THE AUSTRALIAN

Reviews: Stephen Edgar; Jordie Albiston; Paul Croucher; Shevaun Cooley

Detail from the cover of Homing, by Shevaun Cooley

SIMON WEST THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 6, 2018

If you were to imagine poetry in the 20th century as a re-enactment of the Trojan war (fought in the name of what? Beauty? Truth? Self-expression? Mimesis?), then the fiercest and most drawn-out battle would be that waged between free and formal verse.

Free verse won the day and the city, but Stephen Edgar is one of a few poets who, like Aeneas, stole from Troy in the hope of founding a new empire. Since the mid-1980s he has been receiving acclaim for poetry written in what loosely may be called traditional rhyme and metre. Why go to all that trouble, and what's wrong with freedom? For Dante, form mimicked the metaphysical order of the universe. Poets today are shy of metaphysics, but the desire to keep chaos at bay and order our experiences remains constant for those who, like Wordsworth, have ''felt the weight of too much liberty''. Gwen Harwood said she wrote in strict forms not because she was hostile to free verse but because it was so much harder to strike the creative tension that gives the poem its energy without the constraints of rhyme and metre.

In ***Transparencies*** (Black Pepper, 90pp, $24) Edgar has mastered a candid conversational style, transparent even. There are few rhetorical flourishes, emotional fireworks or confessionalist dramas, just a thoughtful and articulate individual reflecting on world and self.

The poems tend to a page or so in length, structured in eight or nine-line stanzas with intricate rhyme schemes that again, like the transparency, are there without drawing attention to themselves.

My own preference would be for more frequent inverted feet, or the occasional dactylic ripple disrupting the march of iambs. There is no denying, however, that form shapes rather than hinders the eloquence of Edgar's voice.

Stephen Edgar and his book, Transparencies

One sense of transparency is allowing light to shine through. Light is a major protagonist of these poems, as active as the artist in creating vision, "the light performs its spectral repertoire / from dawn all day to evening." It can be both the means of vision and a disruption: "Again, a sudden shaft, / it stabs right through the picture of the day." Similarly, perspective can be set a whirl by jumping from the everyday to interstellar space. "In which the hours are aeons and the earth / A molten palette fading to a last / Expanse of starlit vacancy as deep / And see-through as the night."

These poems chart the way "the mind / Coils in the gyre of its own consciousness", but also how that mind finds stability through art, so that the ever present light shines through their stanzas like sunlight streaming into a room.

Jordie Albiston also has felt the weight of liberty. In ***Euclid's Dog: 100 Algorithmic Poems*** (Gloria SMH Press, 113pp, $35) she has devised eight new forms that apply patterns derived from mathematics to the conception and creation of poems.

Some, such as *Pentagon,* are reminiscent of the sestina, while *Golden Mean* is close in feel to the sonnet. Others such as that based on the Fibonacci series are more unusual, though I remain puzzled how two words can be equated to numbers in generating the third and so on.

The algorithm is of course the antithesis of the poem. The language of numbers is called pure because in an equation the determined outcome must always be the same. There is no room for interpretation, or what Yeats called the excited, passionate, fantastical imagination.

Yet caught in what her blurb calls the "discordant realities of the post-truth human condition", Albiston is aware of how we hanker for pure order. "Divide the day into doable sums," she writes at one point.

Thankfully the voices of these poems speak not in numbers but in words that are fluid. Unlike the steady authoritative tone of Edgar, Albiston's voice is characterised by rhetorical fever pitch and the non sequitur:

a white car has had all its windows smashed

in it wasn't there yesterday marry

me? is written high in the sky lucky

I went out the back for a bit before

Albiston's poems do not aim to stand out of time like artifices of eternity but, rather, to dramatise our lack of control and seek mimesis of the very subjectivity of thought: "-o -mind -mind -affected / stuck -mind the step -keep your / thoughts to yourself -we admire the / spectacle of occasional ornament but / -open-open-close-close we hate how / you act like a little house." In this they remind me of Italian poet Amelia Rosselli. There is a disjunction and unpredictability that is exultant and illogical, exhilarating and troubling.

To suggest that this style is the antithesis of an algorithm is not a condemnation of the project. On the contrary, Albiston is aware of the creative stimulus that comes from working with or against a constraint. If there is redemption for our schizoid and groundless age, Albiston suggests that it is not to be found in the sterile perfection of Euclid, so much as that more poetic ideal, love: "how is it that this possible object / of thought called fondness warm affection sex- / ual passion for the sake or in the name / of you my dear may go on remain un- / exhausted or adequate or alive / develop increase in size height amount / intensity over the successive / states of the universe whose every part / or moment is before or after eve- / ry other & defined in terms of heart." Perhaps love between two people is the closest we can come to the miracle of the golden mean.

The Landing, Paul Croucher; Euclid's Dog, Jordie Albiston; Homing, Shevaun Cooley

Although ***The Landing*** (Transit Lounge, 114pp, $23.95) is Paul Croucher's first volume, it has the assuredness of coming from someone who has been writing a long time, as though he had heeded Horace's advise to keep each poem in a drawer for 10 years before publishing. WH Auden claimed an advantage of formal verse was that it freed one from the fetters of the ego. Croucher's free verse poems have been slowly pared back in the footsteps of Americans such as Robert Creeley, as he searches for an essential clarity liberated of ego and rhetoric.

The cover image of a dark iron stairwell in an abandoned building suggests grim foreboding. This belies poems which the poet Patricia Sykes aptly describes on the blurb as "lucid and spare", as here in *Rust*, quoted whole:

How to

take in

this boundlessness?

Rust

in a basin

left out

in

the rain.

Croucher, working with such short lines, has a deft touch for line breaks, and gives weight and balance to each word, as if stanzas aspired to be a collection of porcelain vases.

The subject matter of *The Landing* ranges from travel to scenes of everyday life in Melbourne. An engagement with Buddhism is prominent, particularly the way Eastern ideas are taken up in Western cultures, as in *Beginner*, quoted whole: "After five / minutes of // slow / out-breaths, the // sound of a / bird I don't // know, / like a door // opening." Being about Melbourne, football is also present: "At three-quarter / time, the // Diamond / Sutra's as // useless / as any // long-range / torp // through an / open goal."

Homing (Giramondo, 107pp, $24) is the first book of West Australian Shevaun Cooley. Two main sections are titled with the geographical co-ordinates of small islands, the first off the West Australian south coast, the second in Wales. Homing makes us think of the uncanny instinct of birds, but also our own human desire to belong in place, yet the book charts restlessness and unease rather than groundedness.

The poems are full of margins, currents and clouds: "At the foot of Bluff Knoll, a man forgets the word / for his knees. He stops, wildered. Aren't there currents / everywhere that might snag us? Those clouds." The Australian section opens

with a sequence charting a road trip. There is no sense of arrival, but isolation from community: “None of this seems / right, I want to say. But there is no one close to / offer a reply.” Home, Cooley suggests, is hard to find.

Is it still possible to feel at home, to have roots in a culture dominated by flux and heterogeneity? “Hard as an icon, the sky, / and almost as untouchable,” Cooley writes.

The melancholic tone and references to the Romanian poet Paul Celan suggest places are not sites of being but witness to our restless transits. Yet surely literature has the power to create our sense of place by telling stories, naming the world and connecting us to land. Think of TGH Strehlow describing the importance of conception sites for determining totemic spirits in Aranda cultures, and the traditional stories that associate with each of those spirits.

Poets have long drawn inspiration from dwelling in a particular place, nourished by community and connections with the natural world. Strehlow homes in on a vital aspect of the question: places have historical dimensions. Like Troy, they continue to speak old stories. They’re never just geographical co-ordinates.

I suspect Cooley is aware of this, for the poems set in Wales show more human interaction, more stories, light, and animals.

As she writes in a fine poem of encountering a weasel, “Turned away from the sea, tired of the shifting / blues. I’d like to know what else there is. Please.”

Simon West*’s most recent book of poetry is The Ladder.*

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