

# Long Paddock

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Dwelling in Multiple Possibilities: Claire Potter's *Swallow* and Cameron Lowe's *Porch Music*

It is now almost redundant to note that the past decade has been host to a particularly strong batch of debut poetry collections in this country. Much has been made about this current generation of younger Australian poets, and how and why they might be divided into particular constellations. This natural taxonomical impulse and the lively criticism that has accompanied it has also given way to a less helpful debate among some of the poets themselves in which the lyrical and the experimental modes have been defined as mutually exclusive, hostile territories; according to this factional strain of interpretation, new poets must gravitate to one pole or the other like so many metal filings.

These two fine first books—Claire Potter's *Swallow* and Cameron Lowe's *Porch Music*—show in different ways just how fallacious this supposed divide is, and deserve to be read with an attentiveness that exceeds such didacticism.

Potter's *Swallow* is significant in the context of these questions, as it explores—perhaps even as its main project—the question of poetic making and the way in which the poem may be the site for many converging texts, linguistic registers, and modes of composition. As is evinced by her nods to Duncan and Olson (in “Glass Bead Game” and “The Kinetic Swallow”, respectively), Potter shares an affinity with the Black Mountain poets—particularly with Olson's method of composition by field—and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E techniques of quotation, disruption, collage, and splicing, yet the variety of modes in her work and the inclusion of lyric poems make it difficult to read as a purely experimental enterprise.

A useful entry into Potter's work is “An Asra Bird,” one of the first poems in the book, a complex piece which calls up both Heinrich Heine's poem about the young slave who perishes

for love, and Coleridge's poem "To Asra", a love poem for Sara Hutchinson, whom he referred to by the anagram 'Asra.' Potter's poem begins:

Writing to the rock of cradles, to nicotine, and Joyce  
cider spumed across the walls  
we drank until there was no food left

The poem throws us headlong into a state of intoxication and turmoil: the identity of the poem's plural speakers is unclear, as is the setting and intrusion of Joyce; the surreal logic of "dr[inking] until there was no food left" calls up the heady longing of the speaker in Coleridge's poem, and seems to seek to replicate the sensation of obsessive desire, where the objects of the world become mere mirrors for internal states. As the poem progresses, however, it becomes clear that something more intricate is at work than mimesis:

Half-erased by the sun, a rouge scallop of wing  
flaps in a cardigan  
of vast blue sky

The heart of the poetic flees  
like an Asra bird  
who dies when it loves

When a nursery rhyme replaces  
the diction of drunken boats  
and paper billy carts

Carried by braids of shallow water  
over cobbly stones & eerie potholes  
into the rusty entrails of a stormwater drain

One of the most puzzling aspects of this poem is precisely what is meant by "the heart of the poetic." Is this an *ars poetica*, where it is poetry itself (or perhaps, with a dash of mordancy, "The Overly Poetic") that dies or drowns like Rimbaud's *bateau ivre* when it loves its subject or itself too much? Or is it the image of 'a rouge scallop of wing' that must flee and die for the poem to move on to its resting place, the 'rusty entrails' of the stormwater drain? It is impossible to parse,

but the intertextual play, resistance against resolution, and the ghostly literary echoes are characteristic of the challenges and pleasures of Potter's more difficult poems.

While *Swallow* is crammed with obsessive motifs, many of which are drawn from nature—birds, tides, bees and blossoms populate many of the poems—it would be dangerous to read any of these as symbols or subjects of the poems *per se*. Rather, they are reshuffled and transfigured in disorienting ways, so that the bees in “Bee Puppets” are simultaneously actual bees “home from their morning flight”, toy bees made from “a yellow paper cup [ and] black pipe cleaners,” and, in a final, arresting inversion, dead bees who, once fallen, are carried along like “puppets for travelling ant shows.” Similarly, the book's title, *Swallow*, often functions as a pun or carrier of doubled meaning, as in “Hollow Amid The Ferns”:

.....  
          there's a crowbar for the mudflats  
which sings better, takes  
          longer, provides less resistance  
than my hoarse swallows

Finally, in “Wishbone for Rufus”, the “Rufus” of the title, which we first read as a lover's name, is doubled upon the entry of a rufous owl, who in a gorgeous image, cries back from an “empty parliament tiled with dark green leaves.” It is in this cluster of poems that Potter's ample gifts with language play, mixed registers, pastiche and inversion are seen to their best effect.

Yet it would be untrue to say that *Swallow* is comprised solely of poems that, to borrow Helen Vendler's phrase, resist intelligence. Several luminous and fairly straightforward landscape poems are also peppered throughout: “Eventide” with its river “lipped with bright stones”, and “Night Circus” with its “knuckle trees” are cases in point. There is also a group of poems about relationships between mothers, daughters and grandmothers which appear to invite more autobiographical readings, the finest of which is the stunning prose poem “A Durable Grandmother.” Although a few of these poems do sit somewhat strangely alongside denser, more opaque poems like “La Haine des Fleurs” and “An Asra Bird”, *Swallow* is a richer collection for their inclusion, as they give a sense of Potter's range and evolving voice. While a few of the

poems overreach themselves (“Sewing an Onion” and “Three Black Oranges” in particular fail to accrete any great momentum), *Swallow* is largely assured, alert and attuned to the strange misreadings and multiplicities of language, and announces Potter as a complex and striking new voice.

Like Potter’s *Swallow*, Cameron Lowe’s quietly accomplished *Porch Music* also strikes a notable balance between experimental and lyrical impulses. Divided into two distinct thematic sections—the intimate and domestic minimalist poems of “Balloon Days” and the ekphrastic, inventive prose poems of “Corrosive Littoral”—it reveals Lowe to be at home both in minimalist lyric forms and in a looser, more surreal mode. The subject matter of *Porch Music* is familiar: it is a book about dwelling, in our bodies, in our relationships, in suburbia, in time and the seasons, domestic spaces and exteriors, yet because Lowe’s poems frequently question these moments of dwelling, the effect is unsettling; they give the effect of staring at an object so long that it becomes foreign and unfamiliar. It is no mistake that the book’s title is *Porch Music*; the porch is a kind of liminal space that is neither quite garden or house, much in the same way that Lowe’s poems take place on the fringe of experience, the very edge where one is both in the moment and observing it at once.

One important poem where these complexities of perception converge is the superb “Summer,” which I quote in full:

The smell of sausage on the wind  
from a distant backyard brings you erect  
and summer grins like a show clown  
because it knows it’s being watched.  
In your baggy shorts and T-shirt  
you could be a surfer, and you know it,  
but that was summers ago and seems now  
like a mirage, or an ad on TV,  
where wetsuits slide like quicksilver  
toward the waiting water, which viewed  
through a screen is as beautiful as a bottle  
of Coke and just as sweet. As the day’s  
heat softens into evening there’s that

sausage again, adrift on the hot breeze,  
whispering: *it's summer, it's summer.*

The process of orienting and reorienting that goes on here is characteristic of Lowe's work. The poem begins by setting the season (an important gesture that recurs throughout *Porch Music*) and lands us in a moment of utter sentiency: the drifting scent of sausage from a distant backyard. Then almost immediately there is a shift and we see not only the summer itself from an external vantage point, but the speaker himself: "In your baggy shorts and T-shirt / you could be a surfer, and you know it." Even the speaker's memory itself seems, when revisited, "like a mirage, or an ad on TV." Finally, at the poem's close, we veer gracefully back into the instant of original sensation to find "that sausage again, adrift on the hot breeze."

Occasionally, these moments of first perception are allowed to stand without adulteration, as in the intimate and finely achieved love poems "Easy" and "Solitude", but more often than not, Lowe's stance is defined by a movement between apprehension and negation, statement and self-correction. This hyper-awareness is counterposed throughout against the unknowingness of the natural world; the bats in "Evening in Transylvania" are "answerable to laws they themselves will never contemplate", just as in "Soap bark", "The bee, to be, does not need / to know." It is also often a source of humour, as in "Spoons", where the speaker notes, "...this season's about changes and small failings, in which your hair / resembles no wind-swept tree / such similes are false." Indeed, there is a wryness and exactitude about many of Lowe's best observations that recalls the seemingly offhand but deeply pointed wit of Forbes, which flashes through in "Self-Portrait" as the poet compares his hair to "the 3<sup>rd</sup> Apostle / at Port Campbell – seen / through heavy fog."

However, alongside the conscious mind and its impulse towards precision and observation is the freer, more associative imagination we see at work in the second section, "Corrosive Littoral", which focusses instead on subconscious states. Mostly comprised of prose poems responding to the surrealist paintings of James Gleeson, these poems share similar obsessions as "Balloon Days", but render them in fluid sequences which operate via a kind of dream logic. A

few lines from “Congratulations on the maintenance of an identity” will give a sense of this vastly different mode:

They see in every photograph my father’s face. I tell them: *abandon here syntax and hope*. The child smiles as the father smiles, *ipso facto*. You’re invited to this scattering of seeds, the parting of red sheets, the fiction of cohesion: from this they say I grow.

One of the impressive things about the poems in “Corrosive Littoral” is the way in which they both respond to Gleeson’s work in profound ways but also forge worlds of their own; these are not strict exercises in ekphrasis which seek to explain or describe, but rather works that inhabit Gleeson’s “inscapes” and dwell there in the associative world of the subconscious. They successfully counterbalance the lighter, more buoyant poems of “Balloon Days”, and suggest that Lowe’s, like Potter’s, is a poetic imagination capable of moving comfortably between multiple registers. *Porch Music* is an immensely graceful and assured first collection, and I look forward to reading more of Lowe’s work in the future.

Finally, I think it is worth noting another element that unites Potter’s and Lowe’s debuts: the diversity of references, quotations, and sources the poets have used as poetic impetus. Potter draws on Yeats, Ginsberg, Joni Mitchell, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lucretius, Bukowski and Mary Shelley, among others; Lowe draws on Forbes, Peter Porter, Creeley, Laurie Duggan, The Pixies and Gleeson. Whether or not this bowerbird tendency might fit the “internationalist” criterion of David McCooney’s theory of New Lyricism will likely only tell with the benefit of further output from Potter and Lowe, but for now it appears to have produced in both cases two fine debuts which transcend the reductive debate about lyricism and experimentalism and are happy to dwell in multiple possibilities.