

**David McCooley, *Star Struck* (UWA Publishing, 2016).**

'Star Struck' is an anthology that can be described as atmospheric. Befitting this theme, the opening poem 'This Voice' (title page), introduces us to McCooley's contemplative, ambient, and visually emergent style. This scene-setting poem conveys a sense of removal from everyday action, where sounds filter through at a low volume on a still evening. 'This Voice' is a bracketing poem that also closes the volume on page 87, where its smooth verses evoke transient noise at the level of a murmur, and profound contemplations. In the body of this anthology are four sections, the first titled 'Documents.' This section opens with an obscure reference to the afterlife in the poem 'Habit' (2), observing that habit is both a tool and a pathology. Continuing through this first section, we follow the writer through a cardiac event, which includes hospitalisation, immobilisation, and recovery. But what is peculiar to McCooley is the artful transmission of the phenomenology of experience: every poem is drizzled with mood, ambiance, imagery and impressions.

In 'Speaking the Language' the first line announces, 'And then one day you appear in Accident and Emergency.' Here we are given a sense of the surprise felt at a human body that has suddenly stopped behaving in the life-affirming manner expected of it. As a result, McCooley's patient is 'labile.' In lability there is a welling up of emotion, sudden tears, a deep swimming in fear, confusion. However, like the detached narrator in 'This Voice' who contemplates whispering sounds that passively impinge on suburban silence, a slice of this patient's intellectuality remains aloof enough from his woe to articulate it in medical terms to the doctor, somewhat discounting the crisis it represents.

'What's the matter?' a doctor asks.

'I'm just labile,' you say (3).

Here McCooley withholds psychoanalysis, providing instead ample description, allowing the reader to fill out their own impressions. Even so, the mellow temperament of this patient is a theme that comes through in the poems that follow, in calm acceptance, in non-judgmental observations of the sundry contributions to the character of being in hospital (Music for Hospitals, 4). McCooley uses the 'catalogue' style of verse (lists) on pages 3, 4 and 5, which is an allegorical performance of the austerity of ward life (Cardiac Ward Poetics):

8. Is there really any need to be so  
Spartan about everything? (5)

By the time we have turned the page to 'The Hunter' on page 6, our patient has passed through the heights of crisis and entered recovery from the cardiac event. The nurse in 'The Hunter' is a recreational hunter, entertaining his patients in the ward with photos of dead conquests. The reader is free to reflect on the irony of killing some mammals for fun and healing other mammals for work. This poem reads like a rollicking tale, capturing the vibe of the moment of this unique exchange between nurse and patients. When reading this poem I thought about how the interiors of hospitals do not share a reputation for aesthetic nuance, and neither are nurses

Book reviews: *Star Struck* by David McCooley. Annette Couch.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

reputed for their psychological daintiness. It suffices to get the job done for nurses to be direct, practical, or even bossy. What is shown as qualitatively important in this nurse is his ability to be 'excellent at taking blood;' to share and 'to crack small jokes through his shifts.' The hospital is not a place where the issues of the world outside are discussed in great depth; there is quite enough business to be seen to in keeping people alive, comfortable, and recovering. Long-winded ethical discussions about the morality of hunting animals for sport will not usually occur, but sundry discussion of any sport is likely to make people feel better.

Beautiful, original and descriptive verse continues through this first section, either describing the patient's recovery at home in suburban surrounds in 'Invisible Cities,' (7); 'Do Not Disturb,' (13); 'One Way or Another', (14); 'Intensive Care,' (20); and 'Second-Person,' (21); or the meandering reflections that a time of extended rest allows in 'Animal Studies,' (9-11); 'Callings,' (12); 'The Questionnaire,' (16-17), and 'The Point.' (18).

The second section, 'Available Light' (23) is introduced with a quote that lures us to consider the visual. The section's title poem by the same name, sets out ten still-life studies in two-lined verses where light is presented in various incarnations: 'buffeting ... photographic dusk ... science-fiction lighting ... out-dated starlight ... phosphorescent ... TV Blue ... sentinel LEDs ... fridge glow ... a mirror's unnatural magic' (25). In 'Scene from a Marriage,' a car park at an Australian beach sits in an 'unsentimental light' (26). In the orderly suburbia of 'Summer Nights, Walking,' 'Statuesque cars (are) curated by the street lights.' (27). The darkness atop a ferris wheel at night allows riders to:

Properly appreciate the bitter  
industrial lights across the bay  
or the unlit hearts of the Moreton Bays below (Poem, 28).

Suburban micro-dramas (Three Hysterical Short Stories, 29-31) in stage-like settings, are individually lit scenes that have a feeling of psychological spaciousness about them. This has the effect of allowing the reader room for reflective speculation about each scene, as well of course, the natural immersion in the visual, which is McCooey's gift also. My favourite poem in the volume is 'The Dolls' House' where a family of dolls lead a ghostly life, eating their 'meals of dust and sunlight' in their –

... bourgeois house: three stories;  
pitched roof; casement windows, free of glass,  
Like a house in a European war, the entire  
Back wall has been sheared off. (32)

This poem, longer on average than the others, is truly lovely, haunting, insightful, and human.

The volume possesses a natural elegance that provides an opulent but mellow aesthetic, inviting ponderances ranging from the deep to the quirky. Where poems are set in suburbia, the imagery has a softness, a gentle mood with households that are replete with multifaceted sounds, visions, and ample resident imaginations. The second section closes off available light with its last poem 'Darkness Speaks,'

None of it is true: I am  
neither malevolent nor

mystical. You have nothing  
to fear; I am the one who makes  
things bright and  
dramatic when they need to be  
Like when I spill myself  
a little at sunset ... (52).

Section three is 'Pastorals (Eighteen Dramatic Monologues),' (53). It unfolds with an extravaganza of vignettes where famous bands or musicians form the backdrop to personal tales. Each poem is a story, the music and fame itself form the periphery. The musician featured that most closely resembles McCooey's style is, to my mind, Brian Eno in 'Before and After Science (Brian Eno in Hospital),'

Back on my bed of olive-green  
I realise the music is too quiet.  
Too much gain reduction, as the engineers  
say in their paradoxical style.  
Only the right channel is audible, so that  
The harp music sounds like water.  
I do not move. I see power-lines;  
the faint green of a distant park;  
Rain my or may not be in the air. (58).

Finally, section four, 'Two Nocturnal Tales,' (75) spreads out towards the end of the volume, which is closed by the other half of the opening (bracketing) poem, 'This Voice,' (87).

*Star Struck* offers us the engaging consciousness of an extraordinarily atmospheric poet whose insights are personal and relatable, but also expansive. McCooey's imagination has the capacity to lead us to new intuitions about the light and sounds that immerse us during our everyday lives. *Star Struck* is thoroughly enjoyable and enriching, and is David McCooey's third full length book of poetry.

**Annette Couch**