Kevin Roberts, *Writing the Tides* (Ronsdale Press, 2006)

I should declare my hand at the beginning: I first met Kevin Roberts almost 50 years ago at a country high school in the Riverland of South Australia when I was 14 and he in his first teaching position. His appearance was shortly followed by the arrival of a young Greek female teacher. It is fair to say both parties made an impression.

In a poem, ‘New Australian’ Roberts recalls the ‘passionate black purple blood-red’ of full skirts, the eye shadow, ‘the long black hair in a mane’, of the girl he was to marry, despite opposition from ‘My Tusmore aunt [who] told me we’d have black babies’ and her (Maria’s) Ikarian father. They are still together, and whatever misgivings both sides of the cultural divide might have held seem to have been defused by the couple’s marriage in a third-party country:

> ... the first day it snowed  
> in Canada after our wedding  
> we held up our tongues  
> to the unique and christening flakes. (167)

Roberts’ subsequent absence from Australia since has not amounted to exile. He has been back often; one section of this collection, devoted to poems from his ‘Red Centre Collection’, reveals his ongoing fascination with the Outback:

> The night before I leave Uluru  
> I build a campfire, dry gum  
> spurts into flame, the spiders  
> scatter like my convictions  
> (126)

Other poems reflect the duality of nationality he has taken on. When he suggests that negotiating the ‘deadhead’ – the submerged and dangerous log of Canadian waterways –

> ... is like  
> walking in thick grass  
> in snake country  
> watching 20 feet ahead  
> for the thing to rear up  
> and strike (91)

it is if as he is recognising that the unknown, menacing or indifferent forces which are never far from his poetry, respect no frontiers.

Elsewhere, ‘New Poems’ contain samples like ‘Aussie Rules 1’ (whose evocations of the behaviour of a ball which ‘gambols abrupt as fate’ might be superficially puzzling to his North American readers). But it is succeeded in ‘Aussie Rules 2’ by the link between the ball’s fickleness and the loss suffered by his widowed father:

> how he loved the game  
> hated
the unpredictable point
of the ball its erratic dip
spurt and jump knew
somehow it was linked to her
my mother’s amazing and pointless
disappearance (159)

Some of Roberts’ best poems date from his career as a commercial sea fisherman in Canada. ‘The Fish Come in Dancing’ captures the initial excitement as a school of fish are taken on the line:

iridescent
dark torpedoes
flurry of white silver
spray
as they jump

succeeded by a kind of revulsion as ‘blood and guts crawls / into every crack’ until, as the fish

... flop flat and
dull rainbows on their sides
fade

he confesses:

it gets harder to love
the things
you kill. (86-7)

Nevertheless, his fascination (or addiction, as anyone who has ever fished can understand) remains:

sitting cramped in the drifting boat
ice still on in the shade
eyes bright
for the quick flash of the rod’s tip
oiled spurt of the reel (13)

As always in his poems, though, Roberts goes deeper. From the same collection he describes a rainbow trout:

tricked and hooked
they die like ballet dancers
leap and turn
sinuous as oil
graceful as clouds
choreography by Pan
I could not do it that way (15)

The last line of the poem could almost anticipate the selection from ‘Cobalt 3’, which chronicles Roberts’ battle with cancer that probably should have killed him. As always his reactions are spare and unflinchingly honest. From ‘Betrayal’ he acknowledges,

No matter what the books tell you
or the full care voices of lovers
you’re on your own (135)

‘Phone calls’ reinforces that:

The first few times the phone rings
you blow it
No one knows what to say
and you’re no help
too angry, scared and bitter
to bother with sentiment, besides
they all seem to have written you
off (133)

There are uncomfortable associations there for most of us, I suspect. But the poem is relieved by Roberts’ sense of humour (which may have been a factor in his survival) as he recalls the brash phone call from Australia:

’Hey Blue what’s this
I hear about you and the big C?
I’m bloody glad it’s you and not me
old mate!’

And you relax and laugh
at last, at the stupid honest horror
of it all. (134)

Even in recovery, which the writer compares to the end of a film’s making, when

the curtain falls, the director shouts
cut, that’s a wrap ... (148)

he knows he cannot escape the disease’s legacy:

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... the shadow rat sleeps still
in your flesh, wakes some nights
scurries in the tunnels of your bones
and you jolt bolt upright
into a role you know
you never want to play again. (149)

I referred earlier to Roberts’ wife, Maria. The writer celebrates her and their relationship in several poems in this selection. Jealousy and doubt intrude into ‘Aubade: Exeter’:

I grab the telephone
at the third ring

no one answers

it keeps me wide awake
in the grey dawn (47)

while ‘Brighton Beach’ reflects the ties that nag even at soul mates:

like this sea and sand and tide
we move in and out
of each other’s reach
grating in love one upon the other (42)

but the ‘Procrustean Bed’ is no doubt addressed to his companion, when he describes how its owner shapes her lover to its size, so that he who ‘will know nothing of this’ may

awake to her soft curves at his back
hear in her bed, her birds
sing in the dawn
and consider himself
blessed among men. (192)

And she is also commemorated in what I think is the finest poem in the collection, ‘The Reach’, where Roberts’ repeated and anguished demand ‘What does the body / reach for?’ is resolved in the conclusion:

at night the clear bark
of sea lions turning
in the cold sea

and the back log breaks
into two red flares
I turn to you
to your body warm in the dark
discover the body
reaches for itself
it reaches for
itself (27)

I find the tactileness of Roberts’ poetry, his uncompromising honesty, his spare and yet
diligent examination of his world, and ultimately his celebration of it, compelling. He has
always been a person with an appetite for life and illness has not diminished it, nor his literary

This may not be the place to mention the personal debt I owe him, but I have to: he has
also been one of those rarest of things, a born teacher, who managed to coerce his English
students at my high school into making an acquaintance with modern literature which we
would otherwise almost certainly have managed to avoid. I am grateful to him for
recognising, cajoling and sometimes – even – indulging me when I was 14, and making me
want to write.

Reg Taylor