

BETH SPENCER

Anne Walsh, *Intact*

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The front cover of Anne Walsh's second book of poetry shows an image from wildlife photographer John E. Marriot of a solitary wolf in a snowy landscape, at the edge of a road, howling. The forest in the background is a texture of trees felled and stripped of their foliage and pines still standing. The dirt road narrows and curves out behind the wolf which stands, feet planted, head tipped to the sky, a small warm point of contrast against the snow and devastation.

The title of Walsh's book, *Intact*—a single word meaning undamaged, whole, unscathed, unharmed, inviolate—is ironic given that the poems are about love and loss, about the depths of a relationship and the shattering of it:

*You were the wren in my rending, the row in my sorrow,  
the ear in my tears...*

("Wolves in the Cathedral," 25)

But it is absolutely apt, because the book is also about surviving:

*Visible in the wild wreck I am is the empire I was.*

("Intact" 3)

Walsh was born and grew up in the US and now lives in the very poetry-rich Australian city of Newcastle. This is her second collection of poems. Her first, *Love Like a Drunk Does*, was published by Ginninderra Press almost a decade ago.

In Walsh's biographical note she is described as "a poet and a story writer whose work falls somewhere on the border of those two countries. Sometimes she's a dual citizen and sometimes she has no country at all." Positioning herself as a boundary-rider and boundary crosser, it is in her seemingly effortless ability to blend lyric and narrative, to cross from the territory of politeness and civility into the messy wilds of the love-lost and bring back poetry, and in her startling juxtapositions—wolves and cowboys and kangaroos and jazz all in the same poem—that *Intact* creates and inhabits its own space.

(From "Swing" 29–31)

*There is a song the wind sings  
low under its hat like a lone cowboy hums*

*while mending things  
along the fence, curls it in the alto peel  
of paint horses running  
along the timbre of a distance,  
prays it in the bells from ashram hills,  
chants it in Gregorian pine  
the sacred song of frost  
on their needle lips.  
Purrs it in the tawny boots of kangaroos...*

“Swing” evokes the rhythm of old Westerns with the lone cowboy and the paint horses, moves to chanting and “the bells from ashram hills” and then suddenly flips us awake with that gorgeous image of “the tawny boots of kangaroos.” Later in the poem Walsh riffs on “the single howl of cello / a mate-less wolf in snow” as she winds her words towards a reminder of the cover image and the swing of an axe.

*...[O]n my hand, my thigh, my dollar store notebook  
with the wolf on it,  
on the whole symphony of you in me  
that lives in my hip bones,  
the orchestra there warming up  
furious tender...*

*...The single howl of cello  
a mate-less wolf in snow...*

*...The sudden gasp of one violin  
like the first earth crack of an oak  
after an axe has worked minutes  
to take down all the lifetimes of her.*

The wolf imagery that recurs throughout *Intact* is fitting, for in some ways this slim volume is like a great intense rich poetic howl at the moon.

If you have ever howled like a wolf (and I hope you have), planted yourself firmly, tipped your head back exposing your throat to the sky—that so very vulnerable part of a person, certainly the most vulnerable part of a poet—and surrendered yourself to the howl that lives inside, you will know what a wonderfully complete feeling it is.

*I Know who I am...*  
*A wolf with a prayer in her mouth.*  
(“Your Loss” 37)

Wolves howl I would imagine to express their being. To say I am here, I belong, you cannot ignore me. To join with the great symphony of whatever part of the planet they inhabit and belong to. To express their love of life, and of their pack, and that they are required.

*I'm listening to the song of us and by us I mean every being...*  
*...the song of everything*  
*... sung in my un-cowled wolf monk throat...*  
(“Johnny Cash Dirge” 41–44)

The critic Elizabeth Wright writes that “Texts are bodies speaking to other bodies” (5). Both howling and certain kinds of poetry—when it is done with great precision and attention, as it is here—bring us right into our bodies and senses, and into the body of the planet and everything in and on it, like a visceral meditation.

*We come from the feel of oceans and grope*  
*our way unsteadily*  
*Through the betrayal of dryness and of mortality.*

*But our emotion has a texture and is palpable to*  
*the internal palm*  
*That feels with scarred fingers the endless face of*  
*the eternal.*

(“Scarred Fingers” 49)

It is risky to go through life heart-first. To talk about love so openly even when that love contains loss and pain within it. To allow that love to open you up, to make you even more sensitive to the world. To embrace all of it, the pain and the ordinary and the wonder. To love without discrimination.

(I love the way these poems challenge us even to see the death of an Indian mynah bird in the road as worth grieving over.)

And to say I belong. I am here. I will not be silent. I will continue to be here. You have not destroyed me. I am intact.

*I am gone from you who tried to cage me...*

*I Know who I am.*

*I am breath. Pulse. Secretary of the Interior.*

*I light dawn with one match of my tinder voice.*

*I'm the dervish crow in whirling fields.*

*A mum of three.*

*A wolf with a prayer in her mouth.*

*The prayer herself.*

(“Your Loss” 37)

On my first reading I thought the poems thinned out a bit too much towards the end in a not-so-satisfying way. After the build-up of several rich and extended poems —“Wolves in the Cathedral,” “Swing,” “Johnny Cash Dirge”—that are balanced in between shorter poems of varying lengths, suddenly there is a series of micro poems. (One is a single line—*I am in a love fog and can see everything through it.* “Love Fog” 51.) It is as if we are robbed of a crescendo.

But returning to the book this too seemed part of its essential intactness. Isn't this how a love affair often ends—the drama and then the thinning out?

And then the final poem, “Fuzz Noise”—so strikingly different. A poem for her daughter Annabelle, who is described eating a banana.

*she eats a banana  
big hush of peel  
in her cow onesie...*

*her eating my attention  
peeling it...*

*her chewing  
my writing  
becoming  
her chewing  
our  
silent  
onesie*

This, at the end of it all: so utterly domestic, so embodied. (*Never was there a noisier silent consumption / of anything / than of my attention.*) The antithesis of all the romance, and that which remains right here, whole and intact. A poem about the complexity and the wonder of life: the need to be both consumed by it and—through poetry perhaps, and

love—to consume it. Peeling it, chewing it, attending.  
And never forgetting to howl.

#### WORKS CITED

Wright, Elizabeth. *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice*. London: Methuen, 1984.