

IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

Edited by Robyn Rowland

Our first poet in dialogue is Gina Mercer. Gina has published three collections of poetry: *The Ocean in the Kitchen* (Five Islands Press, 1999); *Night Breathing* (Picaro Press, 2006); and *Handfeeding the Crocodile* (Pardalote Press, 2007). She has also published a novel, *Parachute Silk* (Spinifex Press, 2001) plus two academic books. She has taught creative writing and literature in universities and communities for over 20 years and is currently working as the editor of *Island*.

Gina's latest book, *Handfeeding the Crocodile*, is available for purchase from <http://www.pardalote.com.au/>

The Poet in Prose: on 'Voice'.

Our first extract comes from Seamus Heaney in his lecture to the Royal Society of Literature, October 1074, titled 'Feeling into words' and published in *Finders Keepers. Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (Faber and Faber, London, 2002).

"Finding a voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them; and I believe that it may not even be a metaphor, for a poetic voice is probably very intimately connected with the poet's natural voice, the voice that he hears as the ideal speaker of the lines he is making up.

How, then, do you find it? In practice, you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer's sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, 'Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way.' This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognise instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, the in-fluence."

INTIMATE IN-FLUENCES

by Gina Mercer

A yellow lamp suffuses the room. A mother and child nestle safe within the white cocoon of a mosquito net. The child is curled against her mother's thigh. The mother is reading 'The Diverting Tale of John Gilpin' by William Cowper. The child is only two years old. Cowper's comic ballad makes no sense to her. Does she even know what wine is, or a wig? Yet she loves this poem. Asks her mother to read it to her night after soothing night. The

rhythm and 'sound flows in through [her] ... ear and enters the echo chamber of [her] ... head and delights [her] ... whole nervous system'. She adds Cowper's rhythms to the knowledge of rhythms she already carries in her body: the noisy plumbing rhythms of her mother's pulse and peristalsis as the child lay nestled in the womb; the clacky rhythms of her mother's typewriter as the child plays under and around her mother's desk; the rhythms of her mother's legs and bicycle as they wheel around town, the child snug in a basket on the back. These are the rhythms of her world. These patterns of sound and energy enter the echo-chamber of her head and heart, delighting her whole nervous system.

Her mother is a busy woman. She is a woman with four children to raise and a weekly newspaper to produce. Her husband's fatal car accident has beached her on an island of gruelling deadlines and debts and no transport. She lives two miles from town. There are many miles to bike-ride and no luxuries. Yet every night she creates an oasis under the mosquito net. Every night she makes time to read her youngest child to sleep. She reads William Cowper, Ogden Nash, James Thurber. She reads into her child's skin her love of words. She reads her love into the child's sleep-drifting breath. The child learns her mother's love through the rhythmic words, through her mother's love of words. A few years on, the child's most treasured birthday present is a dictionary all of her very own.

Heaney speaks of the poet finding voice through the reading of other poets: I know that delicious satisfaction when I read a poem and feel its 'rightness'. It may not speak 'of aspects of myself and my experience' as Heaney argues. Rather, it may teach me of another's world, give me insight into unfamiliar experience; that is part of its joy. When I feel that satisfaction, I know the poem to be 'a true sounding' (Heaney's term) of that poet's world. Heaney, elsewhere in this lecture makes an interesting distinction between craft and technique. He uses the image of a person drawing water from a well. A poet who has craft can learn how to wind 'the bucket halfway down the shaft and wind... up a taking of air'. It is not until 'you have dipped into the waters Broken the skin on the pool of yourself' that you have acquired technique, says Heaney [p 19]. I would add that until you have made that kind of 'true sounding' and 'broken that skin' you will also struggle to find voice.

Voice is a slippery concept. In certain poets, no matter how diverse their chosen styles or topics, a certain something thrums through each poem as a constant. It is a marker as distinctive as an actual voice. Heaney suggests that 'a poetic voice is probably very intimately connected with the poet's natural voice.' I want to delete his 'probably' and say an emphatic 'yes' to this proposition. Voice is born of the body, borne by the body, manifested through the body until it is heard by a receiving body – and there it resonates with its own distinctive vibrations across the cilia of the receptive listener.

The child with the very busy mother was sent to the neighbour's to play – often. He was a lonely old man and needed company – often. The mother was busy and needed interruption-free hours – often. The old man's desires were as extreme and relentless as the mother's schedules. He took the child under his house and committed unspeakable acts upon her wordless body – often.

She treasured her dictionary and all its certain, well-defined words. She escaped from her body and his pernicious rhythms by running away into her head. There she could pretend she didn't have a body. She became an academic. People in academia like to pretend they don't have a body. It is de rigueur. She fitted in nicely in that disembodied world of the mind. Then she became a poet and this mutilating disavowal no longer felt right.

Heaney quotes Robert Frost: 'A poem begins as a lump in the throat It finds the thought and the thought finds the words'. Isabel Allende says: 'Often...when I write the first sentence, I don't know what I'm going to write about because it has not made the trip from the belly to the mind'.

Many writers still prefer to use pen and paper when writing their first draft because, as Sue Woolfe writes, it is 'more closely connected to the beating of my heart than any other way'.

So the writing originates, for these writers, in the throat, the belly, the heart. Are they speaking metaphorically only? Remember Heaney, speaking about a poet's voice: 'I believe it may not even be a metaphor'?

Antonio Damasio, Professor of Neurology at Iowa University, speaks of a brain which is 'body-minded': 'the mind arises from or in a brain situated within a body-proper with which it interacts ... due to the mediation of the brain, the mind is grounded in the body-proper'. That sounds so apparently simple: our minds are part of our bodies. Of course. Damasio goes further though, suggesting that we have thought-centres spread throughout our bodies. Before reading any neuroscience, it is clear that many poets intuitively feel as if they write from various sites in their bodies.

Why then does so much poetry feel so disembodied? Why does it speak with desiccated voice? As Woolfe writes: 'The body is so lonely. But we forget it, we don't hear its cries'. Why do so many poets write as if they have forgotten or are ashamed of their bodies?

Did you know that when you view an object which is distasteful to you the shape of your pupil changes compared to when you view an object which pleases you aesthetically? Our responses to poetry are bodily as well as intellectual as you will know if you've been to a successful poetry reading. Your heart rate changes, your eyes leak, your neck horripilates, your chest contracts, your blood flow slows – all within fifteen minutes – all because of a few potent words strung together by a poet. This will only happen if they

have been shameless, have eschewed the mutilating disavowal of the 'talking head' performance, have dared to break open the pool of the self and are singing deep from the well-shaft. It takes courage and practice and strength to sing from these places of vulnerable skin and tender joints. It is worth following Heaney's advice however, in order to find that potent voice that is yours alone. That voice which will brush the cilia of another and through each word's caress on those tiny hairs, through each thrum of vibration on the drum skin of your listener's ears, can bring about the delight of change in their 'whole nervous system'.

I long to hear more shameless poems. Poems with lusty voices. Poems which take soundings from all the thought-centres we carry throughout our bodies. Poems which remember the rhythms of a noisy womb; the clatter of the fork in the mixing bowl as you make breakfast; the sounds you and your lover toss into the velvet dark; the satisfied burps of your child as you pat her back at midnight; all the fricatives and spiky consonants of your last verbal clash; all the chaotic or smooth sounds and rhythms and smells and sights of your daily life. Heaney writes of one of his first successful poems 'Digging': 'I felt I had done more than make an arrangement of words: I felt I had let down a shaft into real life'. Yes, and again yes. Let there be fewer mere clever 'arrangements of words'. Let there be more shafts. Shafts of lust and tranquillity, revenge and hope.

It is no easy thing to 'find a voice' as a poet. But looking for it solely in the constrained and disembodied world of theory and criticism is unlikely to bring you to voice, or to bring voice to you. Perhaps we should try shimmying down Heaney's deep well-shaft to break 'the skin on the pool of self'? Or we could try standing in that cool well shaft to hear how our voices might ring out, energised with all the rhythms our bodies know and have known since our first bedding in loud and nurturing flesh. Then, and perhaps only then, will we find voice, make our language dance and burst until it 'gives [our readers] ... aural gooseflesh.' [Heaney, p 18]

NOTES:

Allende, Isabel. *Writers Dreaming*. N Epel (ed.). Bookman Press (1993), p 6.

Woolfe, Sue. *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady*. UWA Press (2007), p 3.

Damasio, Antonio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*. Harcourt (2003), p 206.

Woolfe, Sue. *Ibid*, p 48.