

Susan Fealy, *Flute of Milk* (UWA Publishing, 2017)

Susan Fealy's poetry volume imparts intricate, visual, moody and surreal subtleties, with the alacrity and refinement of a true philologist. The narratives reconfigure the subject matter, making salient the beautiful, the tender, the refractorily timeless with immersion in experience. Symbolism, allegory, and metaphor are richly deployed throughout the volume. Most certainly, Fealy has a refined appreciation for art, literature, and film; her talent for transmuting these into poetic creations attests to this. The reverence however, rests more in the visual than the existential: even the very sad is still very visually pristine (*Flute of Milk*; *In Lieu of a Statue*). This somehow denies the potential for a full sense of suffering; the beautiful overrides the tragic, but again, the yearning presides over the beautiful:

The plate-glass windows fledged
a pale galaxy: your skin, your face,
your eyes, quiet and distilled
as the points of stars.

I wish I could have measured you
with a compass and a star chart. (30)

Art, film, nature, and love are recurrent inspirations and themes. Syntax melds with mood. Perhaps Fealy purposefully designed the syntax of her poetry to enhance its content, but if so, it is very subtle. For example, one can sense the lines of traveling blue in these extended ellipses:

Blue eyes do not contain blue—
they just swallow less
blue light—
it travels like bees
into the eyes of another. (19)

Bees visit us again in 'The Price of Honey.' The jewelled queen bee is at the centre of a microcosmic drama of oppression. Indeed, she is laden with royalty in her opulent 'gold-tessellated chamber' where,

She pulses with eggs
at the heart of this strange
masonry of molten flowers. (40)

In 'How to Dive in Kelp Forest,' line endings create pause analogical to the slow movement of the water, the boat on it and the fronds beneath:

The stripes braid together, grow air-filled bulbs, float
each frond towards the surface.
Do not jump into a mess of greenish-gold. Wait for the swing of the boat
to move away ... (32)

Book reviews: *Flute of Milk* by Susan Fealy. Annette Couch
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Similarly, the artful timing of the lines' endings in 'Almost Palimpsest' attends to the suspense and menace of the words; the poem itself bespeaks a terrifying threat that can only grip a writer. The subject and the threat are indeed literally *words*, that are intensely waiting to be written:

He glimpsed a swarm of shadows like a silence
before a hammering of bees. They massed now
a tumult of black, a writhing meniscus of wings. (39)

'In the Formal Wear Shop', our subject is a tailor, with a penchant for tidiness. The tone and the syntax is playful, giving rise to a sweeter notion of romance's potential. The narrator considers proposing to this metaphorical 'bower-bird' gentleman, but later decides it is better to 'hem dreams up', than yield to the abandon of love as 'unfurled shirts' (20). Have not we all imagined relationships with someone we desired, only to recant on the basis that our imagination has been more fertile and liberated than material reality?

Intricate miniatures of nature are artfully distilled and conjoined with a tender morality (In Lieu of a Statue; Flute of Milk). In 'Everest,' Fealy takes us from climb to descent, from optimistic boyhood to isolation and abandonment. Again, the use of form to impart the sense of elevation and expansion:

I felt more like an astronaut no clouds a curving horizon. (70)

There is something about thinning oxygen and endless space in its treatment of the lines in the first verse, followed by the more cramped second verse, mirroring diminishing options as frostbite, narrow descent and falling ensue.

It can be asked when reading any poem, what is it that I am in search of? For many it will be meaning; for some it will be meaning and literary form. Fealy's poems have an abundance of both. The surreal poems are there too, for those who can contemplate and navigate the freedom in the verse. The reader will not be left floundering. Sometimes Fealy offers clues to her inspirations, for example this one, inspired by artist Tacita Dean's short art-movie, titled 'Film':

ii
In this tunnel of light
No paintbox of blood:
White noise
Flickers polka-dots,
Around its navel
The waterfall runs backwards.
The single pine at dusk
Collects pink neon spots—
Like wormholes.
Like cracks that distil
What light there is. (60)

Fealy named her poem 'Film' after Dean's art-movie of the same name. As Dean tells us: 'I work like an artist. I don't have a plan. I find the way through, by working.'¹ And therein is a suggestion about how to read poetry: take up the book, you don't need a plan. You'll find the way through, by reading.

A final word for 'Breast Imaging'. It captures the cadence of waiting for, attending and departing from an appointment, where idle thoughts cross one's mind in the waiting room; passive, unconscious observations. The patient sees breast-laden metaphors in the bird's breast, and the circumference of apples. Iambic pentameter gives it a no-nonsense flavour that bespeaks the practical necessity of marching through these things. As such, the poem has a dutiful temperament, in the sense of a duty to oneself fulfilled by way of medical checks. Overlaid are the unconscious recognitions of the desire to protect oneself: 'her head snuggled down into the green of herself' (48). In the black glass (48-9), presumably of the reception desk, and the captured black bubbles in the breast imaging itself, the blackness reveals the menace such appointments seek to avert.

In summary, Fealy's book is indeed beautiful, to be savoured and enjoyed without haste, and appreciated by the cultured critic as much as the novice reader.

Annette Couch

¹ Tacita Dean, *Film* <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-tacita-dean-film>>