

## PREFACE

Readers of poetry have a weather eye for the new, young talents whose work ensures the serious continuance of an art that is possibly vulnerable from being too little read. Slightly surprisingly, it always arrives, robust with the strange fusion of ambitious intent and self-effacement that serious artistry requires. It is true that, occasionally, there is premature praise from critics and committees of judges, if eagerness at some newness overtakes more lasting considerations of artistic reach and achievement. This is of course unhelpful as feedback, and it patronises the reading public, some of whom might (out of the corner of an eye) already be seeing a fair amount of puffery across the poetry industry. Still, that said, the poems in this anthology impress me as having a true distinction in quality and, personally, they move me.

Seven poets are presented, each with a large sample of poems: Elizabeth Campbell, Bonny Cassidy, Sarah Holland-Batt, L K Holt, Graeme Miles, Simon West and Petra White. They have either published their second book, or are in the late stages of writing their second manuscript. That is, they all possess what begins to be an oeuvre. As we went to press, six were aged between twenty-eight and thirty-five. The latter figure would be a tidy, arbitrary cut-off, but Simon West, pushing it by about eighteen months, rounds off as the eldest. It could be asked: why an agebracket? There is an intrinsic interest in the question as to what ways the poets of a new generation take into their hands an art whose history is so amazingly rich and various. This choice of poets and poems is a starter for discussion.

Generational groupings of poets are often self-selected around defined reading interests. In this case it's the inclination to devour as much of poetry's past and present traditions as possible, for the wide craft and spirit of the art. This seems to have fed a particular, persistent élan in their works: intelligence that is free to be daring,

with a practised suppleness of free-verse lines. That is a very broad affinity, however. Open this book and seven remarkably different sensibilities come in view. Each of these poets in fact knows the work of most or all of the others, and some friendly dialogue exists among them, but their poetry shows little trace of groupmindedness. They clearly are disposed by their reading to gather an individual array of influences to act as muse.

For decades, the way of populist appeal has been pushed by some as the future for this art, with only rare successes. The strategy misses poetry's most likely audience. The thing about good poetry, as with other serious art, is that you take it in with an excited patience – a pleasure of art is that it responds hugely if you give it time. Whilst this truth remains well understood for art generally, has it perhaps become fudged somewhere along the way with regard to the reading of poetry? It happens that much of the excellent, serious poetry being written in Australia would naturally speak to the large body of lovers of books and particular arts who are used to the double-play of immediate attraction and slow immersion in a work. Perhaps a way to reconnect is to remind ourselves of the kind of immediacy that poetry has. A suggestion to those who might pick up this book is to try reading its poems boldly aloud, to the furniture or a friend – the sea can be particularly receptive if you have one near. The experience can be galvanising. The strong shades of feeling that exist in every poem on these pages come alive in the head's resonance. Meanings and under-meanings appear unexpectedly – first, second, or third time through; and any obscurities that hang around can be suddenly acceptable in the music of language.

The richness of a good poem is such that you can love it without looking up all its references. I'm not absolutely sure that the few footnotes here add more than a little. On the other hand, these days the dive into Google has for many become a part of poetic

enjoyment. Isis and Osiris, Drummond and Jonson, Galen, and even Medusa as jellyfish are easy items to find. One note here about medieval tapestries gives a useful nudge, perhaps, but readers will already be recognising a contemporary meditation on love.

The eclecticism instated by the modernists almost a century ago permeates the work of each poet here. They are great celebrators of ordinary particularities, in context with the world's larger patchwork of ideas and histories. And this is compatibly postmodern, a term that is still useful to designate how the characteristic mingling of perspectives in modern arts is now general across all manner of media. A flexibility of attitudes typifies many of the best contemporary artists, and it comes out in poetry that often is boldly individuated in voice, style and point of view. Among older Australian contemporaries, consider for example the variousness between these: Wallace-Crabbe, Murray, Owen, Fahey, Adamson, Gray, Wearne, Salom, Polain, Albiston and Jennifer Harrison; and add the late Peter Porter. The writing of each is beautifully idiosyncratic, indeed mercurial.

The poets anthologised here have grown up with the effects of instant global communication. The raw pressures and creative potentials in diversity are their psyche's home territory. Dialogical nimbleness is, as you would expect, prominent in their poetry. And quite as potent here is a confidence in art's other pole, of being still. It is served by a kind of unselfing. In these poems, even when part of the topic is personal identity, the personal pronouns that hold sets of emotion and thought together tend to do so very lightly. The momentum of the poem is not so much inward, towards a presented self, as outward to a world and its mysteries, of being and of language.

A number of coevals (and younger) whose first work is currently being deservedly noticed have been working in similar directions. Talent is tricky, of course: in a concentrated art like poetry, readers generally like it to appear full-on, playful but not mucking around. However, a fortunate contagion is always likely in an art when strong, different talents arrive together. Peer awareness has clearly been inspiring quite a few poets to ask the hard questions of their own writing.

Prose chopped conveniently into lines has always been the easilywritten surrogate for free verse. It is easily knowable by its effect: it draws us to flick through it by eye. The line breaks nowhere special, being a mere load-bearer for bright talk and polishedup images in procession, as if those contents were the poetry. In truth, an ability to write with the full, tensile resources of free verse can only come from intimacy with the manifold traditions of this lovely mode. New creators in jazz, or in many another art, would instantly recognise a like imperative. In free verse or metre, every line of a poem is an audible dance, dancing with other lines. This is where poetry presses us to read it out loud – or, if silently, to sub-vocalise. The dance of free verse has always been consciously reassessed and reinvigorated by its best writers in succeeding generations.

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