

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!

This month's contribution comes from **Mike Ladd**. From South Australia, **Mike** has published six books of poetry. He is currently producer and presenter of ABC Radio National's Saturday afternoon poetry program *Poetica*. His forthcoming book with Five Islands Press (2007) is *Transit*. He has published widely in Australia and collaborated extensively with musicians, including the groups The Drum Poets and newaural net. In 2005 and 2006, he visited Papua New Guinea, as part of an Ausaid project, working with local writers, actors and directors to produce a weekly radio drama serial in Tok Pisin. In 2006 he was awarded the Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship at the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature and was a guest of Venezuela's World Poetry Festival in Caracas.

Mike Ladd:

I read a large amount of new poetry in the course of my work for *Poetica* on ABC Radio National, but here I thought I'd talk about just a few books that I've been impressed with recently, and on top of that, have found useful in giving me impetus or insight for my own writing.

One of those books is Sam Hamill's *Almost Paradise: Selected Poems and Translations*, brought out by Shambhala in 2005. I met Sam in Caracas last year when we were both guests of Venezuela's World Poetry Festival. He has had an extraordinary life. Sam was born in 1942 or 1943 to unknown parents. His birth father gave him up for adoption when he was about three years old; and he was raised by Sam and Freeda Hamill, on a farm in Utah. When he was fifteen years old, he ran away from the farm and became a street kid and drug addict in San Francisco. But then he connected with the Beat Poetry movement and became a disciple of Kenneth Rexroth who influenced him to look at ancient Chinese and Japanese verse.

He joined the Marine corps, mainly so he could be stationed in Japan, but became a conscientious objector and Zen Buddhist practitioner, so had to get

himself discharged. Sam has been a translator of classical poetry from the Chinese and Japanese and the Greek Anthology, the co-creator and editor of Copper Canyon Press, and the founder of Poets Against War. As well as publishing books of translations and essays, Sam has written fourteen volumes of his own poetry.

What I like about his work is that it has so much life behind it. He uses fairly simple language but gets plenty of depth with it. It could be the influence of the ancient Chinese and Japanese tradition, and the Greek Anthology as well. A love of that poetry is something we have in common. Sam is also capable of writing strongly political poems that are also strong poems per se. Whether they are against the Bush regime, or against war in general, or the obscene disparities in the distribution of wealth in this world, they are well-crafted, with strong imagery, satisfying to the senses, and memorable.

I'm also re-reading Sam Hamill's translation of the classic 17th century Japanese text *Narrow Road to the Interior* by Matsuo Basho. It's a haibun, which is a poet's travel diary in prose and haiku. I'm using it as a model for my current writing project. I'm walking the Torrens River in South Australia from its source to the sea and writing about it as I go. It's being serialised in *The Adelaide Review* and hopefully will become a book when it's finished. I say "re-reading" because I think it's worth pointing out that it's good to know some books well, rather than just browsing thousands of them. It's about taking certain books to heart, and in this case, using one as a guide to doing something in the world.

I've also been re-reading a first book, *Path of Ghosts* by Jemal Sharah. It's one of those first books that seems to have come out fully-formed, polished, and with a maturity that makes its author seem like a veteran. That's unusual, but I can think of some recent others such as Aidan Coleman's *Avenues and Runways* and Penelope Layland's *Suburban Anatomy*. *Path of Ghosts* is not a new book. It was published by William Heinemann Australia in 1994. The poems were all written before Jemal was twenty five. They are remarkable, tightly constructed, often formal in metre and rhyme, but emotional too. At the time, Les Murray said on the back cover blurb that Jemal Sharah was "the most gifted young poet in Australia, and the one most likely to have a career of major achievement." That hasn't happened so far - *Path of Ghosts* remains her only slim volume, and she has instead chosen a career in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but that doesn't matter; this book still stands up as a wonderful achievement. Having mentioned formal verse, it's interesting to me to look at its rise at the moment in Australia. Geoff Page, Jordie Albiston, Tom Shapcott and many others are employing traditional forms in new work - and it's not out of a conservative political instinct, rather a sense of challenge and adventure. I'm dabbling in it as well in my new book *Transit*.

WORKS REFERENCED

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