

# Salty Pleasures

David McCooley

Alison Croggon

*Attempts at Being*

Salt, \$21.95pb, 174pp, 1 876857 42 0

Kate Fagan

*The Long Moment*

Salt, \$19.95pb, 107pp, 1 876857 39 0

Jill Jones

*Screens Jets Heaven: New and Selected Poems*

Salt, \$21.95pb, 139pp, 1 876857 22 6

Kate Lilley

*Versary*

Salt, \$19.95pb, 98pp, 1 876857 15 3

WHEN PEOPLE COMPLAIN about 'postmodernism' in poetry, they are usually, for all their talk of form and technique, strangely indifferent to its intense aestheticism. The disruptions of syntax, use of indeterminacy, tonal disjunctions, obtruse formalism, and intertextuality are types of decorativeness, instruments of ornamentation. For all that Language poets and others press their political case, pleasure is the guilty secret of postmodern poetry.

Aesthetic pleasure is immediately apparent in these new works from Salt, the Anglo-Australian publisher that has developed an exciting international poetry list ranging from Ron Silliman to Dennis Haskell. The pleasure of reading this list is partly bibliographic. Salt publishes some of the best-looking (and most reasonably priced) poetry books in the country. The stock is excellent and the text well designed. At a time when the chances of getting a book of poetry published is as slim as a supermodel, it must be doubly pleasing to be published by a company like Salt.

These new works continue Salt's stylish, serious approach to poetry. *Versary* is Kate Lilley's long-awaited debut volume. Her teasing poems can be oblique, humorous and plangent: 'if it's not one thing it's another / if it's not your fault it's irrelevant.' One could see Lilley as an antipodean Susan Howe in her obliquity, erudition and attention to the textuality of history, except that Lilley is funnier, a miniaturist and more interested in popular culture. For all Lilley's erudition, her poems don't have the smell of the archive (as Howe's do). The opening poems in *Versary* lovingly

devour popular genres. The title of 'Nicky's World', the informative endnotes tell us, 'is the name of a collector's plate commemorating the long-running American soap opera *The Young and the Restless*'.

This is the postmodern world of semiotic excess, the plethora of signs that defines and corrodes the idea of self, presence or history. At times, Lilley can sound a little like John Forbes in drag and good form ('I hear the voice-over from the start of *Dirty Dancing* / playing in the lounge and feel sedate / sedated / like one more krispy kreme would set me up for life'). But Lilley's poems engage more with emotions, and these are no less 'real' for their links with irony, self-consciousness and culture. In particular, Lilley is attracted to the sentimentality of country and western music, as in the marvellous 'Live at the Opry': 'When she holds the microphone to her lips / and whispers *mine is a lonely life* / it sounds like a radio tuned to the end of the world.'

Lilley's use of disjunction can produce opacity, but it also produces astonishing poetic effects: 'Take the road she took see where it goes // the strangest house on the block still stands / the little girl in the leaves is the love of my life.' And *Versary* does more than rely on soap opera and country music. Equally important is literary history (especially the seventeenth century), near-exhausted forms such as the eclogue, and the technical language of literature. Form itself features, in 'Mint in Box: A Pantoum Set' (the pantoum being today what the sestina was in the 1960s and 1970s). Lilley's attraction to this form is not surprising, since it is a form that thrives on the non sequitur. Overall, there is a strange (sometimes erotic) beauty about Lilley's poetry. Through its brilliance and wit, it is like good country and western: simultaneously factitious and the 'real thing'. *Versary* is an extraordinary debut.

Lilley's emphasis on love and loss (good postmodern themes) can also be seen in Kate Fagan's first major collection, *The Long Moment*. Both Lilley and Fagan featured in the Paper Bark anthology *Calyx* (2000). Like Lilley, Fagan can occupy worlds simultaneously sensuous and cerebral. Compared to Lilley, Fagan is positively wordy, sometimes unwieldily so, but there is a sense that this wordiness is thematic: 'rhetoric is addictive / circumstantially / a possible effect / of aesthetics in welcome crisis // something molten, / practical / or cumulative, / carnivals of talk / immeasurably precise / as quicklime.' That we might initially miss the oxymoronic quality of 'immeasurably precise' should make us mindful of the unseen depths in the swirl of Fagan's apparent wordiness.

Precision in Fagan's work is immeasurable inasmuch as she delineates moments that cheat representation — 'placement falls under suspicion'. This radical suspicion of representation produces poetry that can teeter between adventure and boredom. The opening and closing sequences, however, are nothing less than brilliant adventures.

Elsewhere, Fagan's poetic world is an abstract, almost mathematical landscape, populated by subjectivities that might themselves be equally abstract. But Fagan is in fact an eroticist of the abstract: 'what seduction a tongue might exert.' Her theorising has a Romantic quality, seen not only in her interest in romantic love, but also in her approach to the real as nature, even if the natural world is always approached from a position of loss and nostalgia (or rather, especially because of that approach): 'We continue to occupy this world, it appears in erratic scrawls, patient and actual. Where nothing refers to nothing.'

As this suggests, Fagan's mode is that of Romantic negativity, sometimes finely imaged: 'the thing / that recognizes dying / flies off a word, / burns / with happening.' Silence and nothingness mingle with the world, with otherness, with the bodies of lovers, to produce complex and engaging fugues. Fagan's poems can, like pelicans, look disconcertingly ungainly until they suddenly take graceful flight.

Jill Jones may seem more conventional than Lilley or Fagan, but some of her best work has a surrealist, transformative energy. 'Antipodean Geography', for instance, begins: 'Continents on the wall / shift slowly through a tide of weather. / Cupboards open and laugh.' Jones's surrealist moments can also be funny: 'The boy next door plays Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* on a gum leaf and he is telling us about his last holiday which he spent in the outside toilet.' Her humour can be more direct, as in her beautifully titled poem on ageing: 'What you've lost is what you keep on losing.' The children of 'old lost friends ... do the things you've lately given up / because they cause cancer, herpes, bad breath and contemplation'. As in both examples, there is a sadness about this humour, and her work as a whole is marked by a kind of hopeful melancholy.

Jones's *métier* is rendering the domestic scene. She imbues domestic comings and goings with great insight, inventiveness and seriousness. Often her poems occupy the in-between spaces of the day — coming home, going to work, going for a walk — and Jones makes these moments both recognisable and strange: 'walking down my path, i expect to meet myself / hanging around the front door, / a refugee on the verandah.' Jones is a modern *flâneur* (without the class connotations) and the city she observes is Sydney, not just the harbour, but also the inner west: its weather, sounds and peculiar atmosphere.

Jones is also a poet of possibilities (her third book was titled *The Book of Possibilities*). She looks with clarity — with neither coldness nor sentimentality — at desire, longing and loss. Some of the poems, especially in her second collection, suffer from a certain slightness, but her work generally asserts that the truly strange and lyrical can be found in the quotidian. The new and uncollected poems gathered in *Screens Jets Heaven* show, if anything, a deepening of the melancholic note that was manifested in the early poem,

'Cruising on a Ridge of Silence': 'Pain can often be the clearer truth.'

Such a sentiment is at the heart of Alison Croggon's latest book, *Attempts at Being*. Croggon has from the beginning of her career demanded attention (gaining an entry in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, 1994, on the strength of one book). She is one of the most powerful lyric poets writing today and, like John Kinsella, has become increasingly active in other areas, writing prose fiction, libretti and works for stage and radio, and editing the webzine *Masthead*.

Some of her dramatic works appear in *Attempts at Being*, but the lyric poems best illustrate Croggon's strengths: metaphorical energy, effective use of high rhetoric, and moral seriousness. She writes with rare rhetorical assurance. Who else could renew a figure as exhausted as grass ('all flesh is grass')? 'Tomorrow's grass will be yellow and voiceless / apart from the small green spear in its heart / shouting tomorrow and tomorrow.' (And the faint echo of Macbeth's nihilistic sentiments about futurity is intriguingly subversive.)

Croggon's essentially lyric status as a writer is not challenged by the longer theatrical pieces. As she observed in an interview in *Cordite 9*: 'I have a very slender interest in narrative as such. It's more what you can do around ideas that interests me.' *Attempts at Being* is full of ideas: the Stevensonian theorising in 'On Lyric'; the meditation on childbirth in 'Mnemosyne'; the metaphysics and politics in 'Amplitudes'. But in the longer, dramatic works, the lack of narrative impetus places a large burden on lyricism and 'what you can do around ideas'.

These longer works have more abjection about them than the Hal David–Burt Bacharach songbook. But, unlike those light songs, these works are '*Voices out of darkness*', as indicated in 'Monologues for an Apocalypse'. Croggon can do the police in different voices: these dramatic works make her book easier to admire than enjoy, though Croggon's apocalyptic imagination can veer towards expressionist theatrical cliché. Liza, from 'The Famine', for instance, remembers a dead child in these terms: 'He's crying. An old black crow somewhere in my head. He's crying and the wings start.'

For me, Croggon is at her best as a lyric poet. She is most inventive and economical in her effects, as in 'neurones quick with / such music / as shakes out angels'. Croggon is the most Romantic of these four poets, in her emphasis on creation, witnessing and the poet as a hieratic figure. In 'Medea' (a pantoum), she figures the ambivalence of the Romantic poet's ambition: 'in blood's filthy clamour / I will show you everything.'

If these fine poets can be facilely categorised as postmodern, it is because of their attention to language and to the unreliability of their medium. But from that unreliability they fashion strong poetic worlds in exquisitely different ways.