

Long Paddock

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Michael Brennan, *Unanimous Night*
Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008
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Alison Croggon, *Theatre*
Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008
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The two books under review are from Salt Publishing, which maintains its commitment to Australian poetry from a base in Cambridge, UK. The first thing one notices is their hardcovers and the high quality of the paper and of the graphic design. As the bestseller lists famously go untroubled by collections of poems, credit should be given to those publishers who regardless invest so much in making beautiful objects of their books. These handsome collections, and others recently published by Salt, would grace any shop window.

The second thing I noticed was the similarity of the blurbs on the two front covers. Michael Brennan, we are told, "is one of the most original voices in Australian poetry today", whereas Alison Croggon "is one of the most powerful lyric poets writing today." It is fortuitous indeed that we have both these poets publishing at the same time. One wonders who the other original and powerful poets might be, and whether they too will soon appear from Salt?

But what of the poetry itself? Michael Brennan's new book, *Unanimous Night*, is the second part of a triptych which begun with his award winning collection, *The Imageless World*. As with the first, *Unanimous Night* is comprised of poems in active correspondence with one another; images and themes are revisited throughout. There are many poems about death and loss and absence, or about how these are retained in everyday, lived experience. Part of this experience, as Brennan's poems show, is how we move, to a greater or lesser extent, beyond the signal moments of our lives, yet always carry them with us, in echoes and reflections.

The signal moment with which *Unanimous Night* most overtly concerns itself is the death of the poet's brother. In what for me is the highlight of the book, the sequence "Sky Was Sky", Brennan writes very honestly about the fact and the suffering of his and his family's loss:

I woke up but it was a dream,
my brother died years ago,
I tried to write about it
but the words never held.

I walked outside, watched the sky
as if it was a face. I saw nothing,
nothing at all but immense joy
as if the sky was an open door...

An emptiness came, the same
emptiness since he died,
since when the door opened,
since sky was sky...

My brother wasn't there,
he was far away, nowhere,
a hunger I felt all over,
all over, even outside of me.

Here we have Brennan's key themes and tropes: dreams, night, sky, emptiness, remembrance, being, time, love, language. The sequence is a triumph because the words do hold, and they hold, I think, because abstractions are kept at bay.

Likewise in the many poems entitled "Letter Home", it is the details we cling to:

November already.
Warmer months finding form,

trays of bulbs laid out, tulips, crocus,
lilies, fat and golden offerings

brushed clean of black northern earth,
names bright and strange as prayer:

Delft Blue, Jeanne d'Arc, Remembrance,
names, the ordinary mysteries

In this instance, the rather commonplace ideas behind the poem, of seasonal change and renewal, are enriched by the quality of the poem's language; there is pleasure in the sounds and rhythm, which we know from the ear and mouth. (Change and renewal feature in many other poems, for example "The Disaster of Grace", and "Rebirth".) However, there are cases in *Unanimous Night*, for example in "Twenty Studies", where the language seems a little flat, which dampens a reader's enthusiasm for the seemingly profound ideas: "She raises the dead / holds memory / like a stone // she polishes / erosion / uncovering her face." The long eponymous poem also suffers from being too one-paced, and, as with "Twenty Studies", there are too many images being forced into correspondence, which leads not to an accretion of meaning but to its dissipation.

Alison Croggon's *Theatre* is less uniform than *Unanimous Night*, more a collection of individual poems. There is a range of styles, from short lyrics to prose poems, fables, sequences, and even a humorous found poem, which must be a favourite at readings.

The book opens with "Poem for John":

You ask for a poem
and I say
I have no poem

here the sky
which embraces both of us
in this single world
is blue

and I read
that birds sing
between the bombs
in Iraq...

you are right
we need poems
as we need bread
we hunger for that blue
human milk
to nourish our largeness
to minister our pain
and our love

here is your poem

I find this poem affecting and very beautiful. The phrasing is simple and direct, the lines broken naturally, perfectly paced despite a complete lack of punctuation. It is one of those poems which appears effortless, and which strikes an instant chord. "We hunger for that blue / human milk / to nourish our largeness" is terrific, the blue human milk calling back to blue sky, to birds and bombs and the brutality of war.

Other poems in *Theatre* – "Beauty" and "All Souls Day", and to a lesser extent the long sequence "Translations from Nowhere" – share the inviting qualities of "Poem for John", but for the most part Croggon's work is dense and rather earnest. One of her big themes is identity, which we find shifting behind the "I" in which most of her poems are written. In an untitled prose poem, published in italics presumably to emphasise its importance to the collection, Croggon writes:

The poet has no identity. She is an electrical cloud she is a swarm of bees she is a kabuki scream she is a shadow on the blind the plates in a cupboard the roar of trucks on a freeway. She is the fiery neurone and the mark on a piece of paper.

"The poet has no identity" is an arresting declaration, but isn't its veracity undermined by nine lines of "she is" "she is"? Or is that the point? Anyway, the poem is overwhelmed by this rush of images, as if the poet hasn't bothered to pick and choose the best idea from which an interesting poem might have been written. "Schwittering" (possibly a reference to Kurt Schwitters?) is another poem which falls over itself to little effect.

"Poems for Television" is a spoof of the CIA's interrogation techniques. It begins with a quote from a training manual, the "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual":

"The purpose of all coercive techniques is to induce psychological regression in the subject by bringing a superior outside force to bear on his will to resist. Regression is basically a loss of autonomy."

The syntax of the poem breaks down until it becomes almost incoherent, presumably imitating the desired effects of the CIA's abhorrent coercive techniques on the unfortunate subject of its interrogation: once the subject is completely broken, s/he can be made to say anything. The stated objectives of the interrogation – disorientation, disintegration of identity, loss of autonomy – seem remarkably similar to the avowed aims of certain forms of experimental poetry. Correspondences indeed.