Michael Sharkey’s *Another Fine Morning in Paradise* is a book of astonished apprehending; these gobsmacked flights of non-fiction fantasy are loud with the klaxons of existential questioning, and Sharkey’s alarms signal a particularly Australian malaise. These authentically desperate ontological pastorals manoeuvre less toward the aubade, mourning instead an exhausted romance with ‘the People’s Republic of No Problems’ (55). This paradise is an Australia-as-failure, where the ‘fun is obligatory, words for laughs’ (55); in this place ‘where nothing you’d think of occurs,/ and repeatedly’ (25), the brute descendants of colonisers roam territories still largely unknown as the poet looks on, irascible and jocular, woe-filled while ode-ing knowingly.

‘The Garden of Earthly Delights’, which opens the collection, is a swift meditation on the empty ambits of utopianism: how humdrum a place where everyone belongs to a leisure class of ‘Trim-limbed men and women (who) spend their days at sport and picnics’ (11), and where ‘each tomorrow they would do the same again’ (11). In this poem Sharkey exercises an uncanny gait across idealised territories where, soon enough within the impossible zones, ‘they took a vote and ended’ the equilibrium. From here the poems swirl closer to home, kinetic and energetically recording idiosyncratic movement –

The Internet tour touts the local charm:
the faux-Victorian veneer, detention centre-style motels,
the yearly Festival of Car Yards, wine and waterfalls and sheep,
a sky that’s pink at five p.m., and trees that God
has polished bright that shed their skin as if they’re glad
to see us watching, church bells banging weddings out
throughout weekends until the strike and hum
of workdays kicks back in and Heaven’s once again
remote, as Heaven should be (42)

The themes here – weather and metaphysics, labour and pleasure, unions intimate and/or associative – map the logos of our weird shapes; within these sites, Sharkey is a meta-realist training a wry eye on the disequilibrium and dissembling. His critiques sharpened, we are the ‘Objects In A Mirror (which) Are Closer Than They Appear’ (50); the poet beholds our Antipodean, once-Edenic wrong-footedness where now ‘our anthems are the hit tune of America’ (45), and culture performs amid ‘the smog-blurred ziggurats of cash’ (64). These reflective texts are satirical, dystopian but never vituperative; in the readymade zones of colonisers-now-colonised –

the bully wins
the money, girl and car and our applause.
(50)

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At heart, these (mostly) heroic couplets interrogate sites of an inauthenticity that is loud with enculturated anti-heroism. Amid the ‘MacFish’ and ‘Mack trucks’ (51), antagonists are ‘waking up and cannot face the ugly thing that’s in the mirror’ (80); these poems, then, are confrontations asking us to consider what passes as sustenance as instead a banality –

we take communion in a box: the What’s Your Beef
and Squid Delicious, All of Italy to Go, the Randy Rooster’s

breasts you won’t believe you’ve sunk your choppers into,
and at John Frum’s pub and discotheque,

a complimentary always for a friend on Topless Nights. (45, 46)

In these engulfed, inorganic and dislocated locales, Sharkey parodies the passing parades of us, understanding our malnourishment as psychic. Perhaps thunderstruck at the unassailable impoverishment, his is often a trenchant register –

Driving like the mentor of a suicide club,
passengers awash with pheromones,

designer drugs and vodka slammers, through
our Arden, close to midnight, our John Keats

of panel beaters chucks a donut even
chasing cops applaud. (46, 47)

In these sub-urban wildernesses of ‘broken glass and fists and pavement pizzas’ (47), the wildness is untamable: underlying Sharkey’s humour-filled derision, though, are the deeper contours of despair. Punters, perverts, forebears, travel guides and pilgrims, farmers, poets and Mall dwellers – citizens one and all – shape a meandering collective identity which weaves, Golem-like and often idiotically, throughout this collection; mapping populations of local fauna, the terrain is often quipped-filled ... ‘Can I help yous?’ (70) echoing alongside ‘Who Do You Think You Are, Jesus? Just Fuck Off’ (44).

Sharkey is far too clever, though, to simply play out gestures of despair-into-antagonism; instead, the poet works to coax, charm, and humour readers toward self-recognition. Thus, lines such as ‘In a Silver Age, your hair, at least, is right’ (64) and ‘The Second last drink always is the one that does the damage what/ possessed me to announce I love these cocktails I could drink them/ all night long’ (80). But Sharkey also never averts his poem from a moral compunction: as in ‘of nothing, nowhere’, where there are now in the ruins of the idyll –

No, no birds for years, oh ten, yeah, twenty.
Plenty then. The whistling ducks, sandpipers,

seagulls. Clever fellers made em disappear,
and all the wetland, put a fence in. Dust there now. (48)

Sharkey is moral without moralizing, tongue often firmly wedged behind cheek; and he often shifts into the inflections of a demotic mock outrage, as in “‘Sort After’ Neighborhood” –

What use is
Heaven if the ones refused admission

can’t be sent to some Nauru or Christmas Island
of the damned to keep the ignorant in bliss? (15)

Asking readers to observe those governances which sort zones into sought-after and exclusionary places, Sharkey’s is an incisive and inclusive (and, often, one senses, fool-suffering) critique which remains astonished that morality remains the preserve of either angels (‘What would you like to do now?’ asks a bird/ that was human but chose to fly [16]) or politicians, all-too-eager and far-too-underwhelming in their rhetoric regarding the ‘overcrowding Paradise’ (79). Sharkey is singing a different tune, intelligent with bright anger that is neither aberrant nor obnoxious but instead beseeches and, in its own ethical way, is ‘full of fight’ (44). The last line is the coda that unlocks his imperative: ‘Lines I improve, boundaries erode’ (92). This book is indeed not just for laughs, though laugh you will. In our politically-moribund times, Another Fine Morning in Paradise stands as important Australian book, and perhaps a classic.

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