

Launch Speech by *Gig Ryan*

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Petra White's poems dwell in an atmosphere of danger, of fret, of being hectically imperilled on metaphysical quests. That is, even when poems are celebrations, of love for example, they appraise the scene from a giddy precipice, such as in 'On This' - which displays an exuberance and daring in celebrating, as she writes it, 'the threat of marriage', a sort of nervy magnificent (as I described her last book *A Hunger*, 2014). That is, the poem affronts through its uneasiness, its turbulent excitement, where what threatens is what must be embraced. Other poems, such as 'The Man', ironically examine gendered positions, a poem which - strangely enough - reminds me of some of Fiona Hile's poems that also seek, and demolish, a treaty with love's contradictions of fusion and self-realisation:

The most glorious man outshines her as she cries,
absorbs her quietly at night
in his tranquil furnace.

So even in these love poems, there is always some terror of being subsumed, as women's names once were subsumed under men's in the old convention of marriage. As in Ezekiel's subjection to God's commands, such as to not mourn his wife, there is always the pit that can engulf the self, whether it be religion, sin, love, or finally, death. Life is always un-solid, molten lava, stretching and scorching out of grasp, teetering on a brink.

Reading for a Quiet Morning coils out from the shock of mortality, from its first long 39-page poem deriving from the Bible's *Book of Ezekiel*, to the second section exploring identity and morality: Anne Boleyn's execution, to Oedipus and Jocasta's guilt, as well as through elegies, love poems, and translations.

The main long poem 'How the Temple Was Built' reinterprets and updates the *Book of Ezekiel*. Ezekiel had visions of the fall of Jerusalem, and these visions led him to his life as a prophet. Now Ezekiel is most famous for being quoted in Eliot's poem of conversion to Anglicanism, 'Ash Wednesday' (completed in 1929): 'Shall these bones live?'. In Ezekiel's vision, he comes to a valley of dry bones, and God asks him 'Can these bones live?', and then God proceeds to turn the bones, that themselves represent people without hope, back into flesh and blood. In another vision, the 'closed gate' to Heaven has been interpreted to mean that Mary, mother of God, is the door to Heaven. In Petra's version, the archetypal Eve, and Esther, who she makes Ezekiel's wife, seem to represent a gate, a door, out of Heaven, and into the world, into flesh, into life. Women's roles then are seen as somewhat peripheral to the tortured masculine hierarchies of Heaven, yet these hierarchies are moot points without women. God also tests Ezekiel by suddenly killing off his loved wife, the 'delight of your eyes', as the Bible version has it. Petra then introduces Esther, or the ghost of Esther, now a star, who becomes a witness to both the creative and destructive visions, a witness to her metaphorical mother Eve who bites her way into life through the apple: 'biting through to the outside world / that exists because of her'. 'Apple' recurs a few times, as proof of boisterous life, rather than of sinful damnation: Ezekiel's 'apple younger self'; the 'love-apple' of Eve; and later in her version of Rilke: 'It's gone, the toppled head / where eyeapples ripened.'

As in the Bible version, this is a fire and brimstone tour of despair, impossible demands, iniquity, panic, with God a mad creator, whose creations defy, or fail, him. But although she borrows biblical language at times, this has travelled far from the King James version:

Job buggered off when he saw him standing
seething and seeing, mind-fucked and yellow-pale.

In this galloping tour-de-force, she examines not just the edifice of religion, that directs Ezekiel, but also art itself. That is, Ezekiel is also the artist, the maker of words to tell his vision, whose core and impetus are his vision that can only exist in the world, in words - 'this vision / that blew up his infant sight' - so before his visions and his life prophesying to the people, he was 'infant', meaning unspeaking. Words are his only means of thought, of creation, and he becomes his words; 'he is parcelled up in vision'; 'Ezekiel heard God / tapping on the rafters of the world, / the rattle of a cricket in a box.' This poem ends then with death:

It ends when Ezekiel's visions end:
He leans back into the end of vision.
The trees are the same. The sky
funnels him, a twist of cloud, into one outcome: his quiet
unassuming death, like
a sausage on a plate glistening before him...
Who heard him loudest?
Only one life, only one.

This clarifies life's brevity and urgency, but also pushes the ambiguity of 'only one' as being both his life itself, as well as there being only one who has truly heard, his lover. There is no life after his purpose, his ambition, has finished. Ezekiel has become his visions and prophecies, and does not exist without them, just as the artist is only ultimately what he/she creates.

This book ends with some versions of Rilke, and in 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', Petra interestingly changes the ending from 'You must change your life' as it's usually translated, to a more commanding, even prophetic, 'You will change your life'. As well as some echoes of Yeats, and sometimes the thoughtful detonations of Elizabeth Bishop, Petra also often chimes with Rilke, in unexpected discursive images:

The planet spins below them harmoniously as a goat
tugging at the grass, smiling with its pale lips.

Among the many images of animals and of things, there is a wonderful catalogue of creatures unleashed in creation, unleashing themselves beyond God's control, after 'planets cascaded like ash from his sleeve' (apart from Homer's Catalogue of Ships, this also reminds me of American poet Juliana Spahr's 'Gentle Now, Don't Add To Heartbreak' that celebrates creatures not yet extinct with a long list of them).

Also, perhaps from her study of German, Petra often uses compound or hyphenated words such as 'selfsoul', 'god-of-a-city': these sorts of neologisms force us to see double, to see the many in one, so to speak, as well as sometimes emphasising a cliched phrase. Many poems seem to share Rilke's belief that we confront the world, oppose it, trapped in consciousness, rather than exist more purely inside it as animals do.

the world of things stares back at him
in its godless glory

Apart from Michael Aiken's Satan Repentant, and John Kinsella's version of Dante (*Divine Comedy: Journeys Through Regional Geography*, 2008) where a burnt-out exploited Western Australia is Hell, I can't think of a contemporary Australian poet who has so thunderously confronted, yet unhinged, the beginnings of the Christian ethos, and that in itself makes this a most impressive book, also possessing what T. S. Eliot requires of poetry - genuineness.