

Long Paddock

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Stripes and Songs

Emma Jones, *The Striped World*

London, Faber & Faber, 2009

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Sarah Holland-Batt, *Aria*

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I wish people would stop talking about a new generation of young female Australian poets. Yes, the girls are writing better than the boys, but this fact, repeated in various reviews and essays over the last few years, along with a grab-bag of names of women in their early career, probably doesn't mean much. As one of the Young Female Australian Poets myself, I wonder whether readers are leaping up from reviews, crying 'I must read some Young Female Australian Poetry!' I suspect not, and when I see the wild disparity in quality among the names that are thrown together like a generation or a movement, I'm almost glad.

Emma Jones and Sarah Holland-Batt deserve to be noticed for the quality of their writing, not their gender. Their first books announce them as two serious talents with a potential to develop into poets of consistent quality.

Emma Jones' *The Striped World* won the 2009 Forward Prize for the Best First Collection. All the poems in *The Striped World* are deeply conscious of the way perception and subjectivity alter and shape or 'stripe' our ideas of the world. 'Window' brings to mind the metaphorical multiplicity, stippling and pie of Hopkins' dappled things:

His sadness was double
it had two edges.
One looked out –
onto skylines,
and streets with ice-cream

men, and cars,
and clouds
like cut cotton.

The other stayed in
to watch
his memories unbuckle
and his hairs
repeat in the washstand.

Both were impatient.
Sometimes they'd meet
and make a window.

'Look at the world!' said the glass.
'Look at the glass!' said the world.

Tigers are a motif, and play alongside the image and idea of the title. This works best in these intriguing lines from 'Sentimental Public Man':

My barred heart

saw the striped world turn like a beast
and said 'open yourself up,
son, and spread out for loving.'
So I wore my heart on my chest,
all decorative.
And it flared like the hair of a parrot.

But the rest of the poem loses focus. The significance of the tiger is basically unclear and poems such as 'Tiger in the Menagerie' (p.4) and 'Painted Tigers' (p. 53) are too obscure, and offer insufficient reward to hold the reader's interest.

The preoccupation with consciousness and with the soul and the body is fruitful and deeply thought. I very much like the 'The Mind' (p. 14), and the swift shifts and momentary certainties of 'Conversation':

'Oh this and that. But for various reasons' –
(the season, and the change in season, the season of grief

And retrospection, the rooftop pulled from the childhood
house, and the internal doll in its stuck seat,

that is, the fictive soul in its brute cathedral, and because of memory,
maybe, and organs in niches, and the beat to things,

and the knowledge that the body is the soul and vice versa,
but that false distinctions are sometimes meaningful,

and that difference, all difference, is just distance, not a state,
not a nation, and because nothing *matters*, not really,

or everything does, I don't mind being an animal, at all . . .

There is a wonderful, provisional lightness to this dramatisation of consciousness, between the gaps of conversation, which defuses, or diffuses any portentousness in the statements. But other poems are more leaden. Often the poet frets too much over her knowledge of the soul's 'fictive' status. Multiple caveats signal that she has digested some theory, and is not naïve. 'Sonnet,' begins 'Here it is again, spring, 'the renewal'./ People have written about this before.' (p. 34). These kinds of assurances are unnecessary and weaken the poems – it's clear she's not naïve, but thoughtful and learned.

Here, and when she worries too much about perception, how it mediates any tentative ideas we have about the Real World, the poems are not bold enough. Jones' tendency to assertion sounds authoritative and this is a problem, as it can disguise places where the poet has taken easy options. 'Daphne' starts rather well, but repetitive statements, short assertive sentences, several full stops per line, start to sound a little gestural. It feels like the poet is trying to convince us too hard; there is more rhetoric than argument. She almost pulls it off, and it's frustrating when the odd thought, the uncanny:

I'm not that happy. It's not important.
And I'm not sad. It's good to be a girl,
and a tree, with the wind in it. It's good
to move in the wind, and move the wind.

ends in the conventional:

My leaves all move. They sing, and make the world.

In 'Hush', this gesturing is worse:

The city looks to the harbor,
but it doesn't want to be submerged.

It doesn't want a porpoise to fly past
the office window and its rows
of copy machines. It doesn't want,
it doesn't want. It doesn't want to think to say
'road,' 'roof,' 'parking meter,' 'bird'.

These self-conscious endings are trite, and sound like a sudden loss of confidence. We've been to those conclusions too many times before, in language too similar. This is genre poetry, and I think Jones is better than that.

The longer poems 'Zoos for the Living,' and 'Zoos for the Dead' seem to suffer a common problem in their genesis – they appear to have sprung out of the correct belief that a drowned town and the history of the Stolen Generations are good subjects for poetry. But 'good' subject matter – interesting, odd, paradoxical, emotionally and ethically engaging – does not necessarily translate into good writing. The subject is 'good' but the poems themselves feel very strained, stretching their metaphors and tending to prose in the effort of covering and explaining, whilst simultaneously mythologising the subject.

The Striped World is an ambitious book, poorly edited. Sarah Holland-Batt's *Aria* perhaps tries to do less, but is meticulously and convincingly polished. This should be surprising, when you consider that Holland-Batt's publisher is the modest UQP, and Jones' the most revered of houses: Faber.

Many, even most, good poets write bad poems and in their early career, at least, rely on an editor to help them discriminate. It's a shame, considering Jones' unusual and inventive talent, that many of these poems got through. But Emma Jones' writing persuades me that her apparently unhelpful publisher, and the potentially damaging acclaim with which her work has been received won't turn her head. I think she will be very good, and my confidence comes from poems like 'Winnowing':

It was a definite change, a migration.
It was a paring down to something lone and lashless –
autumn, a lunar season.
It moved through the traffic,
and ate early dinners in the restaurants,
and got shorter in the afternoons.
It was like someone who saw themselves
in the mirror and got sad;
who grew their hair long, then cut it off.

Sarah Holland-Batt's *Aria* won the Thomas Shapcott Prize and was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Prize. The poems in *Aria* are in conversation with an American tradition of observation and description, where the journey and the atmosphere are more important than the conclusion. Holland-Batt's ear is excellent: the line-breaks are unfailingly musical, the imagery precise and evocative. There is a wonderful quietness to the best poems. Holland-Batt has a confidence which doesn't need to attempt shock or experiment to declare the poems' intelligence. The thoughtfulness and economy of the poems mostly prevents the kind of boredom which is a hazard of observational writing. I like 'Ruined Estates' (p. 6) 'Late Aspect,' (p. 15) and 'The Idea of Mountain' (p. 52), which all dramatise an urge to escape the self, and the self's desire, in the value-free permanence of the natural world. 'The Idea of Mountain' begins:

And of that kind of permanence –
we long for it sometimes,
The obstinacy of a single stone
And its mindlessness. To be less alive
to each particular sadness. Monolithic.
Unmoved as the old man who wakes
and knows no pleasure or disgrace
can harm his tired heart any more
because he has lived, in practical terms, for *ever*.

And ends:

But I would have it still –
the aspens, the hunger, the wasps,
and this happiness, sidling slow
as a foal towards the phosphorescence of new grass:
naïve, and wedded to a predictable end.

The paradoxical permanence and transience of the natural mirrors the transience of desire and love, in 'Meditation on the Plums' and 'Letter to Robert Lowell', and 'The Art of Disappearing':

The moon that broke on the fencepost will not hold.
Desire will not hold. Memory will not hold.
The house you grew up in; its eaves; its attic will not hold.
The still lives and the Botticellis will not hold.
The white peaches in the bowl will not hold.
Something is always about to happen.
You get married, you change your name,
and the sun you wore like a scarf on your wrist has vanished.

This version of a pathetic fallacy, a mirroring between the external world and the suffering or exulting self is the most deeply explored territory of the book, and the matter of the most successful poems.

Memory, and wonder at the significance of memory, are entwined in poems which recall the fleeting, though seemingly timeless, years of childhood; the tone is not quite sentimental. 'Woodpile' and 'Atonement' have a mystery that evokes the strangeness of childhood itself, but also of the infant fears, regrets and shames that we oddly retain. In some of these poems on childhood, where the poem attempts to yoke its atmosphere to a point, extended metaphors seem a little weak and the poem becomes decorative. 'Cavendish Road,' 'Rock Roses' and 'Tracery' stretch a never very robust idea, to a slightly staid conclusion, with some good lines along the way.

Dramatic monologues, and poems on musical themes work with the 'Aria,' of the title: Holland-Batt mostly avoids the areas of triteness around the idea of poem-as-song. In the

best poems of this book, which consider the natural world, the thought seems to grow organically within the subject matter. The urgency of the poems exists within a repose, imparting a kind of gentle authority. Other poems falter where they try to step outside the self and attack a pre-existing subject, as in 'Francesca in the Second Circle', 'Un bel di, vedremo', 'Aria for a Painted Dancer' and 'Rachmaninov's Dream. Their drama seems a little forced.

I like 'Enduring Ritual', a poem which considers Orpheus, and it succeeds where the involved but cool third-person speaker prevents any false urgency:

In the end, Orpheus did not sing
for love. He sang for the instant he forgot
who he was and had been , for those few notes
shining shapelessly above the strings.

I want to say that Holland-Batt is a skillful poet, but this is said too often of poets whose work is dull. She is an interesting young poet in search of deeper subject-matter. The poems in *Aria* are mostly 'wedded to a predictable conclusion,' but they are thoughtful, evocative and subtle. They deserve to be read. I wish both poets the very best of luck.