

Unplugged Sensibilities

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S.K. Kelen

GODDESS OF MERCY

Brandl & Schlesinger, \$22.95pb, 72pp, 1 876040 40 8

Ken Smeaton

LOVE POET LIVE

Eaglemont Press, \$20pb, 83pp, 0 9580998 0 4

S.K. KELEN's *Goddess of Mercy* comes hot on the heels of *Shimmerings* (2000) and represents a considerable leap in terms of control and consistency. *Goddess of Mercy* smacks of well-made editorial cuts and an overall vision of the book as more than the sum of its parts. Kelen's work arguably follows Frank O'Hara's notion that 'you just go on your nerve'. *Goddess of Mercy* maintains the same direct approach, but is perhaps the product of a more hardened and mature nerve. Like the late John Forbes, and O'Hara before him, Kelen's poetry is first and foremost a communicative act, part of a dialogue as much as a discourse, open more often to political comment than to literary hermeneutics.

Kelen sharpens the Australian vernacular against suburban experience, while foraging through the shipwreck of Western literature. His lyricism is rich with allusion and dislocation. Pan appears by the Murrumbidgee, Valiants become chariots and secretaries nymphs, Don Juan quests for love at the local shopping mall, journeys to Centrelink become epic, and so on. Kelen's wry humour and Zen-like reserve save the poems from the weight of either the allusions or the lyricism. Offering something of an acid test to the pretensions of poetry, he undermines the grandiose self-regard of lyricism and literature, often with a laugh-out-loud wit. His précis of Homer in 'Reality Check' is just one example.

Kelen makes good use of mythology, reworking canonical figures into a contemporary vision. Combining allusions to Norman Lindsay and William Wordsworth in 'Kambah Pool', the figure of Pan recalls a burgeoning adolescent sexuality, and the elusive and illusory proximity of childhood to the natural world:

Children see
That crazy old spirit Pan left his shadow
Hanging from a tree and reflection
Drinking at the river the old goat's galloped
Way up mountain, leaps cliff to cliff
Grazes on blackberries growing in the scrub
Gazes over his Murrumbidgee domain.

The poem ends with the 'immigrant god' moving inland. As such, the retreat of the natural world, the movement of the divine into the desert and the colonialism of European

settlement are collocated, at once gathering pathos to the figure of Pan while imbricating the threat such alien fecundity represents to the indigenous.

Kelen's best work incises the contradictions of suburban life and balances satiric admonishment with humour and a recurrent, redemptive sense of grace. 'Fuel Injection' is an example of such a balancing act. Gesturing towards the pastoral in the speaker's opening admiration for the 'silver trees' he has just planted, Kelen develops a suburban idyll in celebration of a 'modern love', pithily claiming: 'what dreams make possible for some / a finely tuned car does for others.' He unravels the contradictions of one of the key loves of suburban experience, a young man for his V8, fully cognisant of the 'undeclared war' he partakes in: 'There's the toll we pay for running / engines filthying the atmosphere / the carnage is an undeclared war / all worthwhile when you hear / a steel heart's multi-valve purr.' With the relative, not wholly redemptive, worth of the modern love in question, the poem sees the line between turpitude and morality blurred with well-meaning, if self-deluding, ethics. The import of this unabashed paean lies in the recognition that the ambiguous, almost ambivalent, ethical position is the stuff of 'real life'.

Poems such as 'Homer's Dream' and 'Buffy', while amusing, are more received than re-conceived cultural studies, and one wonders whether the original rerun would have been preferable. While a few of his shorter lyrics ('The Pathetic Spectre of Extremism' and 'Toxin Baby') seem more like notes towards poems than finished ones, his best poetry penetrates the vagaries and hypocrisy of quotidian experience. In 'Attitude: Don Juan in the Shopping Mall', Kelen creates a brilliantly sustained, acerbic examination of the immigrant experience of 'Fortress Australia'. One of the better long sequences in recent Australian poetry, it illustrates the potential poetry has for cogent political comment and playful satire. Similarly, a poem such as 'O'Connor Ridge' should become something of an Australian classic, much anthologised and lauded for its grasp of a peculiar nostalgia and ethos common to many Australians. The central thread in Kelen's work is that poetry should get down from its pedestal and engage the real world with clarity and care. He achieves this deftly.

KEN SMEATON'S WORK is probably best known through his live performances at numerous festivals and pubs in Melbourne. Smeaton's commitment to live readings and performances stems from the desire to create an egalitarian and independent poetry scene, accessible to 'ordinary' people. This might leave the reader of *Love Poet Live* at something of a disadvantage. The irony of the title is hard to miss, and may point to Smeaton's hope that his poetry is just as alive on the page as behind the mike.

Smeaton's fourth collection in thirty years, *Love Poet Live* draws on at least fifteen years' work. There is an apparent emulation of hard-living poets such as Dylan Thomas, Charles Bukowski and Leonard Cohen in the first sections of the book. This gives way in the last sections to the pared-

back imagery and reserve of Zen influences such as Basho. Similarly, early preoccupations with poverty, ennui, occasional drug use, sex and onanism, and the day-to-day grind of being an unemployed poet shift to scenes of domestic life, the birth of a daughter, the evolution and deterioration of love and its subsequent rebirth. Smeaton adopts a plain diction that at times drifts between the self-romanticising rhetoric of the journal entry and the public exhortations of performance poetry ('I go I do I rant' and 'Rant of a Day'). While touching upon politics (a response to the 1991 Gulf War 'The Wheel' is eerily prescient), Smeaton's work is, as the title suggests, primarily concerned with love and living. His poetry offers 'a clear and direct plumb of the heart'. Unfortunately, it remains uncomfortably apparent that it is Smeaton's heart that is finally being plumbed. The results are less than satisfying when his poetry too readily gives way to the demotic and a nevertheless obscure autobiography:

Humble before this majesty
my words die on the page
fall dry from my tongue.
We aim rockets of passion

to the summit
learn the ropes as we climb.
The mountain growing from you
is bigger than our sense.

Many of the poems celebrate close friendships or eulogise the passing of friends and the ending of relationships. Without offering insights into the nature of friendship or bereavement that extend beyond the purely autobiographical, the results leave a peculiar sense of voyeurism, as though the reader has stumbled upon someone's diary or eavesdropped on another's grief.

Smeaton introduces a conception of poetry as 'the last, great, / non-commercial art form', and goes on to state: 'Unremarked, unsung, I am rare / Oxygen, in the swamp of images.' He is a plain-speaking man. While this is no doubt successful amid the hurly-burly of Melbourne's live poetry scene, the results, in book form, are often hit-and-miss. Ironically, the best poems in *Love Poet Live* are the simple imagist love poems toward the end (such as 'Peach', 'Yumi. The Dream'), since they take the poet's voice from the stage and set it gently against the impersonality of the page.

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