A Slick of Past

Lisa Gorton

Jan Owen
TIME DANCING
Five Islands Press, $16.95pb, 93pp, 0 86418 775 0

Louise Wakeling
MEDIUM SECURITY
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JAN OWEN WROTE many of the poems in this collection during a residency in Malaysia. There are poems about durians and salaks and mangosteens, fig trees and musk trees, night markets, mosquitoes and fireflies. The other poems are also full of things: a crystal bowl and a blue bowl; a Korin print and a Kashan. But these are things she didn’t buy, objects from the past — things that exist as memory, with all its dimensions of time and meaning. And so, for all its detail and rapture, this is metaphysical poetry; full of things, certainly, but also full of abstract and fantastical images of time and music and memory. There’s a wardrobe she remembers: ‘It was glossy black, lightweight, plain, / woven and framed in a clear mood / from canes gathered in by village girls.’

Back of the black wardrobe
with its coffin-shaped drawer
was a high white wall
with a gap where the bats flew in
untidy with life
to hang their rags from a beam.
Squarely below, it stood as firm
as its own first principle, emptiness,
the space where nothing is,
where memory equals mass at the speed of thought

With this play on the formula that equates mass with energy, Owen introduces an intellectual detachment — measured by the shift into the present tense — that takes us outside the room and out of the time she is recreating in this poem.

Owen’s abstractions are typically playful and typically disconcerting, too, for they show memory in its frailty as well as in its strength. And memory, with its peculiar combination of loss and redemption, is a recurring theme in this otherwise varied collection:

It’s stuck perception — a slick of past
for which you thumbprint then,
both cost, both gain.
The commerce between is quick
as the shimmering sex of light
or how we pulse from particle to wave,
short-changing be with have
The quick-changing images in this extraordinary sequence suggest the relentless forward movement of time. Owen often uses these images — of particles and light and memory — as if the commerce she sets up in this way between the particular things she describes and the abstract forces she imagines offers some way to measure what memory gains, and what is lost.

But the most moving poems in this collection make memory’s balance of loss and gain a quality of tone. If they start with a celebration of some incident or particular thing, they end with a renunciation that is something like peace. In ‘The River’, for instance, she travels upstream, ‘winding between the mangroves in a sampan after dark’ to see the fireflies — ‘spirits of the place timedancing / momentary patterns’ — until she concludes: ‘This was as far as we could come, the sampan was / rocking immeasurable minutes till we turned back. / Distance was opening like an aura / around us and between. Something was over / clearly. And flowed on.’ These lines rock back and forth like the movement of the sampan in the water, with the assured affirmative power of someone looking back.

This is rapturous poetry; it conjures up the physical world in all its colour and strangeness, and imagines that world in a metaphysical realm of time and memory. Its energy comes from its celebration of the physical world, but its power to move derives from the detachment that places Owen outside the event, remembering. Some poems seem out of place in this collection: a lively series of tributes to other poets, and some accomplished translations from Baudelaire.

**TURNING TO Louise Wakeling’s poetry is like turning to a different world: the familiar, troubling world of human interaction. And there is nothing metaphysical about it.** Wakeling writes about family, about prisoners and politics. And she writes about politics in terms at once more general and more personal than we usually intend when we use the word. She writes about the private politics of family and the personal cost of politics. It’s not debate or revolution that interests her in these poems, but the more daily facts of compromise, hope and renunciation.

Wakeling often makes poetry from mundane events. In ‘The Teacher’s Lament’ she writes: ‘I would give this breeze off the hills for a day / without marking, a thousand papers / folding their wings like crushed birds.’ She writes in a direct expository style, a style that maintains some of the rhythms of speech, and many of the facts of a particular situation. It is this style, more than anything else, that gives the lament its quality of outwardness; it makes the lament an experience we can easily assimilate.

But Wakeling is at her best when she writes about politics at the point when it becomes history, when it constitutes an event, one that belongs to someone else. Then Wakeling writes with an intense inwardsness that gives the poems (perhaps paradoxically) a broader imaginative range. ‘Kim Lan in Cabramatta’ recounts the experience of a refugee:

This opening has the quality of a lucid dream, because everything in it seems to matter, every small detail seems to have some defining value.

Wakeling achieves the same sense of urgency in a fine long poem ‘for Nidia Diaz’, who, as Wakeling notes, was ‘captured in combat in El Salvador, interrogated for sixteen days, and held in solitary confinement in the national police headquarters for six months’. In this poem, the event — which is large, which is history — is written as something intensely personal:

The details are not symbolic (at least, not symbolic in any obvious way) and yet they have the sense of meaning that we might normally attribute to symbols; the sense that, like Diaz, they stand for something else.

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