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Mal McKimmie, *The Brokenness Sonnets I-III and Other Poems*

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I have been anticipating Mal McKimmie's *The Brokenness Sonnets I-III* since I read his first, *Poetileptic*, published by Five Islands, in 2005. The beauty and intelligence of that first book are extended in the second. McKimmie is a poet of complex metaphor, whose risky and intensely-thought abstractions are sung through the rhymes, half-rhymes, repetitions and reversals of his language. The "Brokenness" of the sonnet sequences is a slippery but important complex of ideas about illness, disability, madness and conversely, of wholeness and normality. The poems wrestle with all these categories, arguing their porousness and dramatising the violence they do when they are used on us or by us.

For me, *The Brokenness Sonnets* hinges on the remarkable long poems "The Judas Tree", "The Tao of Smoking", and "A Man". Here is the extraordinary opening of "The Judas Tree":

When the messenger came
sent by my spouse
(equal we rule &
interchangeable,

female & male, we

pillar a temple)
I left my high station
& laid down my scythe.

For a man whom I love
had fallen asleep
at the wheel of his life
& had wrapped

it around the
Tree of Suicides.

...

The Judas Tree grows
& has always grown
in the middle of
the road, just around

the next corner &
over the next hill,
unavoidable
as road, corner, hill,

as writing I AM
while writing I AM NOT,
as his hope that some
suicides are prodigals,

as his fear that he may
already be home.

Sonneteers Rilke, Berryman, Lowell, Trumbull Stickney, appear in epigraph, quotation and anecdote, but these and other predecessors are more subtly present in the diction of the poems. Shakespeare's massive intervention in the form is

inescapable, giving us not only a line-counting game, but a sense of something inherently sonnetish about paradoxes, contradictions, voltas and verbal doublings “I AM”/ “I AM NOT”. McKimmie’s language, in its love of structure and metaphor, its rhetorical repetitions and contradictions, is Shakespearian, and is sonnetish, even in the sometimes very loose forms of the other poems included here. From the opening of “Apoplectic”:

O Synchronistic Irony, Ironic
Synchronicity, my old full-circle friends,
take my hands for I am here again:
12 years on in the same Hospital . . .

McKimmie, like another Melbourne sonneteer, Jordie Albiston, is unafraid of melodrama. The poems are deeply read and self-conscious, but uncowed by the emotional and discursive censoriousness of contemporary irony, which puts words like “soul” and “heart” into compulsory scare quotes. Albiston and McKimmie, both ironically humorous, use such terms with full knowledge of their danger, seeming to argue that cultural irony is a luxury of the unsuffering; less popular among the broken.

There is a lot of poetry around in Australia at the moment that is very nice. A deeply humble, likeable protagonist experiences moments of human compassion and insight, whilst listening appropriately to the soul-enlarging grammar and syntax of the trees, river, sea and anything else handy. Perhaps there have always been readers who want to be, in the parlance of the book review and the dog-training manual, “rewarded”. In my opinion, it’s that sort of thing that gives “lyric” a bad name. The romantic sense of a poet’s heroism in the face of a philistine world has gone out of fashion in much critical theory, though it never seems to go out of fashion entirely for some poets, judging by the furiousness of the forces arrayed against it. McKimmie is aware of these currents and struggles with them, with varying outcomes. But the

confidence in poetry is notable: “Yes, I have been nostalgic since I was born,/ But it does not follow the events I remember did not happen” (“The Higher, the Fewer”).

The line between dramatising pain and complaining is a narrow one, and I imagine every person draws it in a different place. For me, Berryman never crossed over it, not just because of his humour or his use of characters but because his lyric was so inherently polyvocal and allusive in its diction, that even the narcissism of Henry was able to speak as a conduit of *weltschmerz*. McKimmie’s poems also have this polyvocal, quotational quality, even when relating what sounds autobiographical. At their best, the constant use of symbol, myth and paradox leaves an openness to identification. The poems weave a conceptual net so intricately persuasive that it is hard to find short passages which give the impression of the whole. From “A Man”:

It occurs to me that if I hate him
it may be because I believe
he’ll survive me.
For the rules our strange symbiosis
seem two & two only:

1. That which doesn’t
happen to me, happens to him.

2. That which cannot
happen to him, happens to me.

and later,

Jump & I’ll catch you, he yells.
I can’t, I cry, terrified.
Jump & I’ll catch you. So I jump.
While I am falling
I hear my own voice crying *I can’t*
& realise that
I have obeyed an echo.

It is interesting to see the way a high level of social engagement often goes hand in hand with alienation and anger. Compassion and anger, like McKimmie's Jesus and Judas, would seem to be twins, "synonym-siblings" ("Apoplectic"), not opposites. This weird dualism works terrifically well in many places in "Apoplectic," "Homunculi" and "His & Hers Homunculi". It can be very funny:

The Misanthrope's Question:

Am I an optimist or a pessimist?

Is the world half-full or half-empty of bastards?

("Homunculi")

But sometimes when the poems rage more widely against politicians, Rupert Murdoch, playstations, suburbs, magazines, young doctors, "dumbing down," and the fools apparently responsible for the death of Berryman, the humour is strained or absent. As with the poems of Les Murray, another angry outsider, when McKimmie's poems are most embattled or defensive, they become less thoughtful. The poet seems sometimes to be condemning the reader by implication as one of the "fools" and "bastards" of which the world is "half-full." Which, in all fairness, she may well be.