

Launch Speech – L.K. Holt, Keeps – 15/10/2014

My favourite novelist of the last little while is Siri Hustvedt. In one of her novels she writes of a character:

The man wrote well and soberly, but as I read the article I was overcome by a feeling that he was saying what he knew his readers expected him to say, that the article with its smooth language and received ideas would unsettle nobody.

And this reminds me of the scornful lines in one of Jack Gilbert's poems about 'Newness strutting around as if it were significant / irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry.'

Lucy's poetry is not like this. It doesn't pander to any expectations. It is unsettling and destabilising, puzzling and provoking. It's exciting. I don't think anybody could accuse it of being 'sober' or of 'pretending to be poetry.' Lucy's writing is the antithesis to Robert Frost's suggestion that poetry brings the order of art to the chaos of life. Or rather it does and it doesn't. The writing is beautiful, and artful, but it admits the messiness, the uncertainty and complication, the unknowableness of so much. Too much order, too much knowingness, too much sobriety, can be boring. Lucy is not boring.

As I go on I'm going to speak of Lucy's poetry in terms of transformation, art and magic. And I'll use a number of quotations from art because much of Lucy's work grows out of a contemplation of art of one sort or another. But before I do that I'd like to start where Lucy starts with the poem 'Shark'.

Lucy is gentle with us at the beginning of the book. This is one of the most straight-forward poems in the collection but there is a concision and compression, a sharpness of language and a turn of thought that is still startling. The poem is addressed to 'my' shark. The shark is 'going about your death-zags / in chinkless chainmail'. I'm not sure 'zags' is a word without its partner 'zig' but what a resonant and active word it is here, and 'chinkless chainmail' is a marvellously compressed image in both sight and sound. Such take-your-breath-away phrase making is evident throughout Keeps but, of course, a satisfying poem is more than the sum of flashing phrases; it must build towards something. 'Shark' ends:

Be compassionate! That's to say hungrily
indifferent to this precious rough-cube of brain:
make for my body, rouse it to blood-belting
action, so my hand may do what it can.

How startling is the oxymoron 'hungrily / indifferent' split across the linebreak, or the almost oxymoronic description of the brain as a 'precious rough-cube', or the vigour of the phrase 'blood-belting action'? In Lucy's hands they are surprising yet apt, inevitable but never predictable. And it is in the language and the music that the poem opens up to rouse the reader to think anew about eternal questions concerning nature and the nature of compassion, the status of the body and the brain, fear, doubt and the will to survive. Who is this metaphor shark swimming off Glenelg? What does this first poem mean for the rest of the book?