

# Men Gotta Tell Their Stories

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Mark Mahemoff  
NEAR-LIFE EXPERIENCE  
Ginninderra Press, \$22pb, 122pp, 1 74027 171 8

Craig Powell  
MUSIC AND WOMEN'S BODIES  
Five Islands Press, \$16.95pb, 68pp, 0 86418 776 9

IN ONE OF the characteristically taut poems that make up Mark Mahemoff's second collection, *Near-life Experience*, the speaker describes the bleak reality of imminent separation, and wonders: 'How to expose / the workings of this moment?' Vital and urgent, the question lies at the heart of this poet's practice. Mahemoff's poems are concerned, principally, with transience, with things that are 'here and then / gone'. Constructed, in a majority of cases, from the 'salvaged details' of life, they operate as personal histories, recording everyday experience and observation in the face of death. The poem 'Tullamarine' is representative:

Something brief must be said  
for the tall, pale boy  
with toast-rack thinness  
and a Japanese girl,  
how he shelters and unshelters  
her miniature frame  
in his long woollen coat  
as she clings to him  
like a sail to its mast  
while breath leaves their mouths  
to become wisps of mist  
on the concrete platform,  
while we wait for a skybus.

More often than not, Mahemoff's watchful eye is on the people and paraphernalia of his native Sydney. The book contains numerous evocations of the city's domestic and public scenes, its 'unfriendliness' and 'flippant weather'. In these poems, as in others, it is a consequence of Mahemoff's feeling for the particular that certain lines sound memorably. The poem 'Ordinary Days', for example, concludes with a description of a jogger's running shoes as 'possum eyes / glinting in headlights'; while, in 'A Safe White Warmth', there is perfect aphorism: 'Graffiti is a rumour that no one quite believes.'

Also placed against the backdrop of city life are half a dozen or so poems exploring self and identity. In order to

understand himself better, it seems, Mahemoff can reveal significant amounts of information about his childhood and his family relations; he does so in poems with demonstrative titles, such as 'Imparting', 'Open Inspection' and 'An Admission'. Clearly, his parents' divorce has left its mark, to the extent that a number of the poems are neatly threaded with brief references to danger and insecurity. A city dweller, the poet is nevertheless sensible to the natural perils that lie beyond his fly-screen door.

Elsewhere, Mahemoff's subjects — and the observations surrounding them — are imagined. *Near-life Experience* opens with a set of six cinematic portraits, each of which attempts to define a nation's characteristic portrayal, in film, of love and love-making. These lines taken from 'Spanish' are among the volume's most comical: 'Again we are in a bedroom / but feel slightly unsettled / by the presence of a donkey in the background / chewing on a hairbrush.'

Seeking variety perhaps, Mahemoff has also drawn on material from primary sources in a few of his poems. 'Grand Jury Testimony', for instance, is compiled using extracts from *The Starr Report*, and yields some colourful juxtapositions: 'you also gave her a Rockettes blanket. / I didn't remember the cherry chocolates.'

It is hard not to feel that Mahemoff's book contains more poems than we need. While the quality of the offerings is fairly consistent throughout, too many follow repetitive procedures. In an accumulation of merely descriptive pieces, Mahemoff's flat, understated tone threatens to obscure the finest examples of his work by slipping into mannerism. Other poems simply do not warrant the space allotted to them. 'Reparation Scheme', which poses as a questionnaire to victims of Nazism and ends with the line 'We hope you consider this a final solution', represents a serious lapse in judgment. At its best, however, Mahemoff's voice is clear and poised. His most effective poems are instilled with a muted sense of a time and place outside the present, of 'water racing / from somewhere unseen / to somewhere else in the distance'.

Sentiments similar to these have long been discernible in the poetry of Craig Powell. His fourth book, *Rehearsal for Dancers* (1978), included the following passage:

I move on the blades  
of a hunger that never closes

behind me and I lean  
to the curve the one  
knee bent toward silence

'The Skater'

while in this latest collection — Powell's seventh — there are repeated accounts of life travelling towards darkness, as well as a description of a horse cantering, which notes the 'stillness before [and] stillness after'. Especially among the early books, a poem's movement can sometimes appear to mirror our lives' progression from activity and abundance to

potential vacancy. Poems begin with something actual before turning to questions of existence more difficult to name.

Powell is never more grounded than when telling family stories, what at one point in *Music and Women's Bodies* he calls 'family talk'. Two long poems are based on his late father's sometimes questionable memories of growing up in a New South Wales country town. In chatty, colloquial language, 'The Boy in My Father's Story' tells of the death of a young blacksmith killed by a horse. For Powell, it is not so much the story itself that matters, but rather the telling of it: 'Let the human creature / bless itself before death with stories', he writes at the end of the same poem. So it is scarcely surprising to learn that Powell is also a psychiatrist. The knowledge leads one to think of Martin Flanagan's recent injunction (from *In Sunshine or in Shadow*) that 'Men gotta tell their stories. Too many men runnin' round with hurt little boys inside.'

As the book's title suggests, a touch lasciviously, there is much here to do with sensuousness and human pleasures. Powell refers to enjoyment of wine and picking mangoes, to playing the flute ('Just slid[ing] my breath into a deepening tunnel'), or to the erotic orchid and the feminine 'savour' of its compost. Nature's pungency is also particularly strong in the poems about farm animals. 'The Calves', for example, owes some of its energy to Ted Hughes and to the truncated sounds of Heaney: 'the nubby shadows stagger up from / the soil, a gut-reek of new life, mist / boiling from placentas.' This sort of vigour is fairly characteristic of Powell. But, occasionally, his poetry is simpler and achieves a fine transparency, as in 'Restaurant': 'A tide moves in from Tierra del Fuego. / I watch your face tilt gently to your soup.'

To accompany *Music and Women's Bodies*, Powell has himself recorded the book's entire contents — plus fifteen poems chosen from *Minga Street* (1993) — onto compact disc. The results are frequently revealing, if not always to good advantage. Powell tends to over-dramatise his work; his style of reading is declamatory, with marked variations of pace, pitch and accent. The problem with this approach is that we hear the sound of the poet's voice more than we hear his poetry. Poems previously enjoyed on the page — because 'heard' in the mind — suddenly lose their appeal. Powell is most engaging when least present, when he lets his poems speak for themselves.

