

PETRA WHITE

Bonny Cassidy, *Certain Fathoms*

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John Watson, *Occam's Aftershave [Collected Works Volume 4]*

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Certain Fathoms is Bonny Cassidy's first book, aside from an earlier chapbook. Many of the poems take place in the natural world, but they are not mere nature poems. By which I mean they are not merely descriptive, nor do they project the soul of the speaker into the landscape. That said, they are often encounters with nature, with a sense of the dramatic. What happens typically is an encounter between the human and the natural, in which the natural is changed by being observed, and the human is changed by the encounter.

The first poem, 'Serrata', is a dawn, or pre-dawn encounter with *Banksia Serrata* through a bathroom window. The serrata is magnified by the light: "Breathe grip, breathing gripping under dark, serrata / shadows the fleshcoloured wall / trunks 200 per cent, leaves the size of nebulae ..." And the end recalls Dickinson in the way the speaker is effaced: "So close I doubt myself / squared in the bathroom window, telling." The poem's gesture might appear to be towards the classical sublime, though it is not exactly so. The speaker of the poem, though self-doubting, is able to speak, to "tell". What is this telling? The telling becomes the poem; the poem opens out into what can be told. The poem moves from description to reaction, or maybe confession: "I doubt myself." She looks at herself, "squared in the bathroom window", already "telling" even as the encounter continues. She is framed by the light as the banksia is. The poem becomes a double observation.

In 'Figure' Cassidy continues her awareness of the presence of the human in the landscape: "Pressed and packed into myself / I followed them / under a field / light as shale, its wild melons striped with fuschia bush." There is a similar awareness of, and interest in, human presence and language in 'En Abyrne (Northland)': "Talk is breaking, breaking. In these minutes you / and I seem to be history without lineage. / But something made us / and so it lies in our pit / like a seam turned in."

In another poem, 'Hand to Mouth', Cassidy is concerned with the elusiveness of language – and the need for it – in the face of the overwhelming sea: "I stand here being mumbled, / hearing the bay's mouth from above (water dull as traffic), / sight bigger than tongue. ... My own mouth contracts at the root." Again, the sublime is suggested: being overwhelmed by the natural phenomena and losing one's ability to speak – being mumbled – then recovering, to the extent that her 'grimace' "floods the high tide". But the flood is not a flood of language; it is something abstract, like "simple blocks of space or tonal shifts". And when she says "sight bigger than tongue", it is one sense overwhelming another, rather than the natural world overwhelming all the senses, as the classic encounter with the sublime might have it. There is something interesting, for Cassidy, about the capacity of language to break down and regenerate, for the mouth to "contract at the root" but later find speech, which is the act of the poem. This does not strike me as something Cassidy experiences as a loss – or an instance of the so-called 'failure of language'; it is part of the strength of language that it can be absent, but that it can also be found – and have its absence spoken of. Cassidy does not posit nature as something unsayable; rather as something that opens up possibilities for new forms of speech.

'Range', by contrast, is about the subtlety of nature. This poem has a fascination with the drama and processes of nature that recalls Mark O'Connor:

But don't listen for walking saplings: it's when their drooping
becomes a memory not too distant that it's heard,
and all their scattered picks and knots harden into recognition.

Here the experience of nature fuses naturally with thinking and recognising. The mind is hyper-alert to sounds and shadows, the movements, real and imagined, of the trees, the drama of a bird. There is nothing in this poem about how the poet feels, rather this is about the mind and how it opens to experience and to the strangeness of the real. Which is not to say the mind is passive: there is a creative process involved. The poem opens: "Always begin with a bird, like ruling a line / that stretches into angles", and the self-instruction continues: "But don't listen for walking saplings..." This poem, like many others in this exciting debut, shows a fascinating sensibility, and an acuteness of language:

And here is where the trees have found themselves.
Now the trunks lie flat: thin round tracks down a sandbank.
They're making water by acting it
trying to bring it about
but getting closer and closer to being salted rock.
Their bark rings off in trickles.

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Occam's Aftershave is John Watson's fifth book, the fourth volume in what he calls his 'Collected Works' – as if he is trying to avoid the monolith of a Collected in one volume by collecting as he goes. Like his previous volumes, *Occam's Aftershave* is dense, serious and playful, with a great variety of tones and registers, and an acute awareness of the relationship between writer and reader. Indeed the opening poem is called 'To the Faithful Reader' – an ironic title, of course, because surely readers are fickle creatures, easily bored, liable to put down that which doesn't engage them – unless of course they are faithful to an idolised writer, but I don't think that is what Watson has in mind. Watson begins with an improbable scenario and then: "If you believe this / You'll believe anything, and are thereby my ideal reader." The "faith", here, is the ability to believe, or suspend belief. So why does Watson need a faithful reader? It is part of a game, in this poem, inviting the reader to be led beyond her expectations of what poetry might be. Watson writes:

But for some time now it cannot – surely –
Have escaped your notice that I am flirting

With the idea that poetry and jokes are alike, both skirting
The hem of things, the indrawn breath of wonder corresponding

To the hush before the punchline, the device
Of enjambment being somehow like the nudge nudge

Of double meaning ...

This is in itself a kind of joke, making the poem a joke or the joke a poem. The playfulness is with reductiveness – is the poem merely a joke that is taken too seriously? Can the poem be reduced to these basic elements? If so, why should the reader be interested, let alone faithful? But the whole poem is a tribute to the reader, that person who "resigns herself / To being carried along by events". Such events in poetry include the trickery of tropes, and the beautiful unexpectedness of lines such as "How prodigal the waves in the estuary of the present". To be a faithful reader is to let poetry

happen. And Watson, in turn, is the faithful writer who is always alert and open to poetry's possibility and ready to reel in its largesse.

He is not a poet who works much with emotions; he dwells in the play of ideas. When one is unused to him, he can seem annoyingly clever and a little too fecund, but there is nearly always substance and interest. 'Positive Incapability' is a marvellous re-reading of the myth of Sisyphus, relating it to poetry and how far it can be pushed, the stone being the "stone of possible ideas" and the text which "pushes on by artifice / Until at last it has no reader left". Poetry may challenge the reader but it also works the other way – poetry must be able to go beyond the cosy faithfulness of the reader, even if it seems as ridiculous as pushing a stone uphill.

This capacious book – there is much more to say about it than present space allows – also includes tributes to other writers. I am particularly taken with 'Missing Miss Moore', an ode to the twentieth-century poet Marianne Moore, which outlines a poetics that could be Watson's as readily as Moore's. It is difficult to quote from, working as it does in long virtuosic verse paragraphs, but I recommend reading it in full. Similarly beguiling is 'Ripple on Lines of Paul Muldoon' with its endless play on proverb and pun. At 97 pages, this is a long book – generally I'm of the view that a poetry book should be around fifty or sixty pages, or shorter. But Watson's book is a rarity among many books published of late, in that it deserves its length, containing not a single weak poem.