

ALLISON GALLAGHER

joanne burns, *brush*

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How do the ways we interact with the world impact both our navigation through it, and its impact on the self? In what manner do we internalize and externalize our movements through a modern world that is simultaneously both terrifying and crudely sterile? “does your share portfolio ache” (3) opens joanne burns’ most recent collection, *brush*. It’s a succinct précis of the wonderfully incongruous juxtaposition that permeates much of the collection. *brush* is burns’ sixteenth book of poetry, her first collection *Snatch* published in London in 1972. Burns’ work has long satirised the bizarre edifices of contemporary culture, creating work that subverts the ostensible solemnity of these structures, a practice *brush* continues. Intentionally distorting clarity in order to explore and emphasise both the spectacular unknown and the absurd “normalities” of modern life, burns’ poems comprise of clever, incisive musings that centre largely on the mundane everyday. Split into six sequences, *brush* showcases burns’ penchant for asymmetrically collaging techniques and styles in a way that blurs lines, defying poetic convention. The assemblage of poetry, prose and microfiction contained throughout gleefully contravenes protocol and fucks with format while retaining coherency and impact, a way of storytelling that could easily feel clumsy were it not so uncompromising in its sharpness.

The book’s first section, “bluff”, contains short, sharp dissections of contemporary corporate culture, mashing together oblique financial jargon with modest, occasionally crude metaphor. “this week the market/on a roll, more swiss/than sausage and/sweeter than an audit” (10) begins “manufacturing”, with burns’ reduction of the stock market to baked goods demonstrating the biting irreverence that makes *brush*’s moments of acerbic wit such a delight. When in burns’ farcical, capitalist hyperculture, profits are “taxied into austerity drives/with its red tape bunting” (11) while bankers “dance the zumba jumba/in the constitutional ballroom” (13). Portfolios, investments, and corporate tycoons are stripped of their gravity and become targets for pointed scrutiny.

The following sequence, “in the mood”, is made up of expressive short fiction that steadies the vertigo of the previous section while retaining its observations on the eccentricities of contemporary lifestyles, this time observing with a microscope rather than a camera. With the second section turning away from the world at large and instead looking introspectively, “bluff” and “in the mood” can be seen as comparative studies of how the human condition interacts: first, with the modern world, and also with the self. Burns contemplates the human body whilst in a state of “eloquent decline” (23); “wink” compares afflictions of the eye with lack of foresight in the broader sense—(“how dull the fact of the retina being affected by the hardening of the eye’s vitreous jelly, compared with the aura of divine revelation” (21)—while “literate” explores hair loss, pondering on the “frail akashic records” of white hairs that have “stored a life. lives” (23).

Burns writes in such a way that feels at once both disjointedly dizzying and masterfully cohesive, reflecting the heady sensory overload of simply existing in the modern world. By rejecting linearity, burns’ verbose poems initially appear like near-arbitrary language mash-ups, often only revealing their deliberate placements, their purposeful intentions upon closer inspection. Burns reflexively examines this during “in the mood”’s titular poem:

all those abrasive punctuation marks, confusion of meanings, awkward grammars
and clamorous syllables. the underworld of language. my head aches with the
load. i feel like writing yet i don’t look like writing (30)

Nevertheless, burns muses on her writing of poetry as a necessary act for interpreting her surroundings: “what else is there to do”, she poses, “when you only have two hands and eyes that have mislaid the world” (30).

Burns continues this simultaneously introspective and observational manoeuvring in the sequence “brush: a series of day poems”. In this section, burns is both sardonic regarding the rituals and routines of society while acknowledging her complicity in it. “we sip/on coffee’s prophecies as the morning/rises, the detour into gossip by the bay/welcomes the side order of spinach, oysters/levitate like ectoplasm” (35). When reflecting on Anzac remembrance proceedings, (“all you have/is what you have”) burns points out that she sprinkles her hard boiled egg with dulse – a “sea vegetable from doctor earth/a health food shop” (36).

Throughout this sequence, burns experiments strongly with form, intentionally obscuring its lucidity. Line placements are seemingly unpredictable in a way that blurs vision. This erratic delivery helps us envision the turbulence to burns’ landscapes, her head rattling “like a world that’s lost its spin in allergies, a choir of off-tune scribbled chores” (40).

The following two sequences, “road” and “delivery” continue in much the same way, burns vividly describing relatively the familiar yet absurd locations and scenes, navigating this concrete kaleidoscope with wordplay. Alliteration and assonance echo throughout these accounts, as “archbishops sip cool beers on subliminal rooftops/police parade in six packs spraying cracks in the paving” (51).

The poem in the latter sequence skew more personal than objective, as burns unpacks autobiographical geographies such as Bondi Beach – “always as big as tomorrow, or something wider / more thrilling than time – something huge that could reach out and lift you” (78)—or the sprawling suburbs of Sydney. As they move throughout burns’ memories, these vivid postcards feel intimate while still somewhat surreal and otherworldly, in their way.

The final sequence “wooing the owl (or the great sleep forward)” concerns the “chronologically free for all” realm of sleeping and dreams where you are, according to last poem “frill”, “everywhere at once though your feet are motionless” (105). This section feels both juxtapositional and consistent with the rest of the collection; escaping the arbitrary routine and structures of modern life leads us to experience similarly outlandish surroundings in our sleep-induced imaginations. It is an appropriate tone to close the complex, evocative terrains nestled throughout *brush*. At once vertiginous, biting and irreverent, burns’ abstract field notes of the impressionist plane she moves are a brilliant, esoteric travelogue that demand multiple readings, revealing more nanoscopic strands of detail with each.