

In Dialogue with Poetry

Edited by Robyn Rowland

I find it exciting to read prose written by poets exploring their own processes in poetry, the value and purpose of poetry, its meaning – what poetry is to them, and sometimes what it should be to others! Often they creatively engage with issues of craft; sometimes with the mystery of the moments of creation. Understanding their own and the work of others is part of their exploration of the poetic life.

I am often struck by their sense of surety in this, a kind of fearlessness of opinion. In the established poets, there seems no anxiety about ‘fitting in’ or being in ‘fashion’. They don’t see this positioning of their opinion as something they need to be careful with. Debate is seen as important, useful and engaging.

Zest is keen to bring its members some of that lively engagement with poetry from our own Australian poets. Each month we’ll be selecting a prose quotation from a poet and asking one of our own poets to respond. The selection will be eclectic and cover a range of approaches to poetry.

The brief is as follows:

‘Please respond to the quotation in your own way. You are invited to agree or disagree with it, interpret it and explore. It can be an agreement/extension or a disagreement/argument or both. It can relate to your own work and processes or the work of others you admire in what they have said on poetry. But I don’t want an essay on others, rather on what YOU think and believe about poetry in relation to the issues raised in the quotation given.’

The Poet: Anthony Lawrence

Anthony Lawrence has published eleven books of poems, the most recent being *Bark*, UQP, 2007. A novel, *In The Half Light*, was published by Picador in Australia and the UK in 2000. Anthony has received a number of Literature Board Grants and has won numerous awards for his poetry, including the inaugural Judith Wright Calanthe Award (Queensland Premier's Poetry Prize), the Harri Jones Memorial Award, the Gwen Harwood Memorial Prize (in 1996), and the Newcastle Poetry Prize in 1997. He has also won the Claudio Alcorso Award, the Josephine Ulrick National Poetry Prize, the inaugural Judith Wright Calanthe

Award, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. Anthony currently lives in Queensland where he teaches.

Poet in Prose: Robert Haas.

Images haunt. There is a whole mythology built on this fact: Cézanne painting till his eyes bled, Wordsworth wandering the Lake Country hills in an impassioned daze. Blake describes it very well, and so did the colleague of Tu Fu who said to him, "It is like being alive twice." Images are not quite ideas, they are stiller than that, with less implication outside themselves.. And they are not myth, they do not have explanatory power; they are nearer to pure story. Nor are they always metaphors; they do not say this is that, they say this is. In the nineteenth century one would have said that what compelled us about them was a sense of the eternal. And it is something like that, some feeling in the arrest of the image that what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying that sensation is a feeling of release from the self. Antonio Machado wrote, "hoy es siempre todavía." Yet today is always. And Czeslaw Milosz, "Tylko trwa wieczna chwila." Only the moment is eternal.

For me, at least, there is a delicate balance in this matter.

Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures. Prose on Poetry.* Harper Collins 1984.

Anthony Lawrence's response: The spellmakers

Robert Hass is one of the finest imagists in contemporary American poetry. He is, with Galway Kinnell, Paul Muldoon and Meghan O'Rourke, a favourite. I return to his books and essays when I need to be lifted out of the ordinary. He is a quiet, insistent visionary.

Images do haunt. The best of them take up residence behind the twin watchtowers of our eyes. We can't rely on them for all a new poem brings to the blood and the table but they are essential to its making. They distort and lose lustre if our dependence on them hardens into expectation or complacency. They are of themselves and the elements that conspire to release them. We do not own them. They come and go without heraldry. Locating them is the difficult part. We have to be ready. The timing needs to be right. All things in place. I'm aware of an all-senses-all-

body writing time before it arrives. A contained fire sparks away at the base of my spine. Being in love, which I am, brings a similar magic to the day. Leisurely, considered thinking about the woman I love or a quick thought of her while lowering the sidestand of my motorbike – images of her eyes, her hair, the way her throat moves when she speaks – they are always different, they change me in small, profound ways, and they are changed by my focus, not dependency, on them. They are infinitely various.

Often a poem will begin to form in ways that seem to have little to do with any form of art. Small changes take place, both in the body and mind. They mostly surface as a heightening of the senses, especially sight and sound, where the light seems sharper, and more of the environment is taken in, and considered, and its soundtrack is recorded faithfully. This doesn't happen often, but when it does, the need to write poetry closes in, and I'll start by making notes, with no idea of what they mean, or where they might lead to, or when the process will suspend itself.

About ten years ago, the poet John Forbes told me that I'm too prolific, and then he leaned sideways, hooking his thumb into the change pocket of his jeans – his signature stance, and said "But I mean it as a black compliment".

Early on, I was publishing a book a year, then every two years. These days there might be three or four years between books. When I was prolific, it was because, when the spell of having to write came over me, I'd do nothing else for weeks or sometimes months, sleeping and eating very little, and in those days drinking far too much. Hand-written notes would line the floors and tables. Working word by word, line by line, I'd obsessively craft and follow every lead, with intuition and belief as my compass. By the time the spell had left me, I'd have finished a book of poems, and then it was over, and it was back to what I could make of an ordered, level kind of life. The bills were paid. I ate and slept and hit the bottle less. Until the next time. This kind of behaviour is very good for writing poetry, but it's hell on your health and relationships.

Some might call these changes chemical, some the natural, fluctuating rhythms of a life hotwired to receive and record the marvellous and the mundane. I call them a mixed blessing, and

beyond definitions and descriptions of practical matters, they are almost out of reach, and they resist naming.

When Sylvia Plath walked out, in winter, into the woods and saw a black rook overhead, on a branch, preening itself as the raindrops fell, she understood and most likely anticipated – if not the presence, then the approach and influence of magic. It's not that both she and Ted Hughes had experimented with the Tarot and a Ouija board – tracking the other side, or simply having fun harvesting restlessness and trouble from the abyss – Sylvia Plath lived her poetry, and as a consequence, she was constantly hunting the image or voice that would lay her open to the possibilities of writing a successful poem. Here is "Black Rook in Rainy Weather":

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Lean incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then --
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

The angel flaring at her elbow may be inspiration, divine intervention, depression or all three. There is a long essay marking time at the borders of this wonderful poem, as it speaks so eloquently about craft, exterior forces, and the underpinnings of elation and despair.

Tu Fu's colleague said: It is like being alive twice. That is so wonderful. Indelible, arresting, haunting images give us a duality of both realism and magic that is rare and hard-won. I'd like to align the power and mystery of 'seeing' of the haunting image, with magic.

It would be unwise to declare poetry as a form of magic, and then leave it at that. It's well documented that Yeats' occultism freed him from having to stand at the switching yards between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, between what the Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson calls the Prothelics & Catestants. The poet Robert Duncan, who was adopted on the basis of his astrological chart, used ritual and what he termed "manipulative magic" in his symbol-riddled poems. James Dickey, writing in his confrontational book of essays and reviews *Babel to Byzantium*, wrote that 'Duncan has the old pagan sense of the poem as a divine form of speech which works intimately with the animism of nature, and the sacramental in experience.' Returning to Ted Hughes, his study and knowledge of the Kabbalah was a profound influence on his work. He believed in poetry as a vehicle for undertaking a journey through the inner and outer

worlds, using the healing energies he found there, in his work and life.

It's of great interest to study the various techniques and personal investigations of poets whose work has filtered down the years to influence one's own writing, and yet I can only speak from my own experience of the writing and reading of poetry, which are inseparable. In so doing, I'll attempt to unravel and expose some of the secrets of my magic trade.

An occult science? Well, given that poetry and memory, when combined, become shape-changers and set designers – language plus memory plus altered perception equals science. The occult? That word can mean anything from what's beyond human understanding to all kinds of phenomena, celestial or earthed – so then yes, poetry is an occult science. Though I like to think of it as magic. It's illusory and very hard to learn. Its secrets can only be unlocked after years of serious practice, and even then you might not be able to name them: you know that they work, you know that sometimes a poem has reached out beyond your making and had some influence on a reader. That's what we hope for as writers, after all. You can tell when a poem won't make it beyond the first or second draft. There will be no defining reasons why the poem's been cast aside. It looks fine. The images and line-breaks and ideas are sound, it's not sentimental, cliché has been put to the sword... and yet it's dead. No resurrecting it. You simply know. It's in the sound of it. It's in the deep recesses of your dreaming and waking brain, and in the end, magic had not entered fully into the poem's early stages. The page might have been blackened, but not by a spell.

All my writing life (poetry found me at around nine or ten, and my first poem was published, at eighteen) I've been aware that something strange and mesmerizing happens, whenever I read or listen to poetry whose best images unlock the serious head and throw bucketfuls of stars around. When I find an image or when an image I love locates me, it's mostly when I'm writing in longhand – it's part of a tactile ritual that seems to turn on the landing lights, and if I'm lucky, amazing images come to ground. Something comes undone inside me. It's not as dramatic as Kafka's frozen sea being axed, but it's liberating, and damning. As a poet I am constantly remaking and reinventing what's always been in plain view. This is not my main preoccupation, but it's a crucial one. An afternoon walk might take in the following: a visit to the yak and her calf that live near us on a few

acres; watching a blue-breasted robin lead the way from post to post under a long line of wind-breaking pines; disturbing a flock of zebra finches at a roadside puddle. Depending on my receptivity to change, or indeed my desire and need to make something from what I've seen, I'll either connect with these things, acknowledge their singularity and beauty, and move on, or I'll be off into the makings of a new poem, long before we get home. It won't be about a yak and her calf, a robin under pines, or finches exploding from a puddle. They might appear in the poem, but I've long understood that subject-driven poems are mostly cursed by their own linear, narrow design and margins. It will be my receptivity to what these things suggest that's important. For most of a year, I find it hard to compose a shopping list, so any moments that might lead me into poetry, into that initial, intense connection with mystery and its concomitant magic are rare. In fact, over the years, I've dreaded their arrival. There have been times when, psychologically, I've been pacing on a very thin pane of ice, and having to write was the last thing I needed or wanted. There was no choice, however, and so I went, unprepared as always, into the fray where the failing spirit meets the sublime, and the spellmaking begins.

Writing free verse, where stories are mapped out painstakingly using whatever lyrical gifts I have at my disposal, along with unexpected connections and departures from a central theme, if there is one, I'm acutely aware of the poem as its own conductor and earth wire, and I follow its swinging lantern through the fog. At some stage, being under a spell, and being instructed and guided by mystery comes to an end, and full consciousness takes over. It's at this point I turn to a cold, clinical editorial eye, switched to x-ray mode. The aim, at least in the late to final editing stages, is to make the poem someone else's - to read it as if I were in a bookshop or workshop - this detachment sets the poem free and releases me from its orbit. It's often here that the true nature and worth of an image comes to light. It can be liberating and very odd to find that after many hours of working closely with and on a poem, an image will reveal itself fully for the first time. But gravity is a powerful force, and I have to resist the urge to return to it too soon. I like sending almost-finished-poems into exile, where they remain, in the dark of a drawer or box for days, or weeks, until I can't stand it anymore, and I bring it out into the light, and get down to work again.

The same process applies to writing formal verse, but there's a big difference: I'm more conscious, my head and body, when

they do break through the surface tension of the poem, rise and fall, never going too deep. I'm more in control, if you like. Writing a sonnet, a villanelle, pantoum or sestina – the rules of engagement are clear, and to honour the poem, they need to be adhered to fiercely. Once the largely mathematical framework is in place, you can be as free and wild as you like, taking risks with language, ideas, images. I find, that because I'm so vigilant when working with these forms, I'm there, attuned to the writing process, my eyes on the page, calculating, adjusting, reworking. Sestinas are a good example. I can't relax my grip. They torment me. With their curious, odd-but-delightful-sounding force-fed repetitive word-endings, they are a curse and a special challenge. Too many is bad for the central nervous system. One or two every ten years sounds just about right! With the sestina and other formal styles, it can feel like a scientific procedure if you remain in your head for too long – although, despite what I've just said about the sestina, I don't love the process any less because of it. It's just different, and brings different problems to the table.

The book of poems I'm currently writing is somewhat formal in structure. It's been an extraordinary process. It's as if I'm free diving in the middle of the line, and having to come up for air to see if I'm near the end, then back down again, gathering luminous details, then coming up for air, and finding a half-rhyme or totally unexpected image perfectly in place. At the most profound level, it's as though I'm watching a slide show, projecting images that were taken using emulsion film and brought to life with light, power and the finest lens, the poems are being written frame by frame, and the rhymes, amazingly, are announcing themselves seamlessly. I sense them before a line is complete, and then they're in place. I'm more in touch, on a critical, wakeful level with this book, than with anything I've written. And it's unfolding quickly. I've written thirty poems and only two have been reworked. Of course, when the smoke clears, when I've written myself to a standstill, I'll return to the manuscript and the long process will begin. Word by word, line by line, shuffling the order of poems, trying to make sense of what I've done...

So I'm not talking about the kind of magic and visions one normally thinks of when that word is mentioned. It's about entering and exploring the unknown, and while I have no hard facts and answers to the questions these mysteries raise, I do have evidence from the scene of the line, and I've lifted the

yellow perimeter tape in the hope you've been able to step in and take a look around, and thus draw your own conclusions. I for one, have none.

A final word on rhyme. Using end-rhymes that mirror and match each other exactly is the least successful way of entering a reader's ear and imagination. When I first blackened a page, when this new book was barely the rumour of an idea, the rhymes fell into place and I wanted to know more. I followed them. Exact end-rhymes are predictable. Often, you can anticipate them. Where possible – and here I should emphasize that the choice to use couplets and rhyme was not a deliberate, conscious one – I've used half-rhyme because it's more suggestive, and opens the line and the next to a wealth of musical and visual possibilities. So, that's end-rhymes.

But what of Para rhymes that are buried within a line, and their musical counterparts might be anywhere from three to fifty lines away. These internal snares for the mind and tongue should not be visible. In fact, they're most successful only when a reader has no idea of their presence, and yet has been transported and transformed by them, during their time inside the poem. They are the flint and steel, the cogwheels, the hard-won spells of the best poetry. And it's not only readers who are moved to amazement by these half-rhymed chameleons. Often it's poets who, when working under cover of the magic their making, have no idea these words are there until much later, when reading the poem out loud in a tactile and audible search for objectivity, or after freeing a poem from its sentence in the dark – they'll hear what they've done, and then go looking for it. Magic? I think so.

There is a world of difference between the good and the very fine poem. It's important to remember our place in the scheme of things: Blake, Keats, Shakespeare, Plath, Lowell ... It's a long list. We do what we can, and if we're able to write something that someone remembers, and they are changed, in whatever way by their having engaged with that poem and the associative, attendant scenes it evokes for them, well that's what really matters, in the end. I like to think of Sylvia Plath under that tree, watching the rook. That poem means more to me than I can say here. I go back to it whenever I need reminding that the domestic is only a breath away from the miraculous.