

## Lucy Durneen, *Wild Gestures* (MidnightSun Publishing, 2016)

At her Adelaide launch, English academic Lucy Durneen suggested that the sixteen stories in her debut collection embody Freud's theoretical drives, death and sex. It is true that the stories are full of longing for the resolution of these two instincts, the kind of longing with which many readers and writers may identify, and yes, their creator is well-versed in psychoanalytic theory, but they do more than that.

The authorial voice keens, its intelligent and moody existential angst offers no answers as it articulates important questions about love, art and feminism, some of them 'conjured in therapy', but, nevertheless, the stories are full of hope – *Um beijo* – 'two feelings at once, of being cast away, and longing; a feeling of being shipwrecked and also sighting land' (133). Durneen strives to hammer down language in the face of chaos even as she recognises the task as futile.

Suddenly it feels as if the seventy-eight percent of my body that is water is trying to get back to the sea. *Sehnsucht*, the Germans call this. An intense yearning for a thing far-off, a thing that no word in the English language can define. (54)

The characters could be everyman and everywoman, perplexed and battered by life, by turns questing and despairing, and whose stories are full of undiluted passion but Durneen speeds them through the narrative at a cracking pace. The abrasive and youthful Alicia in 'Noli me Tangere' exemplifies this. The creative writing academy informs *Wild Gestures*' style – plenty of hooks and narrative reversals, show don't tell, metafiction – but in a virtuoso way, forsaking the pared back, banal and bloodless prose accepted in some markets and by uncommitted readers. Durneen may well delight scholars but not in a showy way that might deter a fledgling reader. Drawing on and subverting traditional storytelling techniques, she references mythology, including the Bible, theory and the literary canon: 'closer they drew to fairy stories' (71).

Durneen frequently writes in first person, in some stories a perspective not immediately revealed until two pages in, when a narrator stops explaining their de facto subject. Most are focalised through limited or selective third person point of view. At least two are written in second person and without strain. In 'Let it Out' she directly addresses the reader, compelling them to listen, as if it matters, and in confessional, declarative and confidential tone:

This is the thing that happened to you and Claudine L, two summers ago, when you were on exchange in Buenos Aires. Your Drama and Therapy Year. You weren't going to talk about it, ever, but what the hell. (83)

Hospitals and places of palliative care, bars and rooms in colonial places with Old Towns, and iconic writerly places (Buenos Aires, Paris, Berlin Zoo), especially beside the sea (old Goa, Tangiers, The Flaming Sword Hotel, Eden) offer moody settings.

Death, love and language are common subjects, relationships in crisis and the mutual incomprehension that results a common theme. The narratives take many surprising turns, deepen and draw back in a way that may delight a literary reader: references to music, art, books, history, architecture. Take it or leave it, Durneen loves language, her narratives

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unapologetically rich, literary, and subversive, her synapses firing off in a lot of directions (popular, scholarly, poetic, playful and profane), but always brought under control by mood and plot. The stories also capture the zeitgeist in all its absurdity: ‘Here is the question: what should I change? My shoes, or my life?’ (117).

There are worldly brands and lists – ‘removed eyelash curlers, twenty Gitanes, a box of tampons’ (97). The description of smoking a joint in ‘This is Eden’ attends to all the senses, evoking mood and place:

the man is holding out a the joint, delicately, like I have seen people hold fragile animals and scale models of famous battle heroes. There is a faint scent of soap about him, lavender cut with something hard and antiseptic. Close up to the bowl I can see the olives are marinated in little pieces of garlic. The way he holds it, the joint, it is almost tender. (187)

Some of the best black humour appears in ‘It Wasn’t Stockhausen’s’ in which Bill Hare and his palliative care nurse Ivy struggle to create the narrative of his death: for instance, ‘Even in the rainforest they still get cancer’ (139); ‘gastronomy bag exploding’ (146); ‘the sedative coursing through his system like a canoe flying over rapids’ (151). In the middle of the night, lucid and desperate with last-stage pain, he begs a story from the nurse, who reluctantly obliges, then when he complains about its poor denouement says, ‘I’m a nurse, not a fucking writer. Oh God. Are you going to report me for that?’ (150).

Generally, the subject of sex is dealt with in beautiful ferocity and irreverence: for example, ‘He waited until the moon was full and fucked her in the dunes’ (183); ‘wants it in the ass’ (203); ‘luminous comet, breasts are hard little onions ...’ (206). Sexual choice is closely aligned with feminine freedom.

Suddenly it becomes very important to have tried scuba diving. Suddenly it becomes very important to have eaten shellfish, that have not been boiled continuously for at least three minutes, or to fuck *whom* you want. (50)

‘And What if it Isn’t’ rages against the quest for romantic love and meaningful sex. Two literary academics on sabbatical in Berlin, ‘both fluent in the language of wild gestures’ and with so much in common, fail to progress their relationship. When the unfaithful wife returns to her husband, her unsent letter conveys her frustrated desire to the reader in a controlled feminist rage:

don’t do it like that. You’re not unblocking a drain. You move your hand in the direction of where he is frantically looking for change, playing a bit of Spanish guitar, what even is it? You move your legs differently, up a bit, back a bit. You imagine gestures of extraordinary wildness that bring another mouth to yours, summon them deep in your prefrontal cortex. Cortex isn’t erotic. You lose it. Your husband sighs, a slow sigh of desire exhausted, so one of you is satisfied. One of you is as good as it gets. (176)

'To the Men I have Tried to Seduce with Prose' rants at partner perversity: 'The question everyone asks about the location of the clitoris is the wrong question. What I am saying is: tell me about winds. Fuck me in the violets above Fiesole (180).

Durneen invents surprising and beautiful images: 'orchid pink gullies of your lower intestines' (146).

The city at night is submarine, dark, like a Caspar David Friedrich. I paddle downstream. I slip in and out of streets like they are bays and I am a boat, nudging into harbor. Any floating vessel will do; the Jumblies went to sea in a sieve. I cast out and sail into the centre of the moonlit city and I wear the silence like a fur. (49)

In 2006, literary critic Malcom Knox applied the depictions of birds in books by four successful writers to illustrate his point that in their vivid and particular detail they were signifiers of literary fiction. Durneen has a thing about birds, referencing them indirectly – 'tipping her head as if to drink from her' (66), 'I came at the world from the shadows, hooded and shackled' (190) and 'smoke leaves my mouth like a bird ascending' (188) – and directly – a Festival of Birds and 'a cloud of birds ascend into an almost perfect arrow before forging ahead on some unseen thermal' (34, 76). Perhaps because I'm a fellow twitcher I noticed the birds, a lot of them, flying through the texts. And because they enact freedom but are vulnerable, their arrival is often prescient of darkness.

Birds offer Durneen more than scene setting. She is not concerned as much with birds' birdness, their flapping struggle against the elements, as with their symbolic weight, their everness and their easy deaths: 'The boy flipped him the bird and backed off, skimmed out into the street. A caesura, broken softly' (77); 'Just this morning I saw something when I crossed the street at Solferino, a bird in the road, hit by a car and thrashing into tarmac, its neck and legs broken in opposite directions, like someone had stamped on a clockwork toy' (105).

The metafictional 'Everything is Beautiful is Far Away' carries all Durneen's trademark signs: darkness, yearning, the turning of the intellect to art: 'Today the sheet is a breathing sheet of lead. The entire sea is a stone, shattering. I am out of metaphors. The sea is just the sea' (54).

You don't know why people have such a problem with clichés. Clichés are about the truest things you know. It is as if the world was simultaneously nodding when you hear the words the rain lashed at the windows. It says: your loss is enormous. It says: even the weather is crying for you. You would have to be living on Mars not to know this. (99)

I let myself break the dark pools of his eyes, allowing the cliché because what the hell. (135)

Going back through the stories I wonder why I have marked so few negative notes and it is because I am scratching to find any: a few typos, one awkward phrase. The poem that prefaces the work seems utilitarian but pleasure in the ensuing writing soon overtakes any initial misgivings. A harsher critic might suggest the text is over-laden with references or that

Durneen's dialectic verges on passivity or nihilism, but dark energy also offers surprises and pace.

Like the protagonist in 'And What if it Isn't' Durneen has orchestrated her 'contest of wild gestures! ... sexier than it sounds' in this collection (172). She offers the bounce and strut of someone who knows language and whose mind runs in all directions at once – she is a reader, a thinker, a liver, in all intensity– 'It's the sort of truth you can't put in a story because who would believe it' is stated in an ironic way (109). This debut publication may bring good fortune to independent publisher MidnightSun because, despite the title, the writing is taut and strong and well-crafted. Durneen may not need to gesture quite so wildly now that she is launched, albeit from the Antipodes.

**Gay Lynch**