Dwelling on the Weather

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John Jenkins

A BREAK IN THE WEATHER
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T A TIME when publishers of poetry in Australia are light on the ground, the verse novel as a form appears to be, at least comparatively, a growth industry. The Australian poetry scene has been blessed on this front in recent years, with the sticky-as-sex efforts of Dorothy Porter (The Monkey’s Mask and Wild Surfise), the curious-noir of John Tranter (The Floor of Heaven) and the boots’n’all myth-building of Les Murray (Fredy Neptune). This penchant for a prosey poesy has by no means been limited to our shores, Vikram Seth and Anne Carson being prime examples. Similarly, the most stunning verse novel of recent years, W.G. Sebal’d’s After Nature, is a testimony to the force and suppleness of the form.

With A Break in the Weather, John Jenkins offers us such a beast. At a mere ninety-six pages, this verse novella manages to compress a great deal of information into its 252 octaves. Jenkins adopts and adapts the ottava rima common to Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso and Byron’s Don Juan for his tale of global warming, mixed-race relations and bastard meteorologists. His use of the octave and his light touch with his tale of global warming, mixed-race relations and bastard meteorologists. His use of the octave and his light touch with

John Jenkins offers a smorgasbord of scientific information turned to verse. Take, for example, clouds and pressure systems in Verses 81–85. The scientific knowledge Jenkins disseminates gains a vibrancy (if not poetry) sadly denied his characters. Weather balloons, Chaos theory, relativity, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, El Niño, symbiotic marine colonies, the Gulf Stream, the nomenclature of clouds, the Cretaceous and Permian catastrophes, global climate change, Critical Threshold Events and alternative energies, among much other data, form the backbone of the novella. Rather than a plot per se, Jenkins pushes the reader toward a realisation that a major part of the threat facing the planet is a general failure actually to imagine the catastrophe we have nurtured. Within this strange coupling of science and poetry, this key point evolves quite naturally: it is not enough simply to know; we must also imagine what is being done to the earth and an alternative scenario for our children (Bruce and Miko aptly name their firstborn Miranda).

Towards the novella’s end, Bruce offers an almost Aristotelian summation of the work of art as ‘a sense of being brought to a complete and adequate expression’. For all its various shortcomings, A Break in the Weather successfully achieves just so much.