patterns of phonemes and micro-tones are very dense, like fast-paced informal conversation, an auctioneer's spiel or stand-up comic's shtick; or like West African speaking drums, bongo beat, or Indian tabla.

Note: " ... the ear can distinguish between du pre & yo yo with the elgar played on the same davydo / v cello!" ("*maximus*").

Lines may sometimes look simple on the page, but there's great care in the detail: the way sounds dispose, patter and fall.

Synchopated rhythms, carrying telegraphed content, are sometimes anchored by a main beat, often a rhyme, giving energy and onward life to the line, and revving the poem's engine. The effect is of something vital and dynamic.

Here is an elegant book that manages to be exhilarating and surprising; with formal invention and cohesion; streamlined, precise and essential. It wittily marries high seriousness with true feeling over a complex, many-stranded narrative spanning three generations; always with regard for tradition, but a far greater one for innovation and modernity.

*

Back in the mid-70s, before the publication of Philip Hammial's first book, I recall Walter Billeter and I reading aloud six of his poems we had selected for *Etymospheres* magazine, delighted with their energy and subversive humour, and their lightning-paced and surprising moves.

Flash forward to Hammial's twenty-first collection, *Skin Theory*, and the high-wire acrobatics are as astonishing as ever, now across a broader range of moods, puzzling narratives and rhetorical approaches.

The book begins with "Kamikaze", which plunges you into an intriguing – though admittedly, whacky – scenario, where you are immediately co-opted three ways: as confidante, bemused spectator and creative participant. As so often in this book, lines move at the speed of thought, and register the poet's wonderful anarchic and unique tone (baffling, but funny, and where anything goes).

With Hammial, you find yourself up to your ears in freely imaginative possibilities, and poems that demand your willingness, as reader, to let their cues and clues take you to bizarre places and into dreamlike situations – to allow each "enabling scenario" to be completed, and the poem achieve lift-off.

Certainly, Hammial keeps his part of the bargain of mutual effort involved, repaying with poetic pleasures, with verbal sparkle, marvelous nonsense, or leaps of the imagination – and always at speed. Strange lights in a forest, in "Kamikaze", turn out to be the peering eyes of hiding Japanese pilots, all ashamed to have survived crash-landings. And the poem-narrator is peeved, because his charitable mother has just stolen his prize collection of bicycle bells, because ...

But summary can't do justice. Hammial is like a track-laying train, one speeding into its own making as it goes along. You must take the journey yourself, to gain the full, breathless effect.

But, be warned. The ride is not always joyful; not just an unlimited express to fun city. Far from it; *Skin Theory* has some very somber and even downright doom-laden moments, with the old curse of mortality now deep in the mix.

In the title poem, "Skin Theory", a spot of skin cancer is imagined, within the actual poem itself, and relentlessly spreading out from the book's center, until it consumes everything, pages, poet and all. It takes a brave man to laugh at his own serious illness: "Metastasize, it's / a word I've never used before" the poet notes insouciantly.

Just as cunningly circular-shaped and trickily recursive as "Skin Theory" are "Socks" (an anti-religious rave, and very funny) and "Crows" (a wry parody of spin-doctoring and selective truth-telling).

As things get darker, they also get lighter. Perhaps this is paradoxical and perverse – but certainly to the reader's advantage. Hammial has the sort of sensibility that not only rejects nostalgia and sentimentality, but positively relishes the dark side. He enjoys outpacing his bogeymen with mordant wit, effortless invention and outrageous humour.

If we are taken to uncomfortable places, that's alright too. Nothing is censored, including (in "Help") images of grown men in buckets (body parts dumped after cancer surgery). Oddly, even this can be relished, seasoned with humour as deliciously *noir* as black truffle sauce.

Some poems are cryptic puzzles, wildly inventive, yet oddly coherent – coherent, that is, in their very oddness. Others, like "Bride To Be", resemble surreal folk tales, while "Card Swipes" is about a nightmarish card game played by death squads, where the stakes are both bizarre and deeply shocking (if you lose, you could "win" a wedding ceremony, where bride and groom are symbolically raped and both end in mobile coffins).

"Sowing" is a freely-associative romp, while "Ms Death" visits a country where bells – rather than flags – are ceremoniously raised on poles. The insight being, that if you travel widely enough, you soon realise the huge arbitrariness of all so-called "customs" and "norms". (Hammial is one of Australia's most widely travelled poets.)

Towards the end, there are some surprisingly straightforward biographical poems – about Hammial's growing up and early years in Detroit, before he moved

to Sydney and became an Australian citizen – which show him in control of realistic and quotidian modes, considerably extending his range.

Hammial is also a visual arts collagist and sculptor, and an inventive visual acuity is a dimension of most poems.

Weaknesses include some slight poems toward the book's middle; and ones that spin precariously on certain words or images, as if a great deal of chance were involved: perhaps too much. Or an ever-ramifying complexity falls apart, and the promised jigsaw remains just odd bits and pieces.

But lapses are rare, with the poet's journey sustained by a darkly jaunty, unflagging inventiveness. Along the way, are much serious play, fine absurdity and feats of language. This is a book to be enjoyed.

*

Earth's Breath tells how in 2006 the poet, her friend and their dog were bunkered down at Bingil Bay, a small coastal settlement north of Townsville, just as tropical Cyclone Larry brewed over the Coral Sea, raging toward them across the North Queensland coast.

The book has affinities with the verse novel, strongly linked poems advancing the story, with its "characters" – including the poet herself – caught up in the cyclone's path.

The power and sweep of *Earth's Breath*, like that of the storm itself, is wonderfully direct, raw and emphatic; with intensity gathering throughout successive poems.

We identifying with the poet's concerns and alarms, as her thoughts swirl and buffet around, throwing off eddies of exhilaration close to panic, as lighting-flashes of insight alternate with absolute confusion in the storm and its aftermath.

Part one starts with a careful lead-up: a few stray gusts and sky ominously darkening, and close observation of natural and human worlds soon to be threatened.

The storm hits at full power in part two, the poet's pulse almost spiking off the graph, as not only the metaphorical rug, but house, land and landscape seem pulled from under her. She is slightly shocked to survive; then the immediate aftermath, recovery, clean-up and lingering meditation on meanings and consequences.

Throughout, Hawthorne immerses you completely in her world, not only in that of the storm at full tilt, and a planet's violent respiratory perturbations, but in the unique atmospheres of tropical Queensland. And her gift for succinct description is superb: "the Mourilyan Hotel / is folded like an origami swan ... // ... a kitchen sink in the grass . . ." ("Lifting the roof").

You can feel the air's clammy humidity, as Larry howls down the coast; leaves slap against your legs, and the wind tears at everything. As trees snap, sent spinning across roofs and roads, the writing is wonderfully visceral and kinesthetic.

Poems like "Cyclone time", "Canticle" and "Chaos across the land", seem dashed-off in the urgency of it all, while everything – quite literally – is being turned topsy-turvy. Or, collectively, images in poems register like moments in a long, unfolding film – "a tree branch wings / past the window" ("Cyclone time"), as the focus shifts to blitzed backyards with "glass in the grass", then whole landscapes revealed in ruin, with torn trees "against the new 360 degree view / mountains we've never seen / ... a beach long hidden" ("Into the aftermath").

In the midst of this, but without loss of narrative trajectory, Hawthorn is able to place Larry within a larger context of timeless world myths, referring widely to Hindu and other traditions, to make some sense of the storm's preemptory arrival and of her subsequent shock and depression.

The poet then compares her experiences to those of other people caught up in similar global storms and disasters, seeing them sympathetically as participants in the one planetary drama.

For her, Larry is a "warning", but much more than a general and impersonal wake-up slap from Gaia.

Hawthorne's attention – the eye of her personal storm, as it were – has meanwhile turned inward, so we witness a psychological unsettling at the centre of the poet's "I": "the wind is inside me / I am not ready for this cave-in" ("The cyclone inside").

Larry may be distanced and even paradoxically "tamed" by being humanized – returned, like an evil genie, into a timeless cultural container of myth; just as giving him a name (for the media's benefit) makes him more popularly vivid and explicable.

Natural events such as cyclones, which might otherwise defy comprehension, thus re-enter language through mythopoeic inflation, becoming metaphors of great expressive power.

But should we still view nature through this comforting cultural bubble, one with a mirror on the inside, which reflects only us? Is it wise to imagine human changes to the earth's natural systems as somehow involving gendered pantheistic deities with conscious agency and purpose? Is this useful, when we have ourselves arrogantly tipped the balance, and made utterly indifferent physical systems more unpredictable than ever? Or can myth help us to see this, and to change?

Earth's Breath powerfully spins off these and other large questions, the doubtless rhetorical sweep of which, fortunately for readers, never overshadows the poetry, nor Hawthorne's extraordinary personal story.