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“Warriors Come Out to Play”

Burruga Gutya Ken Canning, *Yimbama*

Vagabond Press, 2015, 98pp pb

ISBN 9781922181435, RRP \$20

Philip Gijindarraji Hall, *Sweetened in Coals*

Ginninderra Press, 2014, 76pp pb

ISBN 9781740278584, RRP \$20

Natalie Harkin, *Dirty Words*

Cordite Books, 2015, 44pp pb

ISBN 97809944259639, RRP \$20

Samuel Wagan Watson, *Love Poems and Death Threats*

University of Queensland Press, 2014, 110pp pb

978-0-7022-5327-0, \$24.95

There exists in Australian governmental discourse a paradoxical impulse in relationships with Indigenous people. Nowhere was this clearer than the concurrence of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (“the intervention”) and the parliamentary apology to the Stolen Generations. Operation Outreach, the intervention’s main logistical operation conducted by an occupying force of 600 soldiers, only concluded on October 21st 2008, a full seven months after Kevin Rudd said sorry. This, and the Coalition’s general support for the apology (John Howard notwithstanding), would suggest that this

discourse is bipartisan. It attests to a conflicted and contested set of relations that is full of contradictions.

The concern with rights, needs, freedom, place and responsibility, with politics in other words, comes to the fore in Philip Hall's *Sweetened by Coals*, Nicole Harkin's *Dirty Words*, Samuel Wagan Watson's *Love Poems and Death Threats* and Ken Canning's *Yimbama*. These works are, thankfully, not simply didactic and moral but engage in a slant way with pressing social concerns, concerns that matter for everyone in Australia. This is poetry of politics if not quite Political Poetry and it responds in a thoughtful way against things like the intervention. Warriors of words have come out to play. This is clearly demonstrated when each poet talks about country.

“Save Behana Gorge” by Hall is typical of *Sweetened by Coals* in the sense of a considered, focused, everyday, eco-consciousness. In this volume Hall is concerned with nature, with ordinary experience, with relating in a reflective manner what he is going through. Consider the following poem:

Save Behana Gorge

To town planners, the granite gorge traces like a wound
across this scythed and hothouse landscape;
its water a sprawling spray-storm in the Wet
spitting and exposing steep barriers to advancement.
Against the creek's current, tadpoles attach head-first
to rocks and on the banks, burrowing frogs chorus
in the leaf litter while leeches stand erect
on their sucker-rear-ends, longing for blood.
Sometimes we see a cormorant or a heron, or hear the shrill
staccato notes of a whistling kite circling treetops.
You watch catfish guarding nests of stone as water rats slip
through a strainer of flood debris. People come here
to swim or spray graffiti. Sometimes,
though, when I spend time in the gorge, all I hear is the zeroing
in of mozzies, all I see is the spray of the torrent
as I wait for curlew to call their drawn-out wailing
weeer-eearr. Often I'll just stare into the canopy
as dragonflies manoeuvre their fabulist films in the flickering light
or I'll watch the orb spider strung golden between trees
and spotted with silver dew, or follow the line
of swimming holes, lichen, fungus and fern,
now proposed as a pipeline by the Cairns Water Corporation.

It is a poem of nature bookended by institution. The intention is made clear by the title, and the authorities are opposed to “you” (reader, addressee), “I” and “we” (poet, speakers) – the “wound” for the “town planners” is decidedly not ours. The gorge is, for the poet and reader, a place to go and meditate, alive in its fecundity. Tadpoles, frogs, leeches, cormorants, heron, kites, catfish and water rats populate our reverie. The poet has a particularly focused gaze – mozzies, dragonflies, orb spider; the minutiae of the bush. Behana Gorge though is not a pure place, not untouched – there is “graffiti” there, suggesting something of the anti- or post-pastoral. The commentary though is clear – a

pre-emptive elegy for a place slated for “advancement” as much as a rallying cry against Cairns Water Corporation’s plans.

Watson’s collection *Love Poems and Death Threats* is pleasingly variable, passionate, open and at times mesmeric. “Sentinel” combines the historic with the committed and is typical, while also being exceptional. It pays witness in a different way to Hall, but it is about country speaking to us, watching over our endeavours now.

Sentinel

The midden remains; a material witness on a promontory or beachhead over the expanses of epoch and aeon, where tributes were held in worship of richer seasons. Festivities – not so dionysian in revelry – but more rainbow-serpentine in respect, these ceremonial milestones that would acknowledge the midden a monument to a spiritual pathos of economical sharing. Sharing and nurturing; graces now almost driven from this land.

The midden remains, where elements once convened in the most sacred of communions – earth, water, fire and wind – mused in the easy linguistics of sea breeze, tongues lathered with salt. Feast and dream the prosperity of the lucky and chosen peoples, custodians in the world of the living and plenty.

The midden remains, but the sea is threatened, the earth torn, the fires exhausted, and the sky tarnished, the people scattered. Conquerors look upon you as a “trash heap” and not a factotum from an ochre Babylon. You, the treasured “debitage”, are preyed upon by roads, skyscrapers and desecration. Your selected bones and matrix of lithium flakes are indecipherable in the wake of the newcomers’ ignorance. The shells in your structure form the unworn necklace of ghosts, held together by songlines locked in an obscure servitude of silence.

The midden remains; guardian to memory.

The midden remains sacred.

The midden remains, sentinel.

The country here is alive – it literally watches over us and our memories. Middens, places of feasts, stand guard as much as are guarded. If Hall is about the poet witnessing nature, about writing his experience into the archive, Watson makes the midden active. The midden negates the classics – “not so dionysian” – but it does not jettison a non-Indigenous past altogether – “an ochre Babylon”. There may yet be a productive solidarity in our world yet. The poem too deploys techniques of sound – “feast and dream”, luck/plenty – to round out and convey the message, and while overall it approaches the prosodic, it is in a stripped back lyrical manner throughout. In tone, content and metaphor, it attests to a politics of memorialisation that is continent wide – not a specific midden but all middens are in this poem.

Harkin’s debut collection – *Dirty Words* – is a wry, propulsive, consistent, abecedarian intervention. When read alongside much contemporary Political Poetry it reads as a formally interesting engagement (particularly in how the poetry uses the space of the page) and the voice is one that comes developed and whole. “Land Rights”, the poem for L, represents not only the style but the format the poems take – 20 of the 26 start with quotations from politicians or artists and what follows is a strong position taken up from this beginning.

Land Rights

Be careful when you walk through this land

Because a child was born here.

—Archie Roach, *A Child Was Born Here*, 1997

Dear Profiteering-Capitalist-Economy with your pursuit of progress and no-limits to growth you may try to wipe us from your accumulation-by-dispossession-slate but we will always be here to bear witness ... to your land-grabs for more access to finite-natural-resources more mines and marinas more cultural-site-desecration digging up more bones offering more techno-fix-solutions to counter more pollution more privatisation more excess more consumption more waste *more More MORE!*

... for that ridge-top and mountain that great body-monolith that one that holds lessons casting shadows as it takes first slice of the sun *and that stone* that smooth piece of old-riverbed that one that gifts strength eroding pathways to fit in the palm of your hand *and that grain of sand* rippled clean cleansed that journeys the earth washed-up from ocean floors to stick to your skin *and that tree* that family-tree that one that shelters shades anchors you deep to the core of the earth then rises to stretch up to the sun....

all this beyond what the eye can see this beautiful strong blood-memory-land always was always will be something else and so much more than what is carved-consumed-wasted for just now

So *dear Profiteering-Capitalist-Economy* *be careful when you walk on this land because a child was born here far more sophisticated than you imagine and a child was born there* sovereign strong with song poetry love and belonging and past-present-future-rights to land

If Hall focused our attention on a specific place and Watson a specific type of place, in “Land Rights” Harkin allows us to attend to the structures placed on top of land and to think about land as a whole. In this passage the enemy is the Profiteering-Capitalist-Economy, not Cairns Water Corporation or colonialists who build atop middens. The poem is somewhat ironic – is Harkin really writing to her opposition? Or is she writing for us about her opposition? The temper though is important. I hope she maintains the rage in the books that come and with it the jagged rhythms that pull one in through richness and daring.

Canning’s *Yimbama* is a direct, unmediated form of plain speech. It speaks directly to us, advocating for a heartfelt, obvious poetry that says what it means. Consider the following poem:

The Lucky Country

We came for freedom,
escape from war, death –
political oppression.
A new life – australia,
a land of opportunity.
We are the tired ones,
tired of the killings
of our loved ones.
Ah, golden australia
opens its arms.
But no the people
They spit, kick
and snickering
at our suffering.
Why do you persecute
us – who only want love
respect and the space
to regain our cultures
that colonialists stole.
We are not a threat
you need not fear us
or hate us.
Australians –
We take nothing
from your way of life.
Leave us alone
to rebuild our life
and you never know
you may just learn.

The title is, of course, ironic. It shifts halfway through to directly address the reader, and so we are implicated in Australia; it positions too, when read alongside other poems in the collection, the cause of migrants and refugees as part of a wider struggle for oppressed minorities. The tone of this is simplistic and it seems less like worked over language than thoughts halfway finished and re-presented here. The other poets do not work in the register of everyday speech – there is construction in them and attention paid to metre, rhyme, rhythm, imagery, style. Canning may fit into a longer tradition of speaking truth to power, but he by no means extends it stylistically.

Taking these four works together, it is clear there is work to do. There is still a skirmish, fight, war going on. The intervention dominates over the apology. What though to do with poetry, which is such a poor political tool? John Kinsella's "activist poetics" is seen as the literal saying of poems in front of logging trucks, of protest poetry being protestor's poetry at protests. We could also ask: what is the logger to do? The aim, I assume, would be to have the logger engage with the poetry as a way to short circuit their material malfeasance. In other words, poetry can be similar to a lock-on; poetry raises consciousness. It is about a transformative utterance – that the poet changes the logger through their protest action (poetry). It is not about reifying the identity of the poet – not about, for example, of saying *ipso facto* and contra Mudrooroo, that all Indigenous poets are protestors advocating for land rights.

People may speak of close reading, or even close listening, but in thinking through the material conditions of occupation in settler societies such as Australia we might want to re-examine some of the revolutionary potential of *activist listening*. We need not only a critique of white supremacist poetry, as the Mongrel Coalition and others call for, but also a way of thinking through the ways and means for loggers – in this example non-Indigenous readers – to “become” protestors.

Activist listeners are necessary. They are fellow travellers, particularly when considered alongside passive tourists ogling the spectacular. The central question becomes how do “we” participate in “their” cause. Reframing that for poetry we might ask: how do we read these poems on *their* terms? This is not to suggest one can be on the inside of an other’s experience and perspective, but that through empathetic openness one engages actively with the text, which is ultimately an interpretive and political act that involves creating community.

If Stuart Cooke and George Dyungayan’s *Bulu Line* is indicative, and I believe it is to some extent, there is a wealth of ordinary language criticism in Indigenous communities, a kind of theory of texts performed in Aboriginal English. Our references and vernacular can’t all be Deleuze, Badiou, Lacan, unless we would all too easily separate this poetry from the poetics. This is not to suggest that we mimic Aboriginal English poetics, lest we wear a rhetorical blackface, or that there are no Indigenous people versed in French theory. It is, however, about suggesting that our frames of reference – our reading tools – might not so easily serve the same purpose for which they were designed.

In the four titles considered here, *Sweetened By Coals* looms in part as a bridge if we were to focus on authorial identity. Hall is not Indigenous by blood but he satisfies the condition of community acceptance, which is necessary in the State’s definition of Aboriginality. Hall offers us a model of difference from strictly raced models and has one sort of legitimacy in a contested and contestable field despite a long and somewhat discredited “white native” tradition. This is, of course, not to suggest he is an Aboriginal person, but rather that he has experiences with Aboriginal people that are important for settler discussions, for activism. Like all the texts, he can inform what is possible in thinking through Australian political conditions, of the nation in a global context, and in a way that is not only direct and impassioned but also oblique, sensitive, metaphoric. It is writing that needs not to arrive then because it is already here, always was, always will be, always already a glowing, redolent part of us. For thinking of activist reading, activist listening, of the audience’s role in poetry, we might finally turn to Peter Minter when he writes in his introduction to *Dirty Words*:

The challenge is *ours* to read Harkin’s *Dirty Words* [Hall’s *Sweetened by Coals*, Watson’s *Love Poems*, Canning’s *Yimbama*], let them fall across our skin and seep into our creases and folds like fine red dust.

Works Cited

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