

Modernist Embraces

Gig Ryan

Chris Andrews

Cut Lunch

Indigo, \$18pb, 88pp, 1 74027 137 8

Peter Lloyd

Collage

Wakefield Press, \$16.95pb, 79pp, 1 86254 570 7

Samuel Wagan Watson

Itinerant Blues

UQP, \$19.95pb, 48pp, 0 7022 3282 3

STARTING IN THE mid-nineteenth century with industrialisation, the celebration of the metropolis as the true site for Art, the embrace of modernism continues apace into the twenty-first century. One thing these three poets have in common is their emphasis on city life. Samuel Wagan Watson and Peter Lloyd enjoy the contrast between citified sophistication and the detritus that accompanies it. Watson's second book, *Itinerant Blues*, is a development from his first, the spiky and lively *Of Muse, Meandering and Midnight*. His often-barbed humour and wild imagination are still apparent. Although he tends to overwrite, excess is preferable to paucity:

night racing through the suburbs
of white stucco dreaming ...
born for the walkabout rally
black feet pumping racing pedal to floor
breaking the silence of the settlers sacred sites
enveloped in shadows when not haunted by the silhouettes of
urban myth ('Night racing')

There are a few comments on the literary world — 'depression and success sitting uniform / on the bedside table' ('Literary festival bump-out') — but most of the poems embrace urban life, particularly the experience of driving. His similes do not always succeed: 'as the stale windscreen wipers awaken / screeching / like a pair of dying mutton-birds being pulled across the glass' ('Sunday'). In 'Jaded Olympic moments', the narrator returns home to find he has been burgled. When the police track down the young white thieves: 'the gear was gone without a trace / the video, the piggy bank, the literary award / and it made sense / 'cause if blackfellas had broken into the house / they would've taken Dad's 10ft

Landrights flag // 'cause it was worth just as much / as Cathy Freeman's gold.'

Sometimes Watson's images are too thickly mixed: 'like being in the stomach of an alloy-coated python / caught in the beard of a violent pepper storm / this 15 hour journey to Brisbane' ('The night train from Newcastle'). His work is full of amusing observations and self-deprecation, but is also informative, as in 'Last Exit To Brisbane': 'Boundary St. // that forged black scratch // a vein from Southbank to West End / with a tail swallowed by the chocolate river // this is the line, the limit / where the dark-skin were told - // DO NOT CROSS!' There is plenty of energy in Watson's work. Generally, the tone is more assured than in his first book.

Chris Andrews's *Cut Lunch* is full of dailiness and the casual habits of life. Sometimes the narrator is a sort of flâneur, giving centre stage to details that are normally overlooked. Andrews uses some unusual rhyming schemes in his fifteen-line, three-stanza poems (which make up the first and third sections of this book); his poetry is more formal and ordered than either Watson's or Lloyd's. The middle section's stately four- and five-beat lines are suited to the half-resigned, half-defiant tone. In 'A Thousand Regrets', Andrews's cartography of the city is both poignant and comical:

the city with its equestrian statues,
sabres raised over creeping traffic,
its dripping fire hydrants and fridges ...
the city, with its Old Masters and students,
taping out squares of bitumen,
vendors of wind-up plastic doves,
disconsolate distributors of handbills ...

A slight change in tone perhaps is 'Pittosporum', which contrasts the new daily life of retirement with the previous busier one, as the retiree recalls his past at a reflective pace.

These catalogues of observations express an almost phenomenological view of the world, attempting to be untainted by subjectivity. These well-tended poems celebrate intellectual and structural pleasures, rather than anarchic or exultant ones. Like Watson and Lloyd, Andrews avoids any swaddling of pseudo-poetic language (although Watson's Yoda-like 'and depleted I am' sounds strained), and revels in conversational language used in subtle enjambments:

The shy, the ones not too many people have touched.
Although when someone says It's just that he's shy
it can mean He's rude but we put up with him
(all this unconscious of course) because it might
be worth our while and it doesn't cost us much.

Peter Lloyd's *Collages* is influenced by the Beat poets in its mix of Eastern and Western philosophies, and also employs many invented compound and hyphenated words. This

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invention can become tiresome, a notation of poetic effect. While Watson and Andrews find poetry in the everyday, Lloyd's notion of poetry is more purely imaginative, zigzagging over a landscape of possibility and renewal, though flecked with painful experience. In 'Wool', compassion is simultaneously brave and inconsolable: 'She's knitted him good this year — leggings, / starbursts for his cancer hat: rainbow of jumpers, // embroideries of plants, lookouts from mountains / and something to feel easier when he breathes; // but smaller and smaller he gets, / yellower and yellower.'

Lloyd often extrapolates from an initial observation, describing it in finer detail each time. His clutter of city life is richly horrifying, but sometimes his horror feels misjudged. Bitterness is worn with more aplomb in Andrews. The spiritual and the corporeal are often intertwined: 'Look at the sky! I scream — // And it's irretrievable! // ... a sudden flash, / a God-skinning-eyeball-explosion at the omphalos, // as a yellow fingernail, slashed and tipped with crimson / stabs through the mist, a cat yeeowls' ('A Surprise'). Lloyd's emphasis is on creating through poetry a new sphere of acceptance, where beauty and ugliness not only coexist but depend upon each other. However, some of his less ambitious poems are more successful because more limited in scope, his imagination more restricted by subject matter. In 'Gift of the Magi', his crowded imagery highlights the scene: 'Herod's bright sword feinted left and right, / giant oratorios leapt from his eyes, // his face crackled like gift-paper.' The underbelly Lloyd describes is more classical and predictable, and his brand of Buddhism is required to tolerate it, whereas both Watson and Andrews are firmly entrenched in the suburbs they view without contempt or irony.

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