

Recent writing

Kimberley Mann : 'Awake During Anaesthetic'

It's lunchtime, Saturday. Hobart's Salamanca market is in full swing, musicians add their rhythmic refrain to the steady ebb and flow of conversation in the street.

Overlooking the market's melee in an office housing the Tasmanian Writers' Centre, seven or eight writers are seated round a table to welcome visiting South Australian poet and novelist Kimberley Mann whose first poetry collection – *Awake During Anaesthetic* – has been released recently by her publisher, the Australian Poetry Centre. The collection's a slim and modest thing, handily pocket-sized yet managing to squeeze in close to a couple of dozen poems. 'What shall I read?' she enquires, glancing round the table. 'My poems are a bit of this and that, addressing various topics and moods,' she explains before settling into a handful of pieces which, as if to prove her point, include the enigmatically titled 'Oral sex with a chilli'. Now what was that about?

Mann's comfortable swapping poems and sharing anecdotes with others at the table, an environment most likely second nature to her given she belongs to a long-lasting Adelaide writing group comprised (among others) of Jude Aquilina, Shen, David Adès and Graham Catt. It's no surprise to learn she copes comfortably with criticism, even appreciates the odd negative response. 'Sometimes I'll take note but not act on it; other times I'll hear three or four people saying the same thing and think maybe there's something radically wrong here, which forces me to have another think'.

Love and loss, purpose and place find representation in Kim's poetry, whether in the droll eroticism – 'you slipped oyster



Kimberley Mann, reading at
Hobart's Republic Bar & Cafe

flesh down my throat / and your tongue to follow' - of 'Terimbula', the distress of personal loss - 'I am not sitting in a garden, not in a park, not by a river / not with you on the Harbour Bridge' - of 'My Live-in-mistake', or the environmental perception - '87 lost white trees in that dry river / sand ghosts / ripping soul from the bark' - of 'Inland', and 'Drought'. Not all poems hit the mark - something of the prosaic weighs upon 'My Doll' - but within the collection are some very fine pieces including 'Native Soil Under Her Nails', Mann's attempt to step inside the asylum seeker's experience. While it's a delicate business to write the political, 'Native Soil Under Her Nails' defeats the cynic by neither actively clamouring for sympathy nor seeking to persuade. In writing of a refugee lifestyle behind fences, Mann embraces politics but reaches beyond - to the personal. Her imagery of 'the sick yellow floodlight of night' highlights the artificiality of the refugee's lot, accentuates the gap between hope and brutish reality.

Native Soil Under Her Nails

*She's behind a fence now 'cos she's an 'Indian giver' a Kurdistan taker'
As she's taken in, the guard will grab her arm roughly, twist it.*

Mica's safe now, can be seen daily
Through the endless round edged squares
her little fingers clinging to the spaghetti thickness
metal, that rattles and jangles with her hope, her tiny anger.
She looks up and this is topped with the meanest kind of tinsel
sharp spikes that do not shine in the harsh light of day
or the sick yellow flood light of night.
Finished with crying, she stares out at this landscape
which could be another planet, with its strange
red rocks, dry wind and desolation
And the questions...too many for a mouth or a month.
Mica looks down, starts to pick the dirt
out from under her nails - an old habit
then stops, not because her mother's voice
still echoes in her head, but because
it is native soil under her nails - dirt from her place
where everything was dangerous, but she knew it
- gunshot and running, frantic feet slapping the dark mud

and not enough food, but she felt safer there, than she does now
There she could run, hide...go home
She remembers the comforting low light in the house
her mother stroking her head, father, muttering in soft tones
Here everything is so bright. So bright.
She had to leave her box of things behind
the special coloured leaves she collected
from the pistachio tree behind the church
the rocks her brother brought back the day he ran up the mountain.
They told her about school on the boat - what it would be like
but here the adults don't talk to them
and nobody seems to be learning much.
Maybe this is freedom - but her voice doesn't work.
It's the dust, the routine and the waiting
the not having anything to say right now
wearing the same scarf every day

It's said the author is no more to be confused with his or her poems than the actor with the part portrayed on the stage, but in Mann's case it isn't at all difficult to make a corollary between poet and artistic endeavour. In her capacity as a counsellor with a South Australian welfare agency, Mann deals daily with social justice issues. 'The money isn't the greatest but the job's good, I love it.' She happily admits to gaining as much from her professional life as from her writing; it confronts her with challenges from which she's determined not to shy away. 'What would be the point?' Listeners to Kim Mann's poetry and conversation are left with writerly impressions of a woman for whom edginess is preferable to a life lived 'safe', for whom sincerity is a natural part of the makeup. And as John Tranter says: there's nothing wrong with sincerity as long as you're not too earnest about it.¹

¹ John Tranter, interviewed by Brian Henry : 'The Argotist Online'.

Wet Ink

Wet Ink - edited by Phillip Edmonds and Dominique Wilson - is a relative newcomer to the stable of Australian literary journals, though in the sense its existence is underpinned by recent Australia Council funding (\$20,000 for the publication of four issues during 2010) it can be said to have 'arrived', sharing the stage with prodigious journals such as *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Island* and *Southerly*.

Its editors suggest the magazine carries no overt ideological agenda other than the promotion of writers to readers, a policy that invites reflection on the nature of projected audiences for small magazines. (Does there exist an 'ideal reader' as entertained by *Overland's* founding editor Stephen Murray-Smith, ie the nursing sister at Port Hedland hospital?) To its credit, *Wet Ink* escapes the restrictions of a journal's first and natural line of support - a readership



Phillip Edmond :
Adelaide Writers' Week,
March 2010

of writers - by concentrating on audience as well as acquiring local and international distribution and the odd advertising dollar. 'We needed a national distributor, and found one, and are militant in the belief that we should at least cover our production costs through advertising.'²

A four issue, \$54 annual subscription [\$48 concession, a little more for institutions] typically entitles readers (taking issue 17 as an example) to eight pieces of fiction, two non-fiction, four poems (though in the previous issue there were six), an interview, a reviews section and an editors' introductory note. It's a distinctive editorial direction to take, most journals tend to publish far more poetry than fiction. Integral to the mix are intelligently written essays (never easy to source) and in this regard Jenny Sinclair's 'The night train to Brisbane' [*Wet Ink* 17] is worth a subscription alone. It's a personal, discursive piece exploring a pivotal point in the past but - one gets the impression - requiring maturation over time to pull together.

The magazine has a strong reviews' policy, with a dozen in number in *Wet Ink* 18 (March 2010) including coverage of Kim Chen

² Phillip Edmonds, 'TEXT Journal', April 2007.

Boey's *Between Stations* and Michael Farrell's *a raiders guide*. Boey's book - a mix of memoir, essay and personal reflection in the mould of Eva Sallis, Pete Hay, Cassandra Pybus and Martin Edmond at their best - is arguably one of the finest Australian literary publications to appear in 2009, and it's pleasing to find support for the book in these pages.

Fiction editor Emmett Stinson assumes a poetry reviewing role with his appraisal of Michael Farrell's *a raider's guide*. Farrell - who probably approaches reviews of his work with dubious disregard, never knowing whether to expect confusion, criticism or acclaim - would be comfortable with this one. Farrell's poetry evokes 'strong reactions from readers who have a prescriptive notion of what a poem should be', Stinson notes, adding that while reading Farrell's poetry might be an unsettling experience for some readers, 'that is the point after all, and those who do will be rewarded by their strange beauty'.

For *Wet Ink*, the question and answer form of the literary interview is standard fare. Some interviewees here are more comfortable in front of the microphone than others: Mike Ladd in *Wet Ink 16* is breezy and opinionative in explaining how he enjoys experimentation but can't stand overly literary, deliberately obscure or snobby poetry. 'Some critics get the horrors if you're too easily understood, as though it's a crime to have a message in a poem, but I've always wanted to communicate, not hold out on people'. In *Wet Ink 14*, Mathew Condon's ruminations on the writing process are well worth a read. Condon wrote his first published novel *The Motorcycle Café* when he was twenty, scribbling away during lunch hours while performing 'dull, monotonous' work in a garage/service station. 'I think now I brought some form of colour to my life by scribbling away when I could. It was a choice and it wasn't. And it wasn't hard because I had no experience at it, no expectations, no critics, no limits to what I thought I could and couldn't do. I had complete freedom. Without even a thought of publication, I just kept writing and rewriting it until I couldn't pare it down any further.' David Malouf (*Wet Ink 17*) focusses on the conceptions of the role of the writer, the way writing 'generally sets out to take what seems familiar and make it strange, and to make it strange in such a way as to make us look at it as if for the first time. When you do that you expose contradictions we think we've resolved.' This doesn't necessarily suppose you find a

reconciliation of opposites, Malouf maintains, 'because the truth might be that those opposites are not reconcilable and the wish to reconcile them is a way of reducing experience rather than allowing it to exist in its full complexity.'

There's a tough realism to much of the magazine's short fiction. Hilaire's 'Beyond language' in issue 17 is a stylish intrigue set against a background relief of the joys and difficulties of foreign travel. In the same issue, overtones of bestiality in the opening paragraphs of Jason Gent's 'Sex in the kitchen' might deter some readers, nevertheless Gent has much to offer. His story focusses on a young worker's first day's employment as a kitchen hand; interactions with fellow workers are alternatively casual, intimate, intense. Peter W. Bishop's 'Lukey' (also in issue 17) is a strong, individualistic piece but his bio's just as original: the "W" in his name is employed to distinguish himself 'from the famous man who runs Varuna and whose errant emails are much more interesting.' And Randall Longmire's 'A mob of recalcitrant mountain-men looking for a horse' (*Wet Ink* 17) plays cleverly on Paterson's 'The Man from Snowy River'.

'What's it worth?'

'A thousand pound,' I said, and the excitement began to build. I watched the unruly mob for signs of trouble. There was no time to waste. This poem had to move along.

An old man was among the crowd with **hair as white as snow**. It had to be Harrison because there were no other white-haired old men around. While casting him would be easy, he wasn't prominent until stanza four...

Publishing a literary journal isn't all beer and skittles, one needs to navigate the inevitable criticisms of style and aesthetics. One reader of *Wet Ink* mentions being distracted by the proliferation of line drawings supporting the writing, another states a preference for the inclusion of more poetry. Perhaps in the final analysis this comes down to no more than diversity of taste. 'And vive la diversification I say', (to quote Philip Mead, commenting on aesthetic differences between Australian literary magazines).³ 'It's postmodern, there's no centre, anywhere's a somewhere....' That *Wet Ink's* heart's in the

³ Philip Mead, 'Magazine Aesthetics', *Famous Reporter* 16, Dec 1997, pg 13.

right place is no better exemplified than by its reviewing policy. The inclusion of reviews isn't a necessity for a literary journal; *Meanjin* survives without them, preferring to apportion extra space to primary creative material. And reviewing is subjective: some efforts succeed better than others, and in this regard *Wet Ink* is no exception. But who could not harbour a soft spot for a publishing outlet providing such generous exposure for new Australian writing?

Andrew Hardy & Chris Rattray, 'Far Beyond The Sun'

Many reasons compel the publication of a collection of poetry, among them acceptance by a publisher, self-publication, a competition win. *Far Beyond The Sun* owes its *raison d'être* to motives elsewhere. A dual collection comprised of the poetry of Andrew Hardy (who died in 1997, aged twenty-two) and inseparable friend Chris Rattray, *Far Beyond the Sun* is published by Andrew's father Barry. Rattray and Hardy lodged together in Launceston, composing poetry on a shared computer. With the exception of some more recent poems by Chris Rattray, the work published here serves as a time capsule for that period of their adolescent lives.

In a commentary constituting part of the collection, Carolyn Glock (Chris and Andrew's former English teacher during their final years of college), notes that in the microcosm of Andrew's poetry, in the paradox of his lightness of spirit and the darkness of his writing, lies a sadness, an unknown. 'What sort of writer and writing would we have encountered had Andrew had the opportunity to move beyond the turbulence and raging uncertainty of the adolescent and young adult? This can only be guessed at and right now we have what Andrew left us: his words.'

It's a simple matter, sadly, to portray Hardy's work as cut off in its prime and characterised by beginnings and uncertainty of expectations. But Chris Rattray's poems similarly deal with notions of promise and contingency. His poems extend from the time of his friendship with Hardy and document the teenage years when he was 'Coming to terms with shaving', lathering cream to 'look like Santa' until a face shines out 'to grow / into / a / man.' Ever perceptive, Rattray writes of 'a normal person / Trapped in a crazy world', proffered pills for what's euphemistically termed 'behavioural correction therapy'.

The pair's writing is full of contrasts, nevertheless common themes emerge. To the melancholy of Hardy's 'Early Mornings' ['And purpose seems just lost and never near'] is the riposte of Rattray's agitated 'Red Shoes in a Blue Crowd'. In addressing love lost (with his reference in the poem 'Survivor' to Christopher Marlowe's 'Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight'), Rattray echoes the thematic flights of Hardy's 'Sunflower Seeds', '27th of March 1993' and 'Efficient Combustion':

Efficient Combustion

Our lights winked out so fast,
I'd grown accustomed to your warm song.
Your dusty prints
Around my spaces.

There's no proof, no record,
You're the dream -
These fading scents of filmy presence -
All the little whirlpools when my plug is pulled.

'You swim now, on my ocular edge,
Distant with blur and
Sea salt to lash
Those horizons that we set,

It isn't hard to see,
We just -
Ran out of fuel.

What comes through strongly in this double-dip of a collection is the profound sense of a tragic loss of talent. Chris Rattray's contributions are fundamental to Hardy's memory; the presence of one complements the other. *Far Beyond the Sun* is a collection necessarily confined to modest parameters of beginnings, transitions and 'what-ifs' but breaking free to present, as Glock rightly suggests, writing 'that is startling in its honesty, refreshing in a world often tarnished with cynicism and falsity'.

Ralph Wessman publishes *famous reporter* with the support of Arts Tasmania.