Complete Book Reviews: Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ash Connell</td>
<td><em>Naming the Ruins</em> by Dinah Roma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash Connell</td>
<td><em>The Beautiful Anxiety</em> by Jill Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratap Kumar Dash</td>
<td><em>The Land: Poems from Australia and India</em> edited by Jaydeep Sarangi and Rob Harle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas E. Kazé</td>
<td><em>100 Days</em> by Juliane Okot Bitek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach Linge</td>
<td><em>either, Orpheus</em> by Dan Disney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Taylor Johnson</td>
<td><em>Breaking the Days</em> by Jill Jones; <em>Hoard</em> by Tracy Ryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Taylor Johnson</td>
<td><em>Comfort Food</em> by Ellen Van Neerven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Walker</td>
<td><em>No Waiting Like Departure</em> by Debasish Lahiri.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

Dinah Roma, *Naming the Ruins* (Vagabond Press, 2014)

Dinah Roma’s *Naming the Ruins* speaks to the broken places in life, both physical and emotional, looking not to find what once was or in an attempt to repair the un-repairable, but to acknowledge and navigate these new states of being. The time Roma is capturing is one ‘after the pain exhausts;’ a space of silence left in the void of misery and joy. This space leaves the poet open to whatever may drift in and fill the void be it God, celestial bodies, illusion of companionship with others, or time itself. This openness is not to be mistaken for uncertainty however. The narrator’s tone does not indulge in a questioning reflection of the void, but speaks assuredly of that which has come to fill it; for, as the reader is told, being human is to be ‘fated to the feasts of mercy.’

The identification and filling of absences and ruins is presented in four ways, each mainly kept separate in the four sections into which the text is divided. Thematically these sections have the effect of a lens zooming out, starting with the personal and ending with the cultural with the bookending sections starting and ending the text in search of spirituality that could be, should a reader so wish, identified through a nameable dogma, though such specificity is avoided on most occasions.

This organisational division starts the collection off with a section that may be off-putting for less religious readers. The poems in the first sections are of a highly religious nature, as Roma heavily utilises phraseology from Christianity. ‘The Liturgy’ and ‘Repetition Compulsions’ both cry out to a capital G god, while waiting in the absence of a response, crying out:

And why not?
Why shouldn’t I seek
The likeness of God? Of Him
who preaches love is knowing
something is born in us again. (12)

An external answer to the questions asked of deities is not to be found here however, as the focus shifts inward before the end of this first section. God is no longer mentioned by name and though slightly biblical images of leavened bread, famines, and ashes remain, a more personal form of spirituality bound to nature begins to emerge. The state of living and being, of completion, is found in other places, in the ‘in-between of memory.’

Through this fade from one type of spiritual experience to another Roma avoids a complete disconnect between the text’s sections. Ending the first with images of time as it is tied to nature and natural movements, she can begin to explore the connection between physical passages of time and memory. Roma’s two favourite expressions of these concepts, no doubt tied to her geographical residence in the Philippines, are water and the sky. However the water here takes on more than mere cleansing properties; it is also violent. Water here both ‘burns deep into my skin’ and ‘reveal our own;’ it ‘hold[s] the world’ but is ‘unnavigable.’ The narrators of these poems see both the beauty and the havoc water brings but see it as unavoidable as the sunrise, both of which are used to measure time. In ‘Present Perfect’ the narrator remembers walking with a loved one down streets next to ‘a river cleansed of its salty air’ as they both ignore ‘the claims of dawn.’ For this narrator, and a few others, water shifts around our memories and the dawn forces new days on us which cause us to forget experiences in lieu of linear time. ‘Of Time’ presents a narrator whose experience
of the temporal that is broken through the act of trying to identify it, so in the same manner other poems learned to master their own ever changing states with a matter-of-factness acceptance.

This carries over into the first poem of the third section, ‘The First Four’. Toward the end of this piece reflecting on the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan a mother is shown continuing cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes amongst the images of wall-less houses and black body bags lining the streets. She is carrying more than this culture mourning as well, one of her own children is missing, but ‘life can only wait so much for the dead;’ she has two other children who need tending to. This hushing of fears and worries, of sadness and disconnect from other people carries through the rest of this section. Loss through death is presented as unavoidable, even in Roma’s version of the story of Lazarus, the man whose own death mirrored that of Christ. The narrator tells us that the miracle in the story is not in the raising of the dead, but how Lazarus will only die once again, nothing has been escaped:

… In his finite self
  and divine, a man leaves alone another
  another in suffering. In his finite self
  and divine, man torments
  at how nothing disrupts death.
  This is the miracle.

From here the loss and leaving move to the less extreme; the finality of death gives way to leaving of friends in ‘The Wine Company’ and the drifting away from a loved one in ‘Toronto.’

Loss and distance move the collection through to its final section, turning the lens toward lost cultures and religion and the literal ruins they have left behind. Here the Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat is explored as holy pilgrimage, a search to ‘arise from my own ruins’ by reassembling the self through myth and worship. Reflections on the poetry of Rumi and the Mekong River bring nature images back into the spiritual, leading to the final poem. By ending with the poem ‘Tak Bat’, Roma weaves all the threads of the various sections together; religion, nature, the personal, and the interpersonal all come together through the description of this lost ritual. Roma avoid attempts at reassembly of ruins throughout, but in this last naming a hint of an answer lies, a suggestion of ritual that brings all the pieces together into something which does not need searching to name.

Ash Connell
University of Texas San Antonio

Approaching Jill Jones’ *The Beautiful Anxiety* you may start to form a strong impression of the collection before you even open the text. The large red semicolons on the grey cover paired with the presence of ‘anxiety’ in the title may bring to mind current movements in the mental health conversation, especially those of Project Semicolon, which creates a dialogue around the underused punctuation mark. So is Jones’ book about mental health? The answer is yes and no. The mental health aspects are there if you are familiar with them; but not picking on the tones of depression and anxiety does not take away from a reader’s experience. Most poems will be comfortable enough for the reader through clever depictions of everyday feelings unfolded in clear, sharp language. Jones will not send you scrambling to the dictionary to unpack her words: her words are everyday ones to match her everyday situations.

The collection opens with a poem titled ‘My Ruined Lyrics’ in which the narrator has trouble composing something, the title suggests a poem or song but the content suggests life. The anxiety begins to show in the third section of the poem. Lines such as ‘It was all down to bad timing at a desk,’ ‘a lack of motivation and petrol,’ and ‘a kind of unattractive comedy that beats queuing’ rings of frustration with modern life, with the empty repetition that begins to feel like a trap (3). War inserts itself into the poem as it intrudes itself into all of life and Jones recognises the consequences that make it an irritant for first world countries, such as the rising cost of oil, but also reminds the reader ‘The war wasn’t a lie. The bombs dropped.’ But this war is a metaphorical one against the trapped, unmotivated mind of the narrator. We can sense this in the lines ‘Trace it on the sheet. And this once dream it on the beach’ (6). The narrator has not only traced out the borders of where the literal bombs have dropped, but also those of the bombs in her own mind, hoping perhaps that being able to imagine herself happening differently her own mind might change. And so with an encompassing of the repeating themes the collection moves forward.

‘What’s Coming Next’ is another star in the collection. In this poem Jones creates vivid, anxious images; images that you are not always sure what they mean cognitively, but they invoke a strong feeling. Once such line is ‘The tabloids have had all coupons torn from them.’ If approached from a literal perspective, this image confuses – do tabloids even have coupons? But Jones here is asking the reader to feel the image, not think it. Here a useless object of misinformation is rendered even more useless to the purchaser of the magazine. Another line engages a visual for the feeling of worsening anxiety, ‘If today is streaky, tomorrow will be unreasonable,’ a beautiful encapsulation of how an irritant can quickly intensify to a situation you want to give up on.

These strong lines of uncertainty, self-doubt, and anxiety can be found throughout the poems each encompassing a feeling that you may have felt, but never been able to verbalise before. Contemplation of a worn down bus stop with root breaking up the sidewalks brings the lines ‘Sometimes I wonder if I’m drinking the wrong water’ (11) and ‘shape is a serious matter, I am not what I am supposed to be’(12). The title poem tells us ‘There’s never time to know yourself’ (28). Another poem, worried about misgivings and memory, declares ‘The road we roll on is greater than our parts’ (38) Another, ‘Big Flower’ which attempts to reconcile the dreams of youth with the reality of death tells us:
I though this proved something
or would make me content with
the way things were, wearisome
worthwhile or perhaps just wonky. (60)

This use of language punctures without a punch. It makes you want to scream yes and underline it five times. And it is not limited to these moments of anxiety. Jones finds ways of making words for everyday images just as impactful. We are given ‘the humour of a petticoat,’ swimming ‘irrelevancies,’ ‘an inch of an antidote,’ and ‘xeroxed zeppelins.’ Each is an illogical image, but each still makes sense.

Jones’ descriptions are so unique and clever, that a reader may find their favourite poem in the collection to be the collection of short descriptions titled ‘Keen.’ These vignettes like sections are more than just clever imagery however. They reveal, like the rest of the collection, fears and doubt and unveil a story of realising a queer identity as a young woman.

Overall The Beautiful Anxiety is pure wordy pleasure. Readers who suffer from anxious conditions can appreciate the way Jones addresses their problems without romanticising them. And of course, all readers can enjoy Jones’ fantastic use of language and images found throughout.

Ash Connell
University of Texas San Antonio
Jaydeep Sarangi and Rob Harle (eds.), *The Land: Poems from Australia and India* (Cyberwit.net, 2015)

This anthology collects poems united by the theme of ‘the land’ in a glocal context. It includes seven contemporary Australian poets and an equal number of Indian poets. They look at nostalgic reminiscences of land, socialistic views of land, appreciation of nature in India and Australia, eco-consciousness and philosophy of life.

The notion of the poetry of the land is always tuned with the past. In this light, some poets in this anthology explore the flashing moments already left back. Arundhati Subramaniam’s ‘Recycled’ provides reminiscences of the land as she remembers how she used to draw the picture of a home when she was five-year-old. Kerry Petherbridge, in his ‘The Sound of My Childhood in Leaving’, reflects on how his voice is getting echoed in the track of time. Mark Cornell recollects pleasant memories of his school days with Sugar-Loaf Mountain and the shadow of trees on it. Nandini Sahu writes of the faint memory of her past home in ‘Many Lands, Many Homes’, comparing it with ‘a dry flower pressed between pages of an old diary’ (72). Sharmila Ray is impressed by the historical episodes of a sea voyage in her poem ‘Voyage’. Altogether, a complete artistic sketch of poetic images is canvassed.

Societal as well as socialistic views constitute a creative reflection. Chandramohan S., in his ‘Occupy Graveyard Movement: On the Landless Dalits of India’, speaks against those who have occupied power and wealth through their legacy and made many other people landless. In ‘Land for the Tiller’, he talks of the brevity of the tiller raising his voice against the capitalist. K. Srilata writes her ‘Artist of Boundaries’ referring to Sir Cyril Radcliffe’s role in forming the dividing line between India and Pakistan, naming him an ‘unwitting geographer’ (56). She writes ironically in ‘Loud is Rains Arriving’, remarking on the ‘real estate promoters’ and talking about their alluring strategies of selling houses. She mocks the concept of a smart home in her ‘Sometimes Referred to as Dry land.’ Syed Ali Ahmed’s ‘Indian Muslims’ is about the deeply rooted culture of Muslims in India. Then, Rob Harle, in his ‘The Old man and the Vineyard’, talks about a mysterious situation of distinguishing between modern reality and ancient values.

Nature in the tapestry of the land provides spell-bound experiences. Heather Taylor Johnson, in her ‘The Harvest’ and ‘Life Cycles’, reflects on her emotional attachment. Her ‘Mountain Rain’ speaks of amazingly deafening rain and ‘Life Science in the Garden at Albertan Primary’ speaks of jolly children enjoying natural activities in the garden. John Dean praises a mountain called Munibung but regrets that such a mountain is damaged by bulldozers. Another landscape called ‘Bed Red’ reminds him of mortality. Peter Jeffery’s ‘Tenterden 1959’ tells of the enjoyment during the spring time as perceived by an infant. His ‘Terra Forming’ talks about self-realisation as a consequence of fast movement of the eyes in perceiving natural calamities. Mark Cornell talks of the beautiful movement of the moon on the white dunes in his ‘She’s Fading’. His ‘Koonung Creek’ reflects on the beauty of the river as it moves forward collecting ‘the bobbling wild flowers’ alongside to the ‘Ancient Creek’. His ‘A Tune of Mt. Oberon’ follows the same romantic description of the mount in the gloomy moonlight and his ‘An Olinda Night’ portrays the beauty of stars in the rippling sea water.

Nandini Sahu in ‘From Dust to Dust’ talks about the importance of the five ethereal unblemished elements that constitute our being having higher spiritual value. In ‘Puri Beach’,
she narrates her unique experiences with the ambience of the holy place. Nathalie Buckland talks of enjoyment of the heat of summer in ‘Coal Change’ and reflects on human plight in the rising red moon. Peter Jeffery’s ‘Bulldozer Cleaning with Chain’ describes how a ‘wombat snuffled’ forward in search of food everywhere ‘Lond Cemetery’ philosophically finds tears in the dew, which leads to a series of thoughts. In ‘The Dawn Is to Come’ and ‘For Juniper’, he refreshes his memory with the change of time. Then, Peter Nicholson’s ‘Figures in a Landscape’ portrays the beauty of the land that poetically marks interval between the Indian and Pacific oceans. His ‘In a Country Garden’ reflects on the movement of natural elements leading to ‘green desire.’ Syed Ali Hamid in his ‘The Land in Monsoon’ narrates the feelings of the arrival of monsoon marking happiness for some but loss for others. Appreciating nature, Jaydeep Sarangi, in his poem, ‘My Temple of Delight’, talks of the love of his village and its surrounding that was full of natural beauty but left with only a memory now.

Arundhati Subramaniam attracts attention towards ‘Olive Ridley in Kolavipalam’ and Jan Dean focuses on another aspect of eco-concern in her poem ‘Vista 2014 relating to an incident in which her neighbours excavated a pool and dumped that with dirty materials. Her ‘The Avenue 2012’ reflects on human-made disaster. Her ‘The Avenue 2012’ reflects on human-made disaster. In ‘Native Entitlement’, Patherbridge laments the destruction of a community-built fairweather bridge by the government and its replacement by a huge iron structure which destroyed the natural ambience of the locality. K. Srilata’s ‘Speaking of Land’ is about eco-disaster owing to scarcity of water. Sharmila Roy’s poems speak of the gradual decay of natural habitats into mechanical set ups.

Life’s philosophy is very much reflected in Heather Taylor Johnson’s ‘The Weight of Which Water’. She associates growth of life with water. Patherbridge, in his ‘Getting back on Track’, says that, while walking, thoughts and feelings lead to knowledge full of music. Nicholson’s ‘Panorama’ expresses how destinies and deviations go on leading to new birth and new age. Hamid’s poems like ‘Earthly Love’, ‘Dusk’ and ‘Dreamland’ speak of manifestation and freedom of soul altogether.

Love of land is reflected through the attachment with places as in Arundhati’s ‘Madras’ the memory of foods and visiting places are recollected and give a glocal context. Nicholson’s ‘Australia’ brings an impressive reflection on the country where ‘each nerve stained its energy flash to word, into the world’ (94). This contrasts with A.D. Hope’s poem with the same title. In ‘Sidney’, he reflects on how kookaburra trees, blossoms and many other ‘images float to brain’ (97).

The undertone of spirituality is there in the poems as Debjani’s ‘Meru’ describes the holiness of the golden mountain and echoes W.B. Yeats’ poem with the same title, which speaks of the pilgrimage to the holy mountain in search of the ultimate truth.

To conclude, both Australian and Indian poems in the anthology can be seen as a representation of the multi-folded aspects of postmodern time. The poets are often found struggling with questions of identity; experiencing the conflict of living between the old and the new; the native world and the invading forces of hegemony from emerging cultures. Creativity is seen in a continuous state of flux. The poets not only eulogise their nations but also forefront the reality.

Pratap Kumar Dash
C.V. Raman (Autonomous) College of Engineering, Bhubaneswar, India
Juliane Okot Bitek, *100 Days* (University of Alberta Press, 2016)

*100 Days* by Juliane Okot Bitek is a collection of 100 poems based on the 100 days of ethnic cleansing that happened in Rwanda in 1994 claiming over 800,000 lives. The poems, originally written as part of a partnership with another artist and shared via social media, engage traumatised personal memory, suspect the objectivity of official discourse and explore the complications involved in forging a new future. This collection, therefore, does not only add to the ever-growing library of contemporary African poetry, but it does so in ways that will further the postcolonial conversations around nationhood, security and interethnic conflicts as they cross paths with ideas of autochthony, place, displacement and ecological interests in twenty-first century Africa.

The speaking voice in this collection, mostly represented as ‘we’ and shifting occasionally to ‘I’ in the negotiation of space within the convergence of the public nature of the genocide and its personal dimensions, comes across mostly as ironic. The motif of betrayal is, for instance, quite strong in the collection, but the allegations of betrayal are levelled against nonhuman witnesses supposed to have suppressed or distorted the story instead of against the perpetrators of the genocide. In ‘Day 100’, we read the following lines:

> It was earth that betrayed us first  
> it was earth that held on to its beauty  
> compelling us to return (1-3)  
> as if nothing was different  
> as if nothing changed (8-9)

The motif of betrayal is generally built around nature, as in the lines above, and religion. This can be assumed to be the poet’s mockery of how humanity would blame its inhumanity on others instead of taking responsibility for their action. That way, the poet is able to deliberately downplay the political dimensions of the massacre appearing to focus more on the psychological and existential aspects. This conscious avoidance, however, does not render the poems any less political, nor does it erase the apportionment of blame; the ironic silence only serves to make the politics that led to the tragedy even louder.

Matters relating to official arrangements of reconciliation and commemoration are also raised in the collection. The poetry treats them with suspicion as they might be ignoring the complexities of personal memory and trauma. This easily calls to mind the numerous critical voices that have commented on the Rwandan reconciliation process, also reminiscent of criticisms directed at South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the 1990s. Bitek captures this hypocrisy in these lines from ‘Day 90’:

> ultimately  
> commemoration is a crafted affair  
> a beautiful thing  
> a symbol of power & resonance  
> in the everlasting flame (10-14)

About the reconciliation process she writes that,

---

Reconciliation is a grand thing
reconciliation photographs well
reconciliation makes people smile
reconciliation feels good  dresses well
writes well  conjures good dreams (‘Day 87’, 1-5)

The poetry shows that these artificial activities do not necessarily bring healing, and might even subvert justice. The insensitivity of such arrangements is expressed in the lines that say artificial reconciliation ‘wants me to forget my first born daughter / the one I could not bury’ (‘Day 87’, 14). It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the poet is preaching vengeance; she seems rather to be advocating a more sympathetic, sensitive and just approach to the handling of public reconciliation. Bitek’s poetry, in terms of aesthetics, thrives on its lyricality, achieved through the use of repetition, conversational tone and sometimes the flow of raw thought usually associated with the stream-of-consciousness technique. It is tempting to compare the poet’s exploration of African orality with that of the older generation of poet’s, especially her father’s, who has left a mark on the African literary landscape as a poet of African oral aesthetics and simple everyday diction. The voice, however, remains confidently hers as an artist belonging to a different generation faced with different issues and access to new media. She does not return to the local epics and folklore of the older generation; rather, it is again tempting to think that the original medium through which the poems were created and disseminated, i.e. the social media, must have also contributed to the conversational and condensed nature of the poems. The recurrent use of the ampersand in place of ‘and’ signals that. Some formalists may want to view the poems as fragmentary and sometimes meaningless. While such views can be justified by referring to recurrent use of repetition and phrases with elusive meaning, that, apart from forming an aspect of the poet’s technique, could be the poet’s exact point: the different forms of fragmentation experienced by the living victims of the genocide and the existential crises that have resulted from such an experience.

On the whole, Bitek’s new collection has provided yet an additional voice to contemporary African literature to not only document or reimagine history or continue the conversations on intersections of the public and the personal, the natural and the spiritual, and the ecological and the political in postcolonial literary studies, but to also encourage discussions on matters of ethnic and religious clashes in an age of increasing security threat on the continent and beyond.

Douglas E. Kazé
Rhodes University
Dan Disney, *either, Orpheus* (UWA Publishing, 2016)

Dan Disney’s *either, Orpheus* pays homage to the villanelle with a loose consideration of the form. Similarly, it considers the ‘spirit of source texts’ (‘coda’), as opposed to responding in like to any poet’s, philosopher’s, or so-called poet-mystic’s rigorously articulated philosophies or forms. What Disney attempts instead of such rigor, in form or philosophy, is to ‘mobilise those anxieties which dogma would either shackle or conceal’ through ‘probings’ that the poet describes as ‘elegiac anthroposcenes’ (‘coda’). If this description sounds densely philosophical, that is because Disney deals in abstractions, favouring the grandiose, universal, and essential to the quotient he condemns, the specificity he elides, and the contingencies he abandons in favour of ideals.

Without Disney’s explicatory ‘coda (in eleven parts)’, the reader may struggle to find this dense philosophy in the poems themselves. That is not to say, however, that the poems fall short of their intended purpose. The villanelle functions ideally towards the collection’s condemnation of the perfunctory: not only does each poem repeatedly draw the reader’s attention to this opprobrium, but the entire collection operates as a single villanelle, with each of its constituent parts painting cubic planes of the comprehensive image – which perhaps explains Disney’s decision not to number the pages or title the poems.

The broader image, or theme, is comprised of the narrator, setting, and philosophy. The first poem draws attention to wilderness, tradition, machinations, and the question of the relationship between the name(s) listed on the bottom of each page and the poem preceding. Here Disney introduces us to the narrator, who ‘spent the first years of [his] life in a valley / sitting in wood muttering the occult business of little folktales’, immediately aligning himself with Rilke, to whom *either, Orpheus* responds. The narrator’s identity – and, in fact, his interpretation of Rilke – is constructed out of otherness: he is not what he critiques, and seldom is without a contrasting concept or figure by which to construct himself.

The reader’s experience will largely depend on the figure(s) with which she identifies. Either she considers herself complicit in Disney’s call to ‘brighten / the spark of your courage’, or she relates to the ‘neat little red brick town’, or to being ‘initiated into the code’, which is to say she accepts extant social structures. Heaven forefend the reader attempt to read the collection in its entirety if she would identify with the latter category: those who do not operate with the imperative of challenging the status quo. If she does, what might otherwise be read as an existential yowl into the abyss – or, as Disney describes the text, a ‘Eurydicean cry’ – could easily be read as a diatribe against the reader. Take the following excerpt:

semi-dressed in sincerity, vulgar biotypes of maverick
slaves to visible resemblance, we’re a great literature of marvellous copies listening in dull

gravity to the operations of justice
dancing amid stockings, a catalogue of diagnoses blundering carbon at non-residents, jerking attentive

Book reviews: *either, Orpheus* by Dan Disney. Zach Linge. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
The common (wo)man is a ‘vulgar’ biotype, not so much a person as a poor copy of what would constitute a worthwhile individual. Furthermore, the narrator mocks not only people but the very physical laws that govern their existence: gravity is ‘dull’, uninspired, pococurante; the body’s composition itself blunders, making it a non-resident of the celestial planes to which the narrator appeals.

If the reader is not distracted by indictments of the common person (‘it’s like “hey have a programmatic soul”’), she will be better situated to appreciate that Disney successfully effects in the reader the same affective frustration the narrator expresses. Disney accomplishes this, in part, through his employment of the villanelle – a form that lends its content to a sort of schizophrenic obsession, from a self-ordained outsider’s perspective, with its central theme. Given that this one theme reaches across the entire collection, this effect is made enormous.

While these poems respond to their influencing texts, they also manage to achieve continuity in philosophy that persists despite those texts’ variety. Perhaps one of the best connections between a poem and its cited influence is the fourth in the collection, inspired by John Ashbery:

…you can sample people, look at the nice wine, I have many arguments with my analyst but on the whole it’s chatty and at the end we say ‘you’re happy?’ then we say ‘The End’, and sometimes the afternoons go past, resolved

As Ashbery, Disney uses enjambment for the sake of humour, invoking multiple meanings within and between lines. Repetition and conversational diction serve both to emphasize the theme of commonality and to also imbue the poem with a sense of the absurd that brings to mind Ashbery’s spirit, if not his specific employment of distinctive imagery to convey larger concepts.

Disney’s philosophy, the theme of *either, Orpheus*, is condensed into a single stanza in the last poem of ‘hive notes (an interlude)’:

in one-chance city, evenings
bounce (then shred), we pop our pills and float collectively
sane, commuters in line to be fed to openmouthed machines, a lightly-dusted breeze

The philosophy is outrage at acedia – the spiritual listlessness that defines everyone and everything the narrator presumes himself not to be; the setting is an Orwellian dystopia, in the current day, in which the narrator contemplates nothing but misfortune, all-powerful government and structure (‘who knew who’d next be tapped, caused to disappear’); and the narrator himself is the breath between meditations that finds no concrete solution, but instead mourns the Anthropocene.

*either, Orpheus* is organised into prelude, part one, interlude, part two, and coda. The prelude draws attention to society’s forgetfulness – of what, we find out only late in part two. It concludes ‘that nothing at all had changed’, presumably from the dawn of humankind through the Anthropocene. Parts one and two function identically: each presents musings and meditations on the common person’s listlessness and lack of courage; his/her inability to recall the power of love with sufficient force (‘we decided that, after all, agapē wasn’t possible’); and the narrator and his philosophers’ exceptionalism. The poems respond ‘in spirit’ to the poets and philosophers parenthetically affixed to the bottom of each, which is to say the reader is asked to accept that they respond to these writers and their texts – whether or not they do, to what extent,
and how effectively is ultimately the reader’s conclusion to reach. The interlude abandons crediting influencing texts and drives home the notion of groupthink with the symbolic inclusion of bumblebees that subdivide the section’s villanelles. Finally, the coda provides the reader with a poetic-prosaic exposition on theme, philosophy, and intent.

The poems’ forms reflect the call to courage by flouting tradition: here a poem is left-aligned, here one is constructed as a circuit board. The forms, their content, and the interpretations of source texts emphasize a condemnation of ‘habitat and ritual’, of ‘old aristocracies of thought’. The collection as a whole accomplishes this by, as the individual villanelle, returning time and again to its singular obsession: the spiritual void of any machinery and the role of the ‘poet-mystic’ in drawing substance out of nothing.

**Zach Linge**  
University of Texas San Antonio

The Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize is a coveted one on the poetry scene, with the winner seeing publication in limited edition chapbooks. The books run to around fifty pages, so I lean toward calling them full-length collections, though small ones to be sure. And that’s a lovely thing about this prize: the production of a thin volume of poetry. *Thin*, so filler-poems are weeded out, and all that’s left is great care. The award for 2014 recognised joint winners, both women, whose books couldn’t be more different.

Tracy Ryan’s *Hoard* defines and dissects the Irish bog and what lies beneath, while Ryan herself deconstructs it. ‘What lies beneath’ the peaty earth is history in the form of tools, jewellery, bodies and boats. As the bog creates its own organic habitat, it also covers and preserves, making it a safe place to bury things. Some burials were for safekeeping, as the owners of the objects fled for safety, planning on return. Sometimes what was buried was never meant to be found.

What riches lie in the hoard, both as physical manifestations and as metaphor. Think of the hoard as somebody’s past; each artefact lifted from the bog is somebody’s memory, somebody’s story. And what happens to that past when the hoard is uncovered and lifted from the bog?

no one has rights to a hoard  
yet a hoard by definition  
once brought to light  
is essentially stolen (11)

I’m reminded of Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’, in which as soon as a person tells her story, the story is no longer hers. Because the story belongs now to a listener who has taken that story and accepted it as something newly possessive, the original teller of the story as ‘author’ is dead. Such is the person who buried the hoard as soon as the hoard is uncovered:

Now whether it wants out or not  
it is returning piecemeal as your surface wears thin  
at first no more than a glint a bright projection  
tantalising all of a sudden one who out walking  
had no more intention of dragging it up  
than the sun means to bring on flowering  
It speaks to you from another life  
as if it were yours or as if you were god  
and it were an offering somebody willed  
into the ground… (15)

In conceptualising the hoard as a person’s identity at a singular moment in time, where each object is a rare memory, proof that the person existed, Ryan writes with both empathy and awe. Stealing a torc (an ancient neck ring) is paramount to stealing the owner’s story:

Book reviews: *Breaking the Days* by Jill Jones and *Hoard* by Tracy Ryan. Heather Taylor Johnson.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.  
if you steal away it is heavy
in your bags (16)

If left untouched, the hoard (as story) would remain buried and intact – no appropriation taken place, no disrespect shown. It’s a lesson we can learn and one we should practice. But curiosity and greed being what they are, uncovering hoards are Irish sport, and Ryan’s quick to return the metaphor to something more pressing: environmental break-down.

Peat is used as fuel in Ireland, so turf-cutting of bogs is as rampant as the destruction of the uniquely complex habitat found there. Just as the ethics of historical appropriation begins and ends with ownership, it is also true of the ethics of land exploitation:

You will say Don’t come in here & tell
me how to run my own bog okay

I know my bog better than anybody
Haven’t we lived together all these years
Hasn’t she always faithfully
furnished my necessity

Don’t I handle her respectfully

Don’t I always like my father taught me
put back the surface layer
to cover over what’s taken (32-33)

_Hoard_ begins with a long poem entitled ‘The changeling addresses Ireland’, in which Ryan (presumably it is the author speaking) hints at _why_ such a passion for bogs. There is ancestry, a confusion of longing and, yes, ownership. But there is a pervasive questioning, an acceptance of mystery and a reluctance to dig her feet into a place that is not hers:

I tell of desert
of dust & gravel
to ground & justify

this unsettling
obsession must flag
each bog we pass

and call it mine
like an explorer
doling out names

without regard for
what came before
the bogs go deeper
than I can account for (4)

And so with the inclusion of this one poem – the opening poem, an important poem – *Hoard* seems to be about a buried ethnicity Ryan cannot get a handle on. Uncovering it would be to unsettle, then claim and, finally, kill the author.

As with *Hoard*, the question of identity in Jill Jones’s *Breaking the Days* is there (is it always there in poetry?) yet it is approached in a less metaphorical way. Jones uses the hard and overt objects that give meaning to her days, such as emails and yapping dogs, matchboxes and fences, and what grounds her seems to be her own front door. Yet what’s contained within the closed doors is equally as telling about who we think we are as is the possibility of what’s beyond the open doors. Doors define places of belonging as much as they provide a means of getting beyond belonging, so that defining home becomes an inclusive act and we can begin to muddle up the pronouns.

There are measures out there
beyond your door, you start counting
but lose birds past dawn
too many in that thankful way of abundance. (1)

What is ‘yours’ when you consider life outside the door? With this as a basis for interrogation, Jones extends poetry’s age-old consideration of how we live in the world to how we live with the world. Some might say it’s about having faith – in humanity, in God – but what if faith is transitory? Perhaps we live by forgetting:

Air is colder today, but you forget it.
Forgetting would be good.
Progress is better with forgetting. (21)

Or maybe it’s through ambivalence:

Some bug is eating the violets.
But we didn’t plant them, anyway. (21)

Perhaps it’s through wasting time:

Goodness, what’s all this time doing here!
Let’s waste it or at least
list the things we’ll do
with it, cook soup with infinite slices
worry about gluten which appears to be in
everything on the shelf, or consider
how to fillet fish because
you have to gut them
or watch ten seagulls flying
low across the gulf.
They swallow fish as if

there are fish below.

And here we kill pumpkins
or weeds
or the living.

Traffic is particularly stupid today (48-49)

Her approach seems to be a heady mix of acceptance and irony, something Jones excels in, something I’d consider to be ‘playful’. And by asking the big questions with such playfulness, the answers are more apt to be slippery, dangling things, just within our ability to grasp and just within our reach.

Though Jones writes with an urban sensibility, make no mistake she’s an eco-poet.

The sun is here.
Look out! We’re tripping over it, don’t be suspicious of the footpath. (23)

This concrete is what we have (this bitumen, this noise, this Wi-Fi signal); why blame it by extolling the sun (the birds, the ocean, the song)? There is so much complaining in our ecological and environmental awareness and what *Breaking the Days* does is offer an alternative: a symbiotic relationship to this world-as-home; advancement through observation and awareness.

The book was mostly written while Jones was poet-in-residence at Stockholm University and I have to wonder how the change in hemisphere, climate, culture and habitat speaks to the work as a whole. I’m of the mind that this book is as much about place as it isn’t. When she writes:

Festivals of bullshit
prove nothing
prove everything (38)

she could very well be referring to her home in Adelaide, city of festivals, but the lines come and go quickly – the poem was never about festivals nor about home. But the previous three lines read:

Rats and white ants
cling to the years
and the constructions. (38)

so the poem *is* about home. The next three lines read:

Not all choices
can be tracked.
Love isn’t all you need. (38)
So it’s about choice (and home). Hers is a cheeky way of moving from image to philosophy. There’s dismemberment yet there’s strong narrative. Because Jones embraces the ‘I’ we see that she’s the protagonist of the narrative, and I’d have to say the overall arc of the narrative is largely about persisting, coping, getting on with living in this busy, beautiful world. There are the book’s final words:

I am moving things around.
I am considering pencils.
I see thirteen ways I can pile up papers.
I realise where the mistakes will fit.
I get anxious about moving things around.
I wonder if at night things move around.
I can think of seventeen things to do with mistakes.
I understand anxiety is normal.
I hear the night – it’s night already.
I don’t know what to say about night.
Is my anxiety insanely adorable?
I get up and go home. (57)

After six consecutive years, the Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize has been ‘put on hold’. I sincerely hope it’ll return because, as I said earlier, I love a thin book of poems, especially if what’s inside is good. Hoard and Breaking the Days are exemplary.

Heather Taylor Johnson
Flinders University
Ellen Van Neerven, *Comfort Food* (UQP, 2016)

Ellen Van Neerven’s debut poetry collection, *Comfort Food*, is dedicated to ‘those who have made me meals’, and the feeling of open-handedness continues in the book’s following 56 poems. Open to the first one, ‘Whole Lot’ (3-4), and you’ll get it straight away. The title itself is like a basket with words spilling out, such abundance and goodness. It’s as if the poet is saying *‘Here, this is what I have to give, and it’s a whole lot; it’s everything’*. What a generous way to begin and so apt a signifier of what’s to come.

The poem begins:

family, earth
dingo, eagle
fire, food
Whole Lot
it’s all of those things

Van Neerven uses a lot of lowercase throughout the collection – one would certainly say it’s a stylistic thing she’s homed in on – but I’m immediately drawn to her choice of capitalising ‘Whole Lot’ amid all of those big, encompassing words. The concept of ‘Whole Lot’ takes on a higher level of status, becoming a religion of sorts. An example of a suitable prayer might be found in the fifth stanza:

we are not here until we sit here
we sit in silence and we are open
there are different kinds of time
I hope you’ll understand

Van Neerven’s well aware of her predominantly white audience, as those of us who fit that category are well aware of her status as up-and-coming-Aboriginal-writer (her debut work – a short story collection called *Heat and Light* – won the David Unaipon Award, the Dobbie Literary Award and the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards Indigenous Writers Prize and was shortlisted for The Stella Prize, the Queensland Literary Award for State Significance, and the Readings Prize) so those last two lines carry enormous weight. Her approach favours invitation over recrimination.

I want to stick with ‘Whole Lot’ a bit longer because there’s so much going on in it that symbolises the book. For instance:

what we eat comes from our roots
if we stop sharing there will be nothing

Food is a perfect metaphor here for cultural understanding. Sitting around a kitchen table or in a circle at a park, eating with others, *sharing* food, places people in a position of equality. How the meal progresses is entirely up to the participants, but this collection lacks anger – not critique, but anger – so poetry is a convivial vehicle for perspective, tolerance, maybe reconciliation. And it’s exactly this notion of ‘sharing’ that makes the poem – the collection – so successful.

In the third stanza she writes:

we start with black
let it get hold of you
look at the stars
or are you afraid to?

This sets up a dichotomy of black and white, with Van Neerven’s ‘black’ playing on both the
colour of her skin and the space between the stars. And there’s another invitation to her
(predominantly white) readers with ‘look at the stars’, with only a short line, then, asking them if
they’re willing, if they’re ready.
The next stanza moves from sky to earth:

the day shows
country spread open
a map of all that was and will be
don’t forget it
I’m tracing it to remember
don’t be scared

Here Van Neerven says that she is another voice for her people, that this is what she does, that this
poetic narrative of indigeneity that is Comfort Food must address the hard issues and must begin
with a welcome: ‘don’t be scared’.
The poem continues the book’s other themes: leaving (I want this to be here / when I leave again
/ I’ve been leaving a lot of times) and longing (there is no easy way to cry / tell them I’ll be back
soon).
There is an inherent push and pull in the mood of these poems, where food is a presence as much
as it is an absence, and it focuses most of this book, though particularly the first half. Food is tied to
the past – as in ‘Roo Tails’, a six-line poem that captures a meaningful, however mundane, image
of her grandmother as a magpie flies by – and it’s enmeshed with the present, especially in the
overseas poems, like ‘Smoking Chutney’:

Don’t fall in love if you can’t live that love. Don’t put that pickled hand on someone else. The
closest you get is a shared flight, stopping in Bangalore. She’ll smile from the tarmac. Find
somewhere to preserve this. An ageless woman, an ageless goodbye. (31)

Food also works to illuminate disconnection

Fussed by nothing but the company. The way an evening tumble-turns out of trouble, warm
voices, tunnel of black beans, every tamale tastes the same (27)

just as it envelopes connection
she is of the bear people
so she’s first to the berries

...take off your socks, show your fur
and I’ll show you my feathers. (28)
Food is a space for the political, too:

    can I say
    white people really bore me sometimes
    to be exact
    I grow tired with what’s unmentioned
    idling in surf club bathrooms
    nothing wrong with the chips
    but they’re talking about Tasmania
    my thoughts haunted by islands
    ...
    what is happening
    with the dialogue of this country
    they are killing people with words
    if I’m not back soon
    tell them I’ve had too many chips (21)

Food is a starting point for all of these things, and in this spirit of giving, Van Neerven’s opened herself up to us, opened up the discussion of: Whose food? Our food. / Whose Australia? Our Australia. There are differences between black and white that go far beyond colour – specifically historical differences and those that are felt in the blood and in the gut – and Comfort Food recognises this with an aim to share stories from the one side of the table that rarely gets a chance to speak (the other so busy talking with their mouths full of food as if the food will otherwise disappear). Comfort Food begs of the other side of the table, again and again, to please, just listen, just eat; there’s plenty to go around – Whole Lot.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**

Flinders University
Debasish Lahiri, *No Waiting like Departure* (Authors Press, 2016)

‘Departure is a reaching out… a hope that it is worth while waiting to arrive at the threshold of another’s life’. (10)

As my pen hovers above a page already multiply marked by words written and erased, I contemplate writing that *No Waiting Like Departure* is a book of poems about travel. It would not be a false statement, for this collection – the second from acclaimed Bengali writer and university lecturer Debasish Lahiri – certainly features many poems based on the poet’s travels. Indeed, the book’s contents are, like a careful map or even itinerary, neatly bordered into six distinct sections, each encompassing a particular place, journey or leg thereof. Placed in sequence, these sections, like chapters, suggest an overall narrative – one that transports readers through the writer’s experiences of Manchester, Delhi, Golapur, Shimla, Chennai, the Andamans and Lahiri’s hometown, Kolkata, among other fascinating settings. This structure makes the collection readable as an autobiographical verse novel or poetic travel diary – a textual expedition oscillating between the familiar and strange towards deepened insight.

Yet to read the book in this way alone would be to miss the many deeper complexities, the elusive treats of a collection that may also be read in many other ways. Suggestions of these alternative readings ripple deliciously through Lahiri’s introduction to the collection – a critical reflection that, with its vivid metaphors and verbal musicality, may itself be considered prose poetry, and which I deem a valuable read in its own right for anyone interested in time, place, philosophy and transformation as manifest in and through poetry. Lahiri remarks that his book, though on one hand describable as ‘poetry about place’, is perhaps more accurately understandable as a ‘poetry of longing’ (13) – of waiting, wanting, searching and desire, of the loss that is discovery, the desolation on which depends hope. With reference to the Greek notion of the *nostos* – a term Homer used in *The Odyssey* to signify both journey and destination – Lahiri notes the paradoxical inseparability of departure, arrival and waiting, emphasising that the ‘point’ of his poems is ‘the turn to return, not return itself’, and reflecting on time as ‘the promise of a return’, yet something that simultaneously seems always from the start irretrievably ‘lost, like an offering poured in the dust’ (13).

Lahiri’s introduction signals the necessity of reading *No Waiting Like Departure* in ways that unravel and exceed too-easy tendencies towards narrative linearity and coherence – tendencies that are in western cultures largely dominant, and at times domineering. Each poem needs be treated as a complex suite of concurrent departures and arrivals in its own right, upon which each new reading layers still more journeys, more readings, more scope for forging connections across and beyond the lines, stanzas and sections of a book that seems to be, on every additional read, ever more an invitation to stray from the logical-yet-limiting sequential order of its contents. But this is no slight against the order itself: in this case, it is the limit that suggests its own excess; the sequence or itinerary is what makes it thinkable to forego the itinerary – to forge interpretive departures from the immediately obvious ways of broaching Lahiri’s poems, and thus to accept implicit invitations towards off-road reading, towards the

---

1 My claim about the dominant and domineering nature of narrative in western cultures refers to issues too complex to accommodate within this brief review. However, readers wishing to contextualise the claim may consult Galen Strawson, ‘Against Narrativity,’ *Ratio* 17.4 (2004) 428-452.

enactment of one’s own textual adventures in and through the metaphysical as well as cultural settings and scenarios that Lahiri’s words weave. It is, after all, possible to travel without leaving one’s armchair, as the poet’s dedication of the book to his father meekly notes.

Broaching *No Waiting Like Departure* in non-linear and non-narrative terms generates possibilities for connections and return-journeys of a broadly Deleuzian, rhizomatic nature. For me, these connections and returns (or turns to return) were most strongly suggested and compelled through the book’s many shifting reiterations of images, ideas and motifs – notably history, memory, loneliness, connection and juxtaposition of the monstrous with the sublime as two things so often embodied within the one same place, moment or experience. For instance, upon finding themselves in

The old chameleon quarters of the fishermen
Where sun-beaten and dry the salt
Of the blue waves
Hide the outrage of history
Like a monster, (103)

a reader may be drawn back to the book’s previous section, in which the author, moving ‘onwards’, makes a ‘return’ to Kolkata:

Pasted on the back
Of a mottled green canvas:
A beautiful country
Estranged by memories …
An ugly city
Endeared by its nightmares …
The way to verse … (93)

This can in turn transport the reader again to the strained departure lounges of the book’s opening ‘Manchester’ suite, where

Random desires for action
Make me think of people,
People without stories
Without the characters
Between the spines of their book
Opened with every day’s waking. (28)

These lines and images exemplify the subtle-yet-powerful ways in which the book’s poems and sections link with and play off one another. They are also characteristic of the condensed language, heightened imagery, symbolic depth, lyrical music and other rare joys offered upon every page, in every poem of this accomplished collection.

I can therefore offer nought but praise for *No Waiting Like Departure*. Though the multitudinous reading possibilities it invites, this book allows readers to connect with and learn from diverse cultures and locations in experiential and engaged, as opposed to safely distanced or hypothetical ways. Lahiri’s poetry reminds us that reading, writing, speech and other acts of language are themselves modes of departure through which one may arrive in many surprising,
undreamed places. Furthermore, and as Lahiri’s poems illustrate, such arrivals always entail possibilities for new departures – push us to thresholds upon which to meet with others, including our new selves, thresholds through which we may in moments of desolation rediscover hope, rediscover life. For even in the face of ‘edgeless darkness’, Lahiri’s poetry shimmers,

Like a noun
On the Sun’s palette
Waiting to colour
A wider light. (122)

Amelia Walker
University of South Australia