

READING AND RELISHING

Edited by Robyn Rowland

Like many poets, women poets in particular, I find the time to read poetry is constantly squeezed between snatched moments to write and the full tide of domesticity. It's interesting though, to have a look inside the reading lives of poets. Often, they give us directions in which our own reading might follow; often they introduce us to books and authors never discovered unless by word-of-mouth: our own e-mag. This section is a brief musing by a poet each month on their own reading of poetry, particularly the work they are enjoying. Hopefully, you'll want to go out and buy some more poetry.

Sandra Thibodeaux

Dr Sandra Thibodeaux is the Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Writers' Centre. She has published two books of poetry (the latest being *Delivery*, presspress) and written 12 plays that have been produced at festivals in Darwin, Bali, Sydney and Melbourne, and broadcast on Radio National. Sandra is a member of the National Liaison Committee of the APC.

I'm currently in a Gail Jones phase. Having recently read *Dreams of Speaking* (in anticipation of Gail's visit to our festival, WordStorm), I turned to *Sixty Lights*, a novel about a woman's search for the love and the light of human existence. I'm up to the last chapter and must confess it's not exactly my cup of tea, despite Gail's very beautiful – and poetic – writing. It's an historical work, and I feel slightly alienated from the characters in their whalebone corsets. This was certainly not the case in *Dreams of Speaking* where the modern, and very cross-border, context made the story feel more real to me. I loved this novel, and I particularly liked its treatment of death and grief. Of course, my personal preference has influenced my reading of Gail's works, and there would be many people who would disagree with me on *Sixty Lights*.

As many of you would know, Gail Jones is a stunning writer who pays great attention to detail. I just love her descriptions – such as this one in *Sixty Lights* about the London Underground workers: 'Once she had stumbled upon workers emerging from a gape in the street; they had skin made of earth and looked like a fraternity of the underworld. She saw them blink and look lost. They wiped their faces with rags. Bog men. Lazarus men. Creatures of sub-London dark' [1].

As mentioned above, death and grief feature strongly in Gail's novels. In *Sixty Lights*, the protagonist, Lucy, speaks of an early death as an 'abbreviation' of

life that does not at all diminish that life (p.189), and as she commences the final stages of dying, Lucy is described as 'entering her own eclipse' (p. 237). Gail's understanding of death and grief is both profound and delicate; her words are capable of great healing and illumination.

On the poetry shelves, I'm enjoying two collections by another of our WordStorm guests, Yong Shu Hoong from Singapore. Shu's poetry is very precise, and he has such a dry wit, he'd pass as an Australian. I first met him in Ubud where he gave me his collection, *Do-while*. Now I'm enjoying *Isaac* and *Frottage*. Isaac sees the poet travel to the USA, where he ponders the differences between cultures there and his own:

... breaking the pus off secret wounds
to find butt-naked the cultures
of my constipated tribe. [2]

I particularly love Shu's reflections on Australia, our various cultural practices, our icons. The Ned Kelly poems – *Conversations with an Outlaw* – are always a crowd favourite with Australian audiences. Here is one of the poems:

III

Tell me a good secret, Ned

Tell me, when will Australia become truly Asian?

Tell me what you think of the Free Trade Agreement
and the philosophy of Pauline Hanson.

Have you ever come across komodo dragons
while trekking the outback?

Tell me, has Australia become American?

Would you fight someone else's war in Iraq
just as you had fought against oppression
in your own backyard?

Have you made up your mind

Or are you about to brandish a protest banner
on a corner of Queen Street Mall?

Tell me if you'd always wanted a real bulletproof vest. [3]

Part of the joy of my job at the Northern Territory Writers' Centre is that I get to read a lot of new work from south-east Asian writers. Shu is just one such writer. I could also mention his fellow Singaporean Alvin Pang or cite the heartbreaking poetry of Indonesia's Goenawan Mohamad. Sandra Tillman from Timor-Leste recently knocked us off our chairs at WordStorm, and the short stories of Indonesia's Ayu Utami, Nukila Amal and Linda Christanty are layered works of history, individual narrative and political criticism. It's not easy for

Australians to access the contemporary literature of our nearest neighbours – and this is surely an embarrassment for our country and its literary establishments. I'll therefore conclude this article by mentioning our latest anthology, *TERRA*, that showcases some of this south-east Asian writing, as well as some stunning poetry and short stories by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Published by the NT Writers' Centre in conjunction with KataKita, it's available from the NT Writers' Centre and all good bookstores!

REFERENCES

- [1] Jones, G, 2005, *Sixty Lights*, Vintage (Random House), London, p.189.
- [2] Yong, S.H., 2007, *Beatific Musings*, *Isaac*, Firstfruits Publications, Singapore.
- [3] Yong, S.H., 2005, *Conversations with an Outlaw*, Frottage, Firstfruits Publications, Singapore.