Volume 10, no. 2
May 2018

Book reviews: Fiction, poetry and life-writing

Contents

Annette Couch          Star Struck by David McCooey
Sebastian Galbo       Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi, translated by
                      Jonathan Wright.
Alice Gorman           The West-Eastern Divan of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
                      translated from the German by Robert Martin.
Melinda Graefe         Double Glaze by Steve Brock
Kay Hart               Zorami A Redemption Song by Malsawmi Jacob
Debasish Lahiri       A Personal History of Vision by Luke Fischer
John Miles             Between the Kindling and the Blaze: Reflections on the
                      Concept of Mana by Ben Brown.
Wendy Jones Nakanishi  The Life to Come by Michelle de Kretser
Jennifer Osborn        The Fabulous Feminist: a Suniti Namjoshi Reader
Jennifer Osborn        Plane Tree Drive by Lynette Washington
Nishi Pulugurtha       Across the Seven Seas by Satendra Nandan

‘Star Struck’ is an anthology that can be described as atmospheric. Befitting this theme, the opening poem ‘This Voice’ (title page), introduces us to McCooey’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 McCooey 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, McCooey’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 McCooey 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). McCooey 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
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

Book reviews: Star Struck by David McCooey, Annette Couch. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018. 
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

Baghdad is rocked by war and Iraqis flee the city under the frenetic rampage of American occupation, sectarian violence, and a wilting economy. Hadi, a junk dealer and storyteller of the Bataween neighborhood, scans the scene of a suicide car bombing. Hadi collects more than rubbish: amongst the smoke, dust, and the bloody debris of human bodies, he stoops to pluck the remnants of a nose from the wreckage, wraps it in a canvas sheet, and leaves the scene. Curating the remains of human bodies blasted asunder by suicide bombs, Hadi sutures bloody remnants to form a complete corpse, stowed away in his crumbling flat. Necromania is far from the reason Hadi pursues his gory task: ‘I made it [the corpse] complete so that it wouldn’t be treated as trash, so it would be treated like other dead people and given a proper burial’ (27). The nose from that day’s bombing was the crowning remnant that perfected the corpse.

Hadi is peculiarly obsessed with imposing an order of wholeness on his disparate and dispersed corner of the Islamic world. He’s preoccupied with what happens at the periphery of suicide bombings: ‘It [a bomb] cut electricity wires and killed birds. Windows were shattered and doors blown in. Cracks appeared in the walls of the nearby houses, and some old ceilings collapsed. There was unseen damage too, all inflicted in a single moment’ (21). At the periphery of the rubble are human remains that are carelessly regarded as debris by Baghdad emergency teams. He watches firemen power-hose blood and ashes down city storm drains, never caring to differentiate rubble from flesh. Hadi’s gruesome project is, in large part, an act of hushed redemption, mourning, and reconciliation for human vestiges left behind at scenes of horrific violence.

Another suicide bombing changes the course of events for the corpse hidden away in the Bataween neighborhood. Hasib, a security guard, is killed by a dynamite-lined truck at the entrance of a hotel. Following the fatal blast, Hasib’s soul wanders Baghdad in search of its incinerated body. His spirit is admonished by another itinerant urban soul, who predicts, ‘You have to find [your body], or some other body, or else things will end badly for you’ (38). With only the charred remains of his body, Hasib’s family was obliged to bury an empty coffin. His gravesite, like countless others, is not a place of eternal rest but an empty topographical marker of vanished life. Vacated from his body, Hasib’s soul eventually encounters Hadi’s reconstructed ‘Frankenstein’, and is fluidly absorbed into the corpse: ‘Overwhelmed by a heaviness and torpor, he lodged inside the corpse, filling from head to toe, because probably, he realized then, it didn’t have a soul, while he was a soul without a body’ (40).

Hadi, however, is far from a devious necromancer – he neither mumbles incantations nor conjures a fiery eschatology for occupied Baghdad. He’s merely the clumsy earthly conduit through which the corpse is born from a deep reverence for the human body. Hadi, if anything, resembles a strangely forlorn ZAKA worker, exposed to the hazardous aftermath of explosions, surveying rubble for blast-torn limbs and scraps of flesh. Established by a group of ultra-orthodox volunteers (Hebrew acronym for the Israeli society, Identifiers of Victims of Disaster), ZAKA’s objective is to collect bodies at scenes of mass violence to ensure that ‘regardless of the
religion of the deceased, [their bodies are] treated in accordance with Jewish law.’ As Lauren B. Wilcox states, ‘ZAKA effectively undertakes a purification ritual of making clean proper of what was disordered and defiled. ZAKA volunteers are motivated by a desire that the bodies of the victims be treated with respect. [...] They will spend hours ensuring that no blood or bits of flesh are left behind.’ She cites interviews with ZAKA workers expressing concern that ‘dogs, birds, and ants will consume human flesh, or that blood will be washed away by hoses’.

1 Indeed, Hadi, witness to the effacing menace of Baghdad’s hoses, is inspired by a similar kind of mission—that human remains are not “heaps of meat,” but deserving of respectful burial (93).

Hadi’s status as the neighborhood junk dealer extends to his devoted stewardship of human remains. Despite his drunkenness and garrulity, Hadi works devotedly to reclaim the wholeness of a human body. ‘The practice of collecting all body fragments and fluids is an example of power regulating the body, turning objects only identifiable from a medical or anatomical viewpoint into remnants of a human subject’ (94). Composed of the many parts of bomb victims – the limbs of those with different religious, political, socioeconomic, and sectarian allegiances – Hadi’s creation becomes a walking necrology of Baghdad’s divided community.

A string of perverse murders dominates the city’s headlines. Rumours circulate that the mysterious corpse – or the ‘Whatsitsname’ or ‘Criminal X’, as it is dubbed by the Iraqi Tracking and Pursuit Department – is a ruthless superhuman, unable to be killed. Animated by Hasib’s soul, Hadi’s Frankenstein stalks the streets of Baghdad to slaughter the murderer responsible for each limb comprising its body, justifying the killing spree as a ‘noble mission’. It realises that, before it can finish off the last victims, the organs and limbs of its putrid body begin to rot. Needing new hands and eyeballs, the Baghdad Frankenstein must obliterate more people for fresh parts. TheWhatsitsname realises the corporeal conditions of his bloody mission: ‘My list of people to seek revenge grew longer as my body parts fell off and my assistants added parts from my new victims, until one night I realized that under these circumstances I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end’ (153). To survive and complete his objective, the corpse becomes entangled in an ever-widening web of killings that span sectarian and political factions.

Implicated in the mystery of the Baghdad Frankenstein are other complex characters whose lives are seamlessly intertwined amidst the everyday violence: Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a diffident journalist; the wizened Elishva, who believes the Baghdad Frankenstein is her son incarnate after years as a missing person of war; Ali Baher al-Saidi, a prominent but shadowy editor of an influential magazine; and Faraj, an unctuous real estate agent bent on seizing historic properties of the Bataween neighborhood. In Saadawi’s novel, these characters move throughout one another’s lives, all directly and indirectly shaped by the corpse’s bloody machinations.

Sadaawi’s posthuman figure has vast hermeneutic potential – an outraged spectre; a disgruntled jinn (اﻟﺠﻦ); a lost soul of war. Particularly troublesome, however, is the limited efficacy of Sadaawi’s allegory, one unfortunately vitiated by the physical composition of

1 Lauren B. Wilcox, Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) (93).
Criminal X who is almost exclusively the amalgamation of mature, able, male bodies. Curiously excluded from the makeup of the Baghdad Frankenstein are the blood, fluids, and limbs of Baghdad’s women, children, and elderly – why are these victims’ lives, equally precious and precarious, omitted from Saadawi’s narrative, from the corporeality of the living dead? In whatever way readers choose to ‘read’ the Whatsitsname, the figure is an allegory – a dark hyperbole – of cyclical sectarian violence carried out to the point of absurdity, though readers may puzzle over the advantages of creating a specifically male organism to reflect on human life at the centre of war.

Sadaawi’s novel concentrates also on the fragility and fluidity of borders, on the chaotic swirling of admixtures and contaminations, and on the (im)possibilities of amalgamation. There’s a preoccupation with exteriors and interiors, explosions and implosions, and ‘boundedness’ and ‘unboundedness’ that exposes the vulnerability of religious, political, and social boundaries. Yet the novel’s innermost tragedy is that the Baghdad Frankenstein is not – despite its initial intentions to exact justice – a wartime messiah, but becomes, with its helpless victims, locked within the endless rotation of Hammurabian retaliation. As conditions in Baghdad deteriorate, Saadawi’s novel casts a doubtful light on the challenges of overcoming sectarian divisions in the Islamic world.

Sebastian Galbo
Review of *The West-Eastern Divan of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, translated from the German by Robert Martin (Wakefield Press 2016)

In the *West-Eastern Divan of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, Goethe (1749-1832) pretends to be a Middle Eastern poet. It is worth remembering, in these times, the love affair the West once had with the East, imputing to it all that was exotic, erotic, and decadent – the ‘orientalising’ fetish dissected by Edward Said and many others since.

Robert Martin, in his translator’s preface, describes the impetus for the Divan: in his mid-sixties, Goethe discovered the renowned fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, through translation. So this book is a translation of Goethe’s attempt to translate Hafez’s genre into German, based on a German translation of the Persian. There’s more: Goethe had fallen in love with a young woman, Marianne von Willemer. The 12 books in the volume contain dialogues and refrains between Goethe and Marianne, in the character of Suleika. What intrigues me is that Marianne herself has written some of the poems. She is no silent muse: her voice is clear.

The question for me is, why not go straight to the original Hafez? What does Goethe have to offer us? Well, I’m about to find out. I decide the best way to do this is to read the volume in chunks, book by book, during my summer sojourn in the southern Riverina region of NSW.

It’s hot on the day before Christmas, as I read the first book, Moganni Nameh, or the Book of the Singer. There are 19 poems, seldom longer than a page (I like a short-to-moderate length poem, having been scarred by attempting to read Thomas Moore’s 1817 ‘Oriental romance’ *Lalla Rookh* as a teenager).

Hafez is mentioned numerous times in the first book, but he plays a greater role in the second, Hafis Nameh or the Book of Hafez. I read the ten poems on Christmas Day, after lunch, with a glass of champagne. The theme is the madness and metre of poetry. In this Book we are introduced to Suleika, the poet’s love.

Family members join me on the patio outside and I read them a few poems from the Book of Hafez to gauge their reactions. ‘He’s no Rumi’ says Claire. For Daniel, the feel of the poems is ‘quite Seussianesque’ – referring to the rhythm of Dr Seuss. To be honest, I can see what he means. Tish says ‘It’s one for the Goethephiles’. This tells me that these poems are not best appreciated when read aloud – perhaps inevitable with translation.

On Boxing Day, with the hum and click of cricket on the TV in the background, I tackle The Book of Reflection. It’s nearly 40 degrees. There are seven poems, one of them pages long. The reflections are about how to live a good life: forbearance, stillness, the middle path.

The next day I begin on Rendsch Nameh, The Book of Displeasure. I’m quite interested in this, as displeasure is both a precise and negative concept. The displeasure alluded to seems to be a mild disgruntlement with how eminence fails to be recognised. There are 14 poems. The first contains this line, which could have many uses:

Would they have the sense to tell a
Rodent turd from coriander?

Also this:

I enjoy a conversation
With an expert or a tyrant

Hikmet Nameh, the Book of Proverbs, is next, on another scorching day. This book seems to be about the ambiguities of life and how to steer a clear path. These lines resonate:

One day, when I had extinguished a spider,
I paused: Was that a thing well done?

And:

Two friends that bring no trouble
Wine goblet, book of poems

The heat continues to build. On New Year’s Day 2018 I read the Book of Timur. Timur, or Tamerlane, was a fourteenth-century Mongolian-Turkish empire builder, with territory from India, Russia to the Mediterranean. In the second poem, the poet speaks to Suleika – imagining love feeding on such a multitude of souls as fell victim to Timur’s domination.

And so we come to the Book of Suleika, where the real business begins. Goethe talks about Suleika, Potiphar’s wife, who tries to seduce Joseph, he of the many-coloured coat. Martin notes in his glossary that Potiphar’s wife is named in the Islamic tradition, and Joseph does not spurn her. It’s interesting that Goethe does not take the character of Joseph, young and handsome. Instead he uses the alias of the sixth-century poet Hatem Tai, ‘renowned for his generosity’ as Martin explains.

Here we have the first poem in Marianne’s hand. She reassures Goethe that her passion equals his. In a time when scrutiny of male predation on women is finally happening, it is very interesting to have Marianne’s strong voice of assent and engagement – and to have the intellectual dimensions of the relationship brought to the fore.

As the dialogue between Suleika and the poet unfolds (and she is, of course, poet too), the poems come into focus: even in translation, their fiercely personal nature makes the poetry ring brighter and stronger. The gingko leaf becomes the symbol of two entities uniting, and/or dividing; the lovers, of course, but also the divergence between the poet’s vision and the reality of life.

Marianne reassures the poet of her love:

You can grace my youthful freshness
With your passion’s seasoned force.

In these lines, she encourages him not to be deterred in seeking her love:

Let your cracked planet forever
Try to make itself whole

Then Hatem and Suleika experience a separation. He worries that the words of other poets appear on her lips. Marianne’s poem sends the West Wind to comfort him and looks forward to the reunion. She exhorts the West Wind to

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Tell him, but tell him humbly:
Say his love is all my life.....

When the reunion happens, Marianne renews her vows of love to Goethe. But is the poet completely satisfied? In Saki Nameh, the Book of the Cupbearer, Hatem goes to the Tavern and sits alone drinking. He says

The drinker, whatever the truth,
Sees much clearer the face of God

Suleika, real or in his imagination, interjects:

Why are you so often like a fiend?

Hatem replies that the poet’s soul is restricted by being contained in the body. He interrupts his inner dialogue to request a new cupbearer. I’m not sure if there is some homoerotic Zeusian thread here. Hatem grows intemperate and the cupbearer tries to restrain him. They go out to look at the stars on a summer’s night. The cupbearer wants an older, wiser man to teach him the ways of life, but, callow youth, falls asleep instead.

It’s now mid-January, and on a gloriously hot day, I’ve just returned from the Berrigan Show and Shine – a vintage car and motorcycle show, a big event in this tiny country town. I drag my brain back into Goethe’s world, to the 10 poems in Mathal Nameh, the Book of Parables. One is written from the perspective of a pearl, speaking to the jeweller about to pierce her through: she and her pearly sisters will be ‘fixed in ruination’ upon the strand. I’m struck by the violence of the metaphor.

Next is the Book of the Parsee. It’s the day before ‘Australia Day’, over 42 degrees in the shade, and country is heaving with controversy. Only two poems in this book. One is about Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsees. Both speak of sun and water.

On ‘Australia Day’, after dripping sweat over a full fried breakfast at the local Country Women’s Association hall, it’s time for Chuld Nameh, the Book of Paradise. This is the last book, with 10 poems. The poet is questioned by a houri at the gates of Paradise. ‘Did your battles or your merit send you here to Paradise?, she asks. The poet replies:

As a man I lived a life, and,
So that means I fought a fight.

So the poet is admitted and gets his own houri – who turns out to be Suleika, or maybe Suleika, for the houri doesn’t remember, although she still loves poetry. The last poem is ‘Goodnight’, as the poet takes his place in Paradise.

So ends the West-Eastern Divan. It bears more than one reading to fully appreciate the themes woven through the books. Overall, the volume explores the relationship of the poet, with all his foibles and doubts, to God, society, good, evil and the world. Martin’s translation is easy to read and accessible, but unless the original German is more subtle and poetic, I’m not convinced by Goethe’s pose. Nevertheless, the story of Suleika/Marianne is intriguing, and for the Goethephiles, it is a valuable addition to his oeuvre in translation. In short, if this is your sort of thing, you will enjoy it.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
I read the final part, a selection of unpublished poems, in the aeroplane on the way back to Adelaide. Fat drops of rain are flattened against the windows as we rise through the clouds, closer to heaven. The change has come at last.

Alice Gorman
Steve Brock, *Double Glaze* (5 Islands Press, 2013)

When we think of double glazing, a number of impressions spring to mind: solidity, strength, sensible sound-proofing. A double-glazed window is a barrier between cosy interior and natural, perhaps hostile outer world. It provides a sheltering buffer, preventing industrial and commercial sounds and smells from insinuating their way into the home. It deadens the noise of traffic. It lets in light, and allows us to watch outside events unfold at a distance. Steve Brock’s second volume of poems, *Double Glaze*, provides a window onto the city and suburban life that he shares with other Adelaideans – commuters, restaurateurs, a World War Two veteran, a smooth-talking ‘guy’, a sailor, fellow poets, his wife and daughter, ‘Pumpkin’ the guinea pig – that he crosses paths with in the course of his own daily journeys. The people that inhabit the world of Brock’s poems are not sheltered by the double-glazed barrier that he often evokes. The glass often works as a mirror in which we see ghostly reflections of ourselves.

The volume is neatly organised into the four themes of work, the commute, writing, and family, and this provides a structure which draws attention to our tendency to compartmentalise our lives. The individual poems provide fluidity within the structure, suggesting that the compartments we construct for ourselves do not always provide a defence against the disappointments and pitfalls of contemporary life. We travel with Brock from home to work, via the laneways, cafes, bookshops and market that situate us in the west end of the city, an area that neighbours the CBD but thrives on its own eccentricities, histories and rhythms that cannot be easily compartmentalised.

Through the motif of double glazing, Brock maintains the steady and objective eye of the flâneur as he observes scenes unfolding around him. The poet often establishes a distance from the action; it as if he sees through a solid glass panel. This has a particularly disorienting effect, as in the poem ‘Core’, when the poet recognises his own image set in glass:

```
not long out of uni
I was waiting at the tram stop
in a suit
eating an apple
when I saw the reflection
in the shelter glass
of a man in a suit
eating an apple
in a split second
I recognised the apple
I threw it in the bin
& stepped on board.
```

The lines echo those of Dennis O’Driscoll, whose ‘In Office’ provides the epigraph to Part I of *Double Glaze*, titled ‘Work’:

We age in the mirrors of office lavatories,
watch seeds of rain broadcast their flecks
along the screen of tinted glass, a pane
that stands between us and the freedom
which we struggle towards …

Brock’s poems dramatise the painful splitting of self that O’Driscoll describes: the striving ‘core’ of self that struggles towards creative freedom is pitted against the ghostly reflected self, a shady doppelgänger in a suit, haunting tram stops and offices.

The poet of Double Glaze knows what it is to have multiple identities that fracture and break apart, that are as fragile and dangerous as shattered glass. In ‘diggers,’ the poet and his daughter dig in their backyard, unearthing toy soldiers that were buried by a little boy who lived there previously. In this domestic, suburban palimpsest, Brock also sifts through evidence of things buried by the father of the boy, ‘the $3000 water bill/the unpaid electricity & gas/ the phone bill/council rates/credit card bills/& letters from lawyers’ that still arrive in the letterbox. The poet finds ‘letters from Social Services’ and ‘holes/in the walls/& the yellow/nicotine-stained paint’ that attest to a father’s neglect. Even the family cat was abandoned, and returns ‘half-starved.’ The poet continues to dig: ‘I find another soldier/& imagine the scale/of the boy’s battle.’ Brock often employs the reflective imagination in this manner, to shine light on what is dark, but also to redress the depressions that often make our lives unbearable. In ‘so what,’ he speaks of the poet’s vocation as transformative:

   a writer
   creates his own
   precursors
   (Borges)
   & brings
   old Adelaide
   coffee shops
   into being
   the Flash
   & the Baci
   the city
   made habitable
   again
   in the poet’s
   dream.

Brock also seems to play on another association: to glaze over means to become unfocused, usually through inattention but also potentially prompted by a burden of details, the minutiae of everyday life, that have become overly familiar. The momentary glazing over becomes a method by which the poet protects himself from the banality of the nine-to-five office job:
sometimes
it’s like a low tide
& the objects
on my desk
are left
stranded
around me
as I gaze
out the office
window
looking
for something
outside of me
to fill
the emptiness

This is how ‘double glaze’ opens, and we follow the poet through the day as he gathers ‘a density/to things’ through ‘shared meaning/around/an experience/even if it was/only/reality tv’. At the end of the day, he finds himself in the pub, ‘laughing/over after work/drinks’:

while above us
in a window
in the corner
of the room
I see them
crashing
against
the edge
of this
desperate
to get in
but we can’t
hear them
above
the background
noise
I see their children
drowning
but don’t
mention this
as we wave
goodbye
& take
our separate
journeys
home.

There is a shift in perception, and what initially appears to be a corner window, hardly worthy of notice, is a television set displaying a ‘reality tv’ of the worst kind. The poet concludes the section on commuting here, implicating us as witnesses, allowing us a glimpse through the television-window onto a horrific moment when desperate asylum seekers, families caught between worlds, are silently taken down into the ocean. Steve Brock’s language is at full stretch. The relentless staccato rhythms punch out at us, giving shape to the unheard cries of the children who are drowning. The poet’s voice is ‘desperate to get in’, to astound the reader, to draw our attention to the two worlds that are separated by glass. There is vulnerability here too. The poet’s voice admits a human brittleness as the words fall away, lines buckling under the weight of all we’re not letting in.

Melinda Graefe
Flinders University

Malsawmi Jacob’s novel *Zorami: A Redemption Story* is quite an engaging work of literary fiction. It is set against the background of the 1960s troubles known as ‘ram buai’ meaning ‘disturbance in the land’ (259).

Zorami is entering her teens and a growing turmoil of her own as she observes the unrest, the grumblings of injustice among her people, which is heading them toward a very dark period for Mizo inside and outside of Mizoram. Zorami has troubles of her own following a traumatic personal event that is causing this once happy, carefree girl to become a more than usually withdrawn, secretive, anxious teenager (43-44).

Using a non-linear structure the story unfolds through Zorami’s reflections as she faces her fiftieth birthday. She is waiting for her husband Sanga to return from a period away on behalf of his work or at least a phone call to ‘wish her happy’ (23).

The interesting characters that people this novel reveal an engaging picture of life among the Mizo: their history, culture, folklore including events leading up to and during the insurgency.

The passages of song and poetry interspersed throughout the text, even a whole chapter devoted to Zorami’s grandma telling her grandchildren some myths (45-52), are representative of the Mizo way of story-telling.1 These stories set Zorami thinking about war and whether it is ever just or purposeful. ‘And what good does any war bring?’ she wonders (52).

Following the annexation of Mizoram to Assam State during the period of Indian independence from British colonisation, things remain much as they have always been. The Mizo continued living in autonomous tribal villages each with its own chief. However, at the time the unrest begins Mizoram is coming out of a long period of drought and a severe famine. They are angered by the poor provision of assistance from both the Assamese and Indian governments in response to a starving people’s needs. Additionally, the lack of assistance that would allow Mizoram to develop an infrastructure enabling them to enter the wider world of trade and economic development is an ongoing grievance, further fueling the growing dissatisfaction. An edict that Assamese, not Mizo, must become the official spoken language as well as that taught in schools finally fans the anger to action. The Mizo fear the disappearance of not only their language, but also their culture, folklore and indeed their entire identity as a people.

During the British rule of India the arrival of English missionaries intent on conversion of the Mizo to Christianity brought schools and possibility for education to Mizoram. It is the missionaries who develop written script for the Mizo language enabling it to be used in education. This is the beginning of empowerment for the Mizo who today are an educated people with one of the highest literacy rates in India, according to the 2011 Census.2

Zorami’s father ‘believes education is of prime importance,’ that it is ‘the magic key that will unlock the door to a better world’ (32) and something that ‘shapes destiny’ (36). He is educated, and encourages his children, including his daughter Zorami, to study hard, learn languages, especially English (41), in the belief it will open opportunities of employment for their future. However, in the early stages of Zorami’s school life, her mother expresses concern that her

---

2 Mizoram Population Census Data 2011 [https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/mizoram.html](https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/mizoram.html)

daughter might become a ‘tomboy’. Mizo women are expected to be modest (42-43). Feminist issues are not dominant as a theme in this novel, but are in evidence within the day-to-day lives of Mizoram’s patriarchal society. Women are not the decision-makers in the home, or in the wider community or in politics. However they are able to gain an education. This is useful allowing them to work outside the home (77-78).

The author manages to convey the ugliness of war including very confronting descriptions of actions by both sides in the period. She portrays the idealism that can grab people, young men looking for a purpose, a cause to involve them. How it can descend into violence, a hunger for power for instance, which in turn may lead to betrayals, torture, looting, inhumane acts such as rape.

Currently Mizoram remains a mainly Christian society; their Presbyterian Synod playing a vital role in negotiations during the peace process (161-162). The Christian theme in the story and its reference to healing and redemption develop a climate for final resolutions for both Zorami and Mizoram. Perhaps having some spiritual awareness may assist readers in understanding the closing chapters although not essential to an enjoyment of the story.

When in Aizawl in May 2004, I visited a friend ... . There were several other visitors. As we sat chatting, I brought up the subject of the “ram buai” period and asked what they remembered about it. Most of them spoke up ... narrated their experiences, some horrifying, some funny.3

It was after this visit that Jacob decided to write about these experiences as a tribute to her people and their endurance during such a harsh period in their history. She hoped it might bring some measure of healing for them. As part of her research, she spent many hours listening to many individuals, in Aizawl and Lunglei; she also met with former Mizoram National Front Leaders and a pastor who started the peace movement. In this way she gained an ear for the idiomatic voice of her people, which she has sought to reproduce throughout the writing. What I initially thought to be errors in the editing process are a deliberate choice of phrasing. For example ‘to wish her on her birthday’ (24) or ‘come to pick them’ and ‘Mother explained why she reached late” (154).

‘I have used the English language to tell a Mizo story, and hope I have succeeded in bringing out the native flavour through it. ... Some parts may read a bit bumpy because of this approach, though I’ve also tried to not hamper its readability... .4

The writing is carefully considered, with a style that is simple and easy to read. The chapters and their titles could in themselves almost be headings for stories complete in themselves. The use of short sentences at the end of some chapters almost provides a succinct summary of their own, ‘Dead bodies tell strange tales’ (p144) or ‘The betrayer and the betrayed died together’ (p127).

The inclusion of the many Mizo phrases throughout the novel gives an even richer sense of the voice of these interesting people. Provision of a Glossary aids in interpreting these phrases into English (254-263).

---

3 Sarangi 5.
4 Sarangi 6.
Few readers are likely to have heard of Mizoram, the Mizo, or Malsawmi Jacob. This, her first full novel in English, was written to broaden awareness of Mizoram in the outside world. Jacob is the first Mizo author to be published outside of India. The book is currently available in Europe, USA, several Asian countries, and Australia.

Kay Hart

Human vision is itself an artifact, shaped by other artifacts, namely pictures, all perception thus being the result of historical changes in representation. An image can, then, signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental or verbal phenomena. One needs to look no further than Luke Fischer’s A Personal History of Vision to realise this.

Fischer’s book is an amalgamation of the apparent visual and an imagined verbal climate that might surround it with its hot suns, hard rains and untimely tempests. As he reminds us at the end of his roll call of dedicatees in ‘Floating Seeds’, a poem ‘offers nothing / but a castle in the air’. By attempting the impossible a poem evokes the impossible as a prospect.

Fischer’s poems are conceived as an allegorical homecoming. And he chooses his own context with clarity. Elements that signify his personal experiences and narratives that are disseminated as a part and parcel of genealogical inheritance, are placed as a thick layering of cultural matter as he leads the viewer in a visual perambulation into his own constructions of memory, of travel, of moving into and out of spaces, and the light that inhabits those spaces.

At the peril of stating the obvious, Fischer is painterly. In his poems a sheer knowledge of history breaks out of the waters from time to time. And the free-play of Ekphrasis that curls like a sea round these eruptions is an understanding of the traditional methods of painting and sculpting that allow him to create characters in a play of line and depth, of reality and vision, weaving disparate contexts into a unified mass. The deftness of Fischer’s painterly hand manifests itself in those poems which are like preparatory cartoons for that grand canvas:

Incrementally impressed
by smiling, thinking and looking hard –
foils of skin – presaging a far-off unity
of wisdom and joy – like shafts through clouds
they ray out from twin suns.

(‘On the Beauty of Eye Wrinkles’)

The artist’s scheme of breaking the canvas into small fragmented planes in Fischer’s poetry creates a sense of the shattered picture plane that confines the substance of his narrative. This breaking up of space allows more facets of event and experience to glow and surprise us in the penumbra of everyday life.

as the waitress takes my empty cup
we surprise each other
face
to
face
an icon on a chapel wall
glimpsed in a candle’s
flicker

(‘Glance’)

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
In ‘Annunciation’ Fischer achieves a brilliant translation of the pictorial vacancy in Fra Angelico’s fresco as a terse efflorescence of words carefully unpacks the ells of silence and light broken by the columns and bordered by the garden. Fischer’s act of ekphrastic translation extends even to the conception of the two columns on the physical page. Fischer’s poem plunges down like the hermit hawk in a vertical view of spiritual history that ranges across centuries of adoration, mystery and myth and arrives at this startling afternoon scene in the convent and its garden. The breathlessness of this arrival and the carefully breathed out rendition of the scene are both evident in the fine trapeze act of the lines across the void of the caesurae.

Fischer’s lines course down the vortex of art history as he arrives at the earthiness of Mary’s dress in Angelico’s fresco via the tonal portraiture of still life in Giorgio Morandi’s work. Uncannily, both Angelico and Morandi hail from the same region, and Fischer’s sudden bringing together of ‘the pastel clay’, that is ‘the colour of humility’ in these two painters, like castaways on the shores of five centuries, seems no less than an illuminated mystery that has defied solution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Her midnight blue mantle</th>
<th>falls without resistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She notices its weight</td>
<td>her posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than a person</td>
<td>feels a blanket in sleep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ekphrasis, so often the dragon’s teeth sown in the turf between painting and poetry, does not yield a harvest of negativity in ‘Annunciation’. Fischer’s poem turns a brilliant nugget in Fra Angelico, the feeling of weight that the look of the blue blanket gives and the association it has with restfulness, into a sensitive anecdote that takes in minute details of the garden scene like the light.

In ‘Madonna of the Goldfinch’, based on Raphael’s painting of the same title, Fischer brings art history and Australian national history to a heady mix in his description of the Madonna. His diction exfoliates with nature harnessing architectural forms, an organic life putting a soft glove around the angularities of learnedness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The blue sky around her head</th>
<th>a natural mandorla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a natural mandorla</td>
<td>framed by unmoving clouds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expanse and release of the blue sky and the ossified cloud in the painting are brought to a pointed resolution in the phrase ‘natural mandrola’, the mere spectre of an oxymoron drifting across the lines like cloud shadow. Fischer evokes Raphael’s time and writes the poem sitting in the smithy of the Urbino artist’s imagination. So Fischer’s poem is not an account of Raphael’s painting, but the painting done afresh in words.

| Her dress and mantle are a crimson rosella’s breast and wings … an angelic bird landed in a Tuscan field? |
Fischer’s lines have a thing-heavy fall, and a lugubrious matter-of-factness that can easily beguile even an ardent poetry lover into questioning the life that lies coiled like a spring in them. He has the same love for the accretion of the starkness and acuteness of pictorial detail that the American poet William Carlos Williams had developed in his late cycle of poems *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). – And the ‘crimson rosella’ (a bird integral to Australian fauna) is a brilliant touch as Fischer’s Australian Muse comes to roost at the heart of Raphael’s canvas. No wonder, as Fischer cheekily suggests, that baby Christ looks on, not at John the Baptist, the great herald of Christendom, like the old continent, but ‘into another space’: possibly Australia.

Fischer’s poetry demonstrates in the same moment the weakness and the strength of an urban consciousness grappling with nature imagery. In one of several instances in *A Personal History of Vision* of this crossroads, decision-demanding moment where an aspect of nature, its vision, challenges the poet, Fischer falls back upon the built and the architectural, the art-historical, that translates nature in its own idiom. The results can be intellectually fascinating – the conceit as well chiselled as God’s index finger on the dome of Sistine Chapel – the minuteness of detail offset by the vastness of its reference, across cultural history.

When you sit on a stone
among wild flowers in mid-bloom,
the mosaic in Monreale comes to mind,
of God on the seventh day
seated at the centre of his garden,
how his surroundings seemed real
yet internal to his mind,

(‘View from the Mountain: Sicily’)

Fischer’s poetry dwells upon the expansion of the moment by way of the prostheses of vision: the sound, colour, weight and brush of vision, that of the open eye and the shut one too. This expansion of the present, for which he claims he writes, is

vital as breath to an empty lung,
for the garden that grows around me,
whether I’m in the city or on a mountain –

(‘Why I Write’)

A visionary journey with Luke Fischer is like sauntering through downtown gridlocks in great cities with wisteria and vines, honey bees and angophoras in hanging gardens of the mind casting inverted shadows like reflections in water in a Monet painting.

The visions in *A Personal History of Vision* provoke an organic growth of the reader’s mind. They inspire parallel journeys, like the ones Fischer himself makes in the poems. Any attempt to hoard his images for that dungeon of glossary is met with a grasp of thin air and a gasp of the critic’s exasperation. He is like his own description of the cormorant who ‘drifts, dives and comes up elsewhere’.

Debasish Lahiri
Ben Brown, Between the Kindling and the Blaze: Reflections on the Concept of Mana, with accompanying CD of selected readings (Anahera Press, 2013).

Completed under a Michael King Writers’ Centre Māori Writer’s Residency (Auckland 2011), Between the Kindling and the Blaze, subtitled Reflections on the Concept of Mana, is a collection of poems and prose poem pieces about a major concept common to all the Pacific’s Polynesian cultures. In the book, writer, poet and performer Ben Brown (Ngāti Paoa, Ngāti Mahuta) addresses the subject specifically in respect to his Māori heritage, ‘not by attempting a definition of the concept of mana, but rather in presenting a personal reflection on its myriad qualities and nuances.’

An important first feature of the book is its glossary. Aimed at those approaching Between with no in-depth knowledge of Māori culture and tradition, it lists Māori words and phrases used, with their meanings given in English. Reference to it beforehand as well as during reading will prove essential to a fuller appreciation and understanding of the actual poems and prose pieces.

For example, mana itself is described as ‘prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma’, and mana wahine as ‘the qualities of mana possessed and manifested by women, including strength, respect, leadership etc.’ Further reading on mana, however, would also be strongly recommended, with, as the author himself suggests, the concept having manifold meanings, of ‘myriad qualities and nuances.’

In Māori culture, as throughout Polynesia, mana is seen as not only applying to people, but also to places and objects, to the environment, to the inanimate as well as animate. Regarded as a supernatural force, it goes hand in hand with the tapu or atua, another elemental Polynesian concept, this time for the holy or sacred, the creator. Mana is inherited, received by a person; a person is therefore an agent of mana, never its source or maker. In mana, responsibility and stewardship come with such attributes as power and control, in respect to the tribe or community, the land and water, the natural world.

Brown first addresses mana in regard to the natural world and man’s custodianship, in an opening piece entitled ‘Preface’:

The rock is humble ... and is slowly eroded away.
The rock has memories of being a mountain.
It knows one day it may be no more than a grain of sand.

The tree stands majestic and strong, observing the passage of time.
The man with the axe who comes to the tree is humble.

The man comes ... to gather rocks and shovel sand.
The man must build a house ... he builds it of rocks and sand and timber.

---

2 ‘Woman’, Glossary.
Small birds will nest beneath the eaves and he will exalt in their singing.
Here is a place of mana. (1)

The next piece, simply entitled ‘Mana’, shows mana in regard to a person, though not without some whimsy along with the gravity:

Mana is my grandfather in his retirement
Mana is his right to deafness when the noise of meaninglessness
assails his ears and he sees fit to visit his church
of ancestors and lost lovers, whispering his kōrero4
to them amid the clamour of grandchildren and aunties.
Aunties think they run this world yet he remains remote
from their cacophony. Never mind, they mean well eh.

Mana is the man who does without saying. (2)

Between contains the dedication ‘For the whānau’. As a noun, the glossary gives whānau as traditionally meaning the immediate and extended family, though also with an added modern usage that includes those of value with no kinship ties to the speaker. Here also the glossary is of further use, in that it also includes New Zealand vernacular terms of both English or Māori origin. ‘Bro’, for example, as perhaps is widely known, means brother in the mateship sense, firm friend. ‘Chur’ on the other hand means thank you, though idiomised to the extent that it comes with an awesome or impressive connotation.

In ‘Chur bro’, as in a number of poems and pieces in the book, Brown employs the wider meaning of whānau, with simple vernacular becoming a strong statement whereby tribute is paid to a fellow Māori poet, the pre-eminent Hone Tuwhare who died in 2008 aged 86:

Anyway
What brings you down
this way bro
Muttonbirds and oysters
Maybe
Cooler women
Greyer seas
Both more enigmatic
And that’s a neat trick too man
Turning the Pākehā’s5
English into a
Reo6 all your own (12-13)

In ‘The brother come home’ things are darker. Dedicated to the Māori Rastafarian Chris Campbell who died violently in 1990, it is one of the poems also included in the CD selection.

---

5 ‘New Zealander of European descent’, Glossary.
Its reading there, masterly done through skilled caesura and full emphasis of the refrain, builds powerfully from its written form:

The brother come home from the city
He done with the concrete cold
Steel heart got him angry
All that Babylon burned him out

The brother come home from the city
Blood him a tribe for his troubles
Run with the horsemen riding hard
through his sorrows
Scorning his fate

The brother come home from the city
And home he stayed (24-25)

Brown has held a multitude of jobs in both urban and rural New Zealand. Those of barman, forklift driver, railway and construction worker would have contrasted with farm and forestry labourer, shepherd and gardener. This can be seen in two consecutive poems, ‘Hui’ at the doorway to heaven’ and ‘The Field’, with or without the connotations of mana. From ‘Hui’:

To find meagre words
in the glimmering city
Where actions speak louder
of fought and lost battles

Here sprawled unruly
These towers of inconstant dreaming
climb higgledy-piggledy higher than hope (39)

And ‘The Field’:

And given eyes I saw
a field
Laid fallow empty earth
Yet yield to me the sky
and every star therein

to feel as breath across my face
before a lover’s kiss (41)

Two final, untitled pieces appear on the back jacket. In both, the holism of the mana concept, its myriad quality and nuance once again, form a fitting closure, while at the same time revealing the nature of the book’s title. From ‘Untitled 1’:

The colour of mana is red they say, from warm sunset tones to bold, vigorous and bloody shades of power and authority.

---

7 ‘Meeting, gathering’, Glossary.
But where is the white of purity, the certainty of black, the humility of grey?
Colour then, will not suffice in the exploration of mana. (Back cover)

And ‘Untitled 2’:

Karanga mai Karanga mai
The call is great and echoing
Between the rivered hills
Between the islands and the sky
Between the daylight and the darkness
Lit with every twinkling eye
Between the kindling and the blaze. (Back cover)

Brown is also an award-winning children’s book author, having collaborated with his wife, the illustrator Helen Taylor in his 17 publications in that genre. Born in 1962 in Motueka at the very top of New Zealand’s South Island, he lives in Lyttelton on that island’s central east coast.

The poems and prose poems of *Between*, like Brown’s working life and creative output are wide-ranging. And if, as explained, mana is all things to all things, that is consistent. The book, along with its accompanying CD of selected readings, was widely and positively reviewed in Brown’s homeland. Frank and authentic, it is a collection that at the same time has a kind and generous quality with its touches of whimsy. A mana authority of its own, in fact, at a time when it is said that few poetry collections by Māori writers are making their appearance.

*Between the Kindling and the Blaze* ranges across the full spectrum of the Māori milieu, and although it stands in its own right, it does offer a bonus. Written in English per se, it nevertheless has a strong bilingual leaning in its use of Māori words, sayings and idiom. It is a book that can lead its readers into finding out more about the rich tradition and history of the Māori people as a whole.

John Miles

*The Life to Come* is the product of a ferociously intelligent, formidably ambitious, and prodigiously gifted author. It is the fifth novel by Sri-Lankan born Michelle de Kretser, although in its format of five loosely linked stories that share only a few characters in common, it strains our conventional notion of the genre. It is a work that also challenges the ability of its readers to pay proper attention. *The Life to Come* straddles space and time, consisting of recollections of the past interspersed with present experiences, and with the action playing out in one country and then another. The first and second sections of the novel take place in Sydney, the third in Paris, the fourth in Sydney, and the fifth in pre-independence Ceylon, in post-independence Sri Lanka, and back in Sydney. Much of the novel is set in Australia’s boom years of the early twenty-first century, when mining money funded the privileged lives led by the upper middle-class progressives who feature largely in its vast and varied cast of characters.

The first section, entitled ‘The Fictive Self,’ set in the late 1990s, introduces us to two individuals who will make intermittent appearances in the remaining four and provide a thread of continuity. By a stroke of luck, family connections and wealth have led to George Mayhew’s being able to inhabit a spacious house in a desirable neighbourhood of Sydney where he can fulfil his dream of writing a novel while teaching a few university classes. A young, enthusiastic girl named Pippa, one of George’s former students, is now his lodger; she will reappear in the remaining four stories. Pippa is also a would-be novelist, although George thinks his breezy, frothy and noisy housemate too childish ever to produce anything of value. He, meanwhile, labours on severe, uncomfortable works intended to reveal and dissect the world’s brutality.

The second section is devoted to an academic couple: Cassie, a white middle-class Australian, and her Sinhalese boyfriend, Ash. Their affair is strained by the opposing worldviews imparted by their different backgrounds. Cassie, raised by freethinking bohemian parents, is a credulous soul who cherishes an untested faith in kindness while Ash, the immigrant scarred by the horrors of the civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka for two and a half decades, longs to impress on his girlfriend the reality of cruelty and despair, to wipe the innocent smile from her face. Pippa appears as Cassie’s childhood friend; Cassie is one of the few people aware the aspiring novelist had changed her name when she was eighteen because nobody called Narelle could ever win the Booker Prize. We learn from Pippa about George; he is gaining fame as a novelist and his wealthy mother has bought him an expensive flat in Melbourne.

In the third section, Pippa is in Paris, researching material for a novel she will eventually publish, to mediocre reviews, as French Lessons, but the main character is Celeste, a Frenchwoman who spent much of her childhood in Australia and, as an adult, fled what she perceived as its historical naivety and cultural vapidity to return to France. She works as a professional translator and is a private, self-possessed individual involved in a lesbian love affair. Celeste is a complex and complicated being. She conceals her sexual predilection from others; she hides the intensity of her passion from her lover. Celeste despairs at the wilful ignorance Pippa and other Australian friends exhibit as tourists in Paris, content to skate over the surface of the intricacies of French culture, confident their ignorance will inspire compassionate kindness in the French. She compares them to fortunate children who expect only to be loved.

While she has been a peripheral if important linking figure in the other sections of the novel, Pippa features as the subject of the fourth, which sees her marrying into a wealthy Australian family and achieving a measure of fame if not notoriety for a novel that features domestic violence. In this novel, her first real success, Pippa has drawn a crude caricature of a neighbour, a Sri Lankan woman named Christabel. The fifth section of the novel includes Christabel’s reminiscences of her childhood in Ceylon, her removal to Australia to share a home with a fellow exile and childhood friend named Bunty, her love for Pippa, and the agonized sense of betrayal Christabel feels when she realizes how Pippa has not only misunderstood her but also exploited their friendship by producing a distorted fictionalization of her relationship with Bunty in her novel.

The characters in *The Life to Come* are largely as ignorant of their own motives and beliefs as they are of those of others. In that sense, we are all ‘fictive selves’, unable or unwilling to probe human complexity. Well intentioned Cassie and Pippa are given to virtue signalling while equally fond of expressing their dislike of those they consider less enlightened. Their privileged lives, unchallenged by adversity, allow them this luxury. They are self-absorbed and vain, unaware they are lying to themselves and others.

But the main target of the exuberant satire that informs and enlivens the novel seems to be Australia itself. Michelle de Kretser spent her own childhood on Sri Lanka and emigrated to Australia as a teenager. She dissects the complacency of her adopted country with a kind of glee but also with the subtlety and awareness perhaps only an outsider can muster. The ‘true’ Australians like Cassie and Pippa, cocooned in innocence, preoccupied with their literary festivals and dinner parties, seem unaware of the dark events in the past which have profoundly influenced Christabel, Ash and Celeste: Sri Lanka’s complex and bloody history and the murder of Algerians in Paris in the 1960s.

Michelle de Kretser is too skilled – and compassionate – a novelist to rely on the simplification of stereotypes. Even shallow, self-serving characters like Pippa are redeemed, shown to have their own complicated backstories that inspire our pity and understanding. One theme of *The Life to Come* is the misunderstandings that arise in interactions between different cultures. Another is the human urge to tell stories that make sense of the bewildering complexity of everyday life and possibly provide reassurance when we are confronted by its mystery and terror. But it is a measure of de Kretser’s complexity, her refusal to accept easy answers that, after all, the idea of literature as consolation is rejected. *The Life to Come* concludes with Christabel discarding novels by Pippa and George Mayhew, finding they reinforce her sense of life’s awfulness rather than relieving it.

*Wendy Jones Nakanishi*

Suniti Namjoshi’s fables are lessons conveyed in poetry and fairy tales. She fills her magical world with all kinds of creatures: blue donkeys and one-eyed monkeys, glass birds and fur seals, giant lizards and strange monsters. There are human figures too: the whistling princess, Snow White and Rose Green, the Woman Who Lived on the Beach. All of them contribute to the moral and emotional lessons of *The Fabulous Feminist*.

Fables are recognised as one of the most enduring forms of folk literature. Aesop told fables that are still read today, as did Jean de La Fontaine and numerous Indian and Oriental storytellers. Think of ‘The Hare and the Tortoise’, ‘The Goose that laid the Golden Eggs’, ‘The Boy who cried Wolf’. These ‘stories with a moral’ still resonate; Namjoshi’s success lies in recreating and repurposing them as *feminist* fables, life lessons for girls and women:

> The Incredible Woman raged through the skies, lassoed a planet, set it in orbit, rescued a starship, flattened a mountain, straightened a building, smiled at a child, caught a few thieves all in one morning, and then, took a little time off to visit her psychiatrist, since she is at heart a really womanly woman and all she wants is a normal life (18).

Suniti Namjoshi was educated in India, the United States and Canada before she moved to England in the late 1970s and discovered the feminist and gay liberation movement that influenced her writing so intensively. She chose the ancient form of the fable to examine and express her feminism because

> I didn’t much like being a second class citizen ... the fable form makes it clear that [we] question what happens to anyone whenever there’s an imbalance of power ... It uses the very power of language and the literary tradition to expose what is absurd and unacceptable (2-3).

The greater part of the collected work in this reader consists of these engaging and accessible fables, supplemented by poetry and extracts from longer fictional work. As such, it is an ideal volume for browsing and dipping into rather than for reading from cover to cover. It is not a comprehensive examination of Namjoshi’s feminist ideology, but it works well as a sampler of her ideas and insights.

Her work is imaginative and inspiring; most readers are likely to come across something that will resonate with them either through form, content, character or theme. I had a fondness for the Blue Donkey who replies ‘Can’t and won’t’ when she is told to change her colour to a conservative grey. I also enjoyed the poems about Medusa and Sycorax, Snow White and Pygmalion, Caliban and Miranda. One of Namjoshi’s strengths is the breadth of her culture, her willingness to engage with a range of influences, from Greek legends to Indian myths, from European fairy tales to writers as different as Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare:

> I made them? Maiden and monster
> and then disdained them?
> Was there something in me

that fed and sustained them?
Are they mine or their own?
I dare not claim them.

(Prospero, in the sequence *Snapshots of Caliban*, 51)

This Reader was published in 2012 by Spinifex Press, an established Australian feminist publisher. Namjoshi has written another novel since then, and her considerable body of work as a creative, feminist and Indian English writer continues to attract critical acclaim. Late last year, during the student controversy around the ‘whitewashing’ of the literary syllabus at Cambridge University, Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* was cited as one of the most significant of the neglected ethnic minority texts left out of the curriculum¹.

Suniti Namjoshi is widely regarded as a major figure in transnational and post-colonial writing, and deserves to become better known in our country through this Australian imprint. Given the perception of her insights, and the power of her words, I don’t hesitate to recommend *The Fabulous Feminist*.

Jennifer Osborn


Lynette Washington’s *Plane Tree Drive* is a suburban street in the city of Adelaide. It’s a long road, lined with cream brick houses and bluestone cottages, flats and housing trust homes, vegetable patches and run-down, old sheds. And of course there are the plane trees, ‘their elaborate forked leaves … phosphorescently green in summer, camp orange in autumn and then absent in winter’ (13). In spring, South Australia’s hay-fever season, the street is littered with pollen ‘like yellow puffs of fairy floss’ (111).

Washington’s cast of characters is as varied as her landscape and as changeable as the weather: people of all ages, in all walks and stages of life. There are teenagers and brides-to-be; young mothers and divorced, middle-aged men; married couples and grandparents. We meet Mary, ‘the woman who talks to animals’ as well as Poppy, the ‘teenager with a nosy brother’ and Jennifer, married to Dan but desperately in love with Alexander. A cast of 50 or so of ‘the most important people’ (9) is named at the front of the book, a quick and useful guide to the characters whose stories are woven throughout the text of *Plane Tree Drive*.

The short stories in Lynette Washington’s captivating book form a collection of interlinked stories, joined by common themes, characters and setting. As such, they fit the genre of the short story cycle, sometimes known as a ‘novel in stories’¹ or a discontinuous narrative.² Some of the stories have already been published independently (243); they stand alone and can be read as single stories, complete in themselves. In *Plane Tree Drive*, the outcome of Washington’s work for her PhD in Creative Writing, the stories are enriched by a connected reading.

There are still ‘single story’ protagonists (such as Poppy, the teenager whose funny and delightful diary entries appear early in the text, or Hunni, ‘Department store worker, friend of hermit crabs’). But there are also characters we come to know well through a series of glimpses into their lives. Maurice, first-person narrator of ‘Secrets and Plane Trees’, reveals:

> Jacqui hated the house on Plane Tree Drive. She moved in with me because she was pregnant with Amily … She said the trees made her feel like she was in prison. She was convinced the street was shadowy, secretive. Something about the gnarled fingers of the branches especially made her skin crawl. Of course, it was nothing to do with the trees at all. (13)

By the end of the collection, Amily is a teenager, living with her mother and visiting her father at the house in Plane Tree Drive; Maurice is rebuilding his life by sharing his music with the local community, enjoying regular gigs with his Shed Dogs band.

---

¹ Benjamin Sapadin, ‘Celebrating Short Story Cycles’, *New York Public Library blog* (3 May 2016), https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/05/03/short-story-cycles


---

The protagonist whom we come to know most completely is Jennifer, who appears in a dozen or so of the stories, sometimes as the narrator. She is introduced in ‘Smoke and Broccoli’ as a woman in her thirties, struggling to come to terms with stay-at-home motherhood (with baby Ava and her husband Dan, a man who eats his dinner in front of the television and is in his pyjamas by 8 pm.) Her plans and dreams, her ‘idea of a different life’ have become ‘smoke. Gone, in the face of immediate demand’ (24). Over the course of Plane Tree Drive, it becomes clear that Jennifer’s marriage is compromised by her unrequited love for her teenage friend, Alexander: ‘security and love are not the same’ (40). Dan’s gradual awareness of the breakdown of their relationship is evident in two of the strongest stories in the collection: the subtle ‘After’, where the couple struggle to communicate at a birthday dinner in a Chinese restaurant, and ‘Compartments and Venn Diagrams’, a novel way of drawing Dan’s view of ‘the space between Ava and me’ (196).

The strengths of the collection are enhanced by this variety in narrative point of view, structure and style. There are first, second and third person narratives; past and present tense; dialogue and monologue; realistic and surrealistic stories. The structural forms are as varied as diary entries, blog posts, housing needs assessments, letters and flowcharts. One of my favourite stories, ‘Milk Cup’, is less than a page long – yet it perfectly captures a moment in the Jennifer ‘cycle’, a revealing glimpse into her relationship with her small daughter.

As the frontispiece quotation from The Great Gatsby emphasises, this is fiction about ‘the inexhaustible variety of life’. Plane Tree Drive is a fine cycle of short stories, written by a new Australian author very much in command of her creativity and craft.

Jennifer Osborn

Satendra Nandan’s *Across the Seven Seas* is a thin volume of poems containing nine poems that speak of loss, nostalgia, memory, home, longing, grief, indenture and displacement. Indenture in Fiji, known as ‘Girmit’ (a corruption of the word ‘agreement’), was abolished in the year 1917. The centenary was commemorated in 2017 in Fiji and in many other parts of the postcolonial world where the Indian diaspora is present. *Across the Seven Seas* is a Girmit Abolition Centennial Volume. The poems in the volume speak of the Girmit experience in Fiji, its presence in the lives of many who gave up their homeland and moved to Fiji, and of the abolition of indenture and of the coups that took place in Fiji, often leading to more displacement and movement.

An academic who traces his roots to India, Satendra Nandan, was also a member of the House of Representatives owing allegiance to the National Federation Party in Fiji. He later joined the Fiji Labour Party and was a minister in the government. After the coup of 1987, Nandan moved to Australia, where he now lives and teaches at the Australian National University in Canberra. He returned to Fiji in February 2005 and has, since 2006, made significant contributions to the building of a new Fiji.

Nandan belongs to the third generation of his family to have been born in Fiji. His forefathers belonged to India and Nandan’s poems in the volume under review frequently refer to India as the homeland that once was. The indenture past that was part of the lives of his forefathers colours his thinking and is evident in his poems. The coup caused him to leave Fiji, thereby causing another displacement.

The first poem in the volume, ‘Votualevu Junction’ brings in various issues that are of importance to the diaspora. The poem refers to the coup and of ‘coups within coups’ in Fiji: it talks about how for a second time he is rejected, this time by the country which has always been home for him, Fiji. The cultural bonds that his people have worked at creating in the new homeland, markers that still retain some of the cultures of India, are lost again:

> For me all stories began at my birth,  
> When dream flowed in many streams  
> The palms grew tall like my brothers:  
> Where my cut umbilical cord was buried  
> Under the mango tree with fruitful boughs  
> That I thought was my piece of earth. (14)

The coup of 1987 changed Nandan’s bonds with Fiji. He moved to Australia, to a new land and country. The angst of a new displacement is revealed in the poem:

> My mind had read, my eyes travelled,  
> Now that my bones ache, my mind roams  
> I can only imagine the pain of those men  
> Who fathered us in their storm-tossed homes. (31)
The Indian diaspora in Fiji had strong contributions to Fiji’s growth and prosperity. Nandan’s poems bring in feelings of nostalgia, anguish, assimilation and finally betrayal. It is the betrayal of values and beliefs that cause great pain, that bring back to memory all the hardships that indenture and slavery entailed. There is, at the same time, a deep sense of attachment to the country that became home to the indenture diaspora and a sense of rejection that caused him to leave. Nandan was born in Nadi, and in the poem ‘Nadi Airport,’ he speaks of war, displacement, loss, memory, death, and home.

Over landscapes we fly
But the heart remains in one spot
A country so warm and hot
A place of your first grace. (42)

Addressed to his ‘fellow Fijians’, the poem, ‘The Coup: A Day in May’, speaks of the Fiji coups of 1987. These coups came as a shock to Fiji Indians who had worked hard to assimilate in their new land and make it home. Nandan speaks of it as a betrayal – ‘Muhmeinramram, bagal me choori!’ (49)

It was a bloodless coup, they say,
In the customary Pacific way.
No stains were left on prison walls
No blots on the army fatigues
The pavements of the city were clean
There was silence in the mouth of every gun
Only masks shone, shimmered in the sun. (50)

One of the poems in the volume that speaks sensitively about the ideas of loss and mourning is ‘Antyesti Samskara.’ The poem speaks of his coming to Fiji to perform the funeral rites of his mother – ‘Of course one never returns to the same place’ (53).

The presence is your postcard of pain, loss and relics of remembrances in the attic of memory. (53)

Written in prose, ‘Antyesti Samskara’, the title meaning last rites, speaks of his leaving Fiji for Australia and returning on hearing the news of his mother’s death. The prose voices sadness and loss vividly, with a sense of great poignancy. There are lines in verse which is the poem that he reads at his mother’s funeral ceremony and then again prose as he revisits the place that was once home for him. Nostalgia and memory colour the poem that beautifully brings in the predicament of the exile. The line, ‘An unanchored soul had been finally anchored, or so we consoled ourselves,’ brings in the idea of the displaced subtly (73).

‘In the Shadows of a Tree,’ refers to the Girmit – ‘One simple, single word distorted’ (78). The displacement and sense of loss are vividly evoked in the poem ‘The Wreckage of Syria’, which refers to a ship carrying immigrants:
The Syria with 540 souls on board
Sailed from Calcutta on 13 March
By the Cape of Good Hope:
Hope was all they carried in their hearts (87)

A news report on the television about refugees dying in a ship wreck takes the poet back to another time and another ship.

Is it a story
Of yesterday’s glory
Or today’s grief? (89)

Each of the poems in the volume speak poignantly of the loss and agony of the Girmit whose longing for home remains. Many are interspersed with Hindi words, sometimes two or three words are put together with no spaces between them lending them an urgency and colloquialism. The title alludes to a popular Hindi line that refers to the land across seven seas as a utopia and hence is ironic given the fact that the land and country referred to in the poems is anything but utopian.

**Nishi Pulugurtha**