

LUKE BEESLEY

*First Light* by Kate Fagan  
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*First Light*, by former Sydney, now Blue Mountains-based, poet and folk musician, Kate Fagan, is a book in six or seven chapters, depending on whether you include the notes which are substantial at five pages and revealing in terms of influences e.g. seminal rock/pop musicians, L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E.-centred modernist and postmodern poets, local contemporaries, and writers such as W.G. Sebald who are difficult to categorise.

Visual artists are important to Fagan, too, including Nick Keys, a Sydney-based installation-and-collage artist and poet in his own right, who has made an artwork work specifically for the cover of *First Light*. Keys's blue, cream and white collage of cut-up words immediately brings to mind a similar, collage piece of Rosalie Gascoigne's, "Hung Fire", on the cover of Fagan's last full-length collection, *The Long Moment* (2002).

I found risk in this reiteration – this tilt to displaced lettering, surface, signs and collage – particularly given the 2nd chapter of *First Light* contains ten centos. Is collage too obvious a technique to describe Fagan's poetics? She does so much more than simply *collage* the poems. But what becomes a possibility, upon repeated reads, is a desire to remind the reader of the book's *book-ness* and its presence within the act of reading; to encourage the reader to return to Keys's work as it's deepened by the poems and by an intimacy with the book-as-object.

A second, perhaps less superficial, hesitation came at the discovery of this flock of centos 15 pages in. After developing a seductive trust, using a direct and even tone, Fagan boldly confronts us with a potential flight from the author, and from this atmosphere of steady assurance.

I'll sketch this effect to demonstrate one of *First Light's* real strengths:

The first chapter, 'Observations on Time, Cargo', contains a sequence of nine short, lyric poems, the first being about testing the air and, like many of the poems of *The Long Moment*, the tone is philosophical and intimate. Ten years on from her first collection, Fagan contemplates new beginnings and poetics – What to take and leave behind? – "cargo":

All I can see are weather and its imitators.

I decide upon four themes:  
tragedy, character, temporality, locus.

Things and appearances are moving,  
positive freight lines up  
in letters.

The poems of this section use enjambment to swing the reader through, with glimmers of metaphor, using Fagan's signature ability to make the vocabulary of science sensual. Linguistically, this section contains some of the book's lushest moments:

Afterimages sway,  
flocks of apostrophes  
skirt the 'bright obvious' still-house of speech.

There are peaches  
tied in the richest windows.

This gorgeous piece recalls the juicy, meta-lyricism of the poem, 'In Pursuit of Blue', in *The Long Moment*: "a smooth chunk / of ocean in our hands. // surprising and licked / as the word *turquoise*." The final moments of *First Light*'s first section ends: "Voices cut the street like old super-eights. // On the count of three: / one, two. Three." The reader then pauses – is reminded of an earlier line – "the maroon resolve / folding to a page" – and sees the new section heading: FIRST LIGHT. The shift from "weather and its imitators" in the first line of the book, to "one, two" – beat – "three" – beat – turn the page, FIRST LIGHT, is exquisite and characteristic of Fagan's sense of music and its need for movements.

The possibility of abandoning this careful atmosphere for centos – a collage of other people's lines – is a little nerve wracking. There's great pressure on these centos to not only contain strong lines that feel part of the same poem, but to continue in Fagan's even voice. We find relief, though, immediately, even as the voice scats and croons:

This time I'm going to talk about  
red light. Bandit trees altering  
ways of relating with clouds  
hum hum hum aum hum hum.

This poem, like the book, the section title and the artwork on the cover, is called 'First Light', and is made up of lines from neo-Dadaist, Fluxus-friendly poet, Jackson Mac Low. He's clearly a touchstone for Fagan's leap into poetic chance, here, and perhaps even a precursor to Fagan's cover designs (many of Mac Low's covers contain a rectangular-shaped artwork divided into parts). Fagan seems in control. And the centos – although containing a jagged sort of lightness to them – are quintessentially hers: playful, sonorous, quizzical. If there is awkwardness in any of the language: "alcohol lamp between / thick things", Fagan anticipates our concerns in the next phrase: "between much railing and mouthing". Her control and intelligence is also evident when allowing for a more personal note, in a poem dedicated to her daughter called 'A Little Song' which, with its softness and light musical touches, and using phrases gleaned from Gertrude Stein, cleverly links Fagan's daughter's early utterances to Stein's reduction of language to pure sounds and essences.

In chapter three, 'The Correspondence', we encounter metaphors for birth and references to pregnancy and the sensitivity of the body, but the "letters" are abstract and more complex than a simple note or lyric to new life. They're portraits of emotion and memory, and their recipients are indistinct. The line breaks are cunning and the mood brings to mind the densely emotional imagery in Terrance Malick's more recent films:

The boats decay on their painters  
and no one lives to sail them.  
Later I saw a woman walking  
past us with a lamp, illuminating

And, a little later in 'Letter IX':

A kite against the setting hill.  
Eventually my songs will pass for history,  
brighter than time.  
I will walk  
across the city as another  
beside others.

Following the letters of section three is 'Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers', containing 15 prose

poems. Then in the book's fifth section, 'Authentic Nature', we find nine of the book's most conventional poems, in that each has their own title; their own conceptual and sonic space to occupy. It's as if, after trying out new instruments and session musicians, the singer turns her skills and experience, ten years on from her last album, to the standard – landscapes. Curiously, there was a section in *The Long Moment* called 'anti-landscape'. Fagan enters 'Authentic Nature', now a mid-career poet, with her eyes open. The maturity of her writing is evidenced in poems like 'Workman Honeyeater' where she uses the philosophical enquiry and playful sense of fragmentation in *First Light*'s first four sections, but brings them to a more recognisable form or circumstance. That she can successfully (originally and without sentimentality) write with unabashed lyricism here attests to this:

A thousand leaves like arrows,  
close to the truck than I could hazard.  
It's helmet of sleek feathers shook  
in the long, fluid rain. These eaves

*First Light*'s final section, 'Thought's Kilometre', like section one, has a sense of its place in the collection – *denouement*. And yet the book throughout seems to refer to the audio of its motion in the reader's hands: to beginnings and farewells and "moveable chapters".

Returning with this idea to the prose poems of 'Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers', the first letter of each poem is enlarged in the manner of a novel's new chapter/new paragraph – first light. There is restraint in these block-shaped poems, too, and surrealism, but they're lean and aural. The poems reference Keys and Gascoigne in shape, but there is an accumulated logic to them that allows a line like: "I raised my hand to steady the stars. Where we might and would. Could you have seen would you have desired saw and seeing became that is to say electrified", to enter the reader freely and with meaning.

Again the reader is brought to Stein's musical gestures, here, and 'Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers' ends in a wound-down tone of formal austerity – aesthetically Japanese and considerate: "I move quietly now as if picking up shoes or setting papers in order. Fold and renew the hours." Looking back at Nick Keys's collage, I realise that at least half of the artwork is blank. Although the centos and the busy prose poems offer a carnival-like static and texture to the book, *First Light* still comes across gently, or austere. Perhaps this is because there is a deliberately equal amount of blank white space throughout the book, in and around the well-spaced poems. Or perhaps it is more to do with a trust gained, and Fagan's empathy for patient readers and re-readings. In this sense, the overall pleasure (and power) of the book – its whole – washes over the reader. The "syllables" of *The Long Moment* were "a vector, an atomic spacial practice", but in *First Light*, in a resonant and beautiful way, Fagan finds that they're purely "hollow".