

## ALI JANE SMITH

Corey Wakeling, *Goad Omen*

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On the cover of Corey Wakeling's first collection of poetry, *Goad Omen*, is a reproduction of artist and fellow poet Duncan Hose's, "Geronimo", a black-and-white painting of a buffalo or bison. It must have been this bovine image that had me idly thinking, as I stood at the mailbox removing the book's packaging, that the title was a play on "goat oxen". This slippage was perhaps a good omen: when I opened the book to read the poems, I discovered that I was fortuitously in the ideal state of mind to bring to a first reading of Corey Wakeling's work.

The choice of a buffalo/bison for the cover indicates Wakeling's approach to language and meaning. The shaggy-headed beast we know from screen Westerns is commonly referred to as a buffalo, but a zoologist would likely describe it as a type of bison only distantly related to the buffalo of Africa and Asia. In *Goad Omen*, there is a productive space of play and possibility between names and things – a space like a screwball comedy with confusion, snappy dialogue, serious ideas, charming asides, and jokes based on mistaken identity.

The practice of categorising poems and poets means entering into debates on how poets should be grouped and the relative merits of such groups. While this process can at times be productive, and likely for some is an impetus for analysis, even for the creation, of poetry, I'm intending to cheat and sidestep the issue by using the metaphor of a spectrum as a means of locating Wakeling's book in a broader context. At one end of my poetry rainbow is a coherent poem that, while it may be complex, treats language as a transparent vehicle for writing a poem about something or things. At the other end is a poem that won't sit still to be read, a poem that might be fragmented, or repetitive, that uses incomplete and broken syntax, that can feel like a cipher, that may not refer to external reality at all. Don't ask me which end holds the pot of gold, but I can tell you that Corey Wakeling is well along the destabilised, enigmatic end, alongside Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, Gig Ryan and Michael Farrell, but more delirious than any of these. This is poetry that has a complicated relationship with "aboutness"; poetry that is interested in how language works, but also in vividness, humour, ways of seeing, and a deliberate disruption of the sense of a stable self that experiences, thinks, describes and reveals to the reader.

It is possible to read these poems for meaning. "That Part in Basquiat When David Bowie Playing Andy Warhol Says" arranges Bolsheviks, D.H. Lawrence, Soviet poets and filmmakers, marine images, references to cinema, a night in Little Bourke Street, a hamburger, and lots of questions:

...Why is it Ivan the Terrible's dark locks  
during the fall start to take on the appearance of the kelp wood...

...How is it  
the speech falls like rum from the Soviet sailor or soldier's mouth...

...Why is the Queen a scallop...

But it is the patterning of names and objects, and the rhetorical techniques employed to bring them into relation with one another that I read, rather than the sense and syntax of the lines and sentences. The poem is framed by its title: David Bowie performing the role of Andy Warhol is the perfect pop shazam, an image of the play of surfaces, the "reality" of figures such as Bowie and Warhol being famously, endlessly, masked. The poem also closes with a line in quotation-marks that links to the title, "I can't even see what's good anymore." We understand that David Bowie playing Andy Warhol is talking about losing the ability to judge what is good art, but in this poem, as I read it, the question is larger, to do with moral good, with the good society, with the meaning of good itself.

In Wakeling's poetry, words and phrases are bolted together like Meccano pieces, forming lines that in turn build stanzas. His work requires an approach that is inimical to reading, to the dance of eye and brain that results in letters on the page transforming into the infinite variety of rich experiences we take from the written word. There is no smooth progress toward understanding as we read the poems in *Goad Omen*. We must be prepared for adventure, to trip and leap across unmatched stepping-stones. The process of reading itself is made strange, as in his poem "The Ox":

At Batman Park, a dance of surfactants about  
the tobacco smoke and a small bonfire with molten lead,  
like old folks at home in Grafton,  
a lung test if you've tried anything like Yeats' symbology  
and turned out an architect. Nothing doing, no.

How to read this stanza? My usual approach to interpretation would seek out referents: Batman Park is an actual park on the North bank of the Yarra, in Melbourne, named for John Batman. Batman also calls to mind the caped crusader. Surfactants, tobacco smoke and the bonfire of broken lead might be images related to the park, and might even be in some way "like" Grafton's elderly, though Wakeling doesn't take pains to make explicit any connections that might exist between Batman Park, surfactants, smoke, lead, and old folks. On the next line, the lung test echoes the smoke and lead, but we move then to Yeats, and an architect.

I'm getting nowhere with a denotative approach. Instead, I step back, take a breath, stop looking at the brushstrokes and consider the overall effect. These lines are a bricolage of language drawn from a variety of milieux: the language of science in *surfactant*, of an idea of American vernacular in *old folks*, of literary criticism in *Yeats'*

*symbolology*. The very short sentence, “Nothing doing, no”, is a pair of negatives that simultaneously confirm the text’s resistance to interpretation and provide a brief respite from the complex syntax of the previous sentence. I plunge headlong into the next five lines:

The best known name in Newark versus  
unbeaten fuselage-like Hoddle Bridge, strangers  
we hallucinate a hanging from the Victorian pommel  
lanterns that colour syrup on our return  
back, the Yarra near black.

Again, a denotative reading has me puzzling over what “the best known name in Newark” might refer to? Perhaps it is associated with an earlier reference to Kazan, presumably the film director Elia Kazan. Batman Park and the Yarra call to mind the title of one of Kazan’s most famous films, *On the Waterfront*: and so the stanza becomes a description of crossing the Yarra in fading light, and, now that I am reading associatively, rather than denotatively, I can go on to think about Kazan and *On the Waterfront*, about the themes of loyalty and integrity associated with both the director and the film, about bridges and fuselages, the glories and horrors of these objects and the industries that produce them, about the visual effect of moving water coupled with changing light. All the while, I’m also taking pleasure in the synchronic play, the mix of “language cultures”, as Michael Farrell terms them,<sup>1</sup> the boldly tautological “return/back” that balances the within-line rhyme of *back* and *black* around the axis of the Yarra, the treatment of language as a construction material. Reading these poems is unlikely to offer a revelatory meaning, but extends instead the provision of welcome material for connection and association, for that vital bovine pastime, rumination.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Brennan, “Interview with Michael Farrell”. Web.  
[http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou\\_article/item/20530/Interview-with-Michael-Farrell/en](http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/20530/Interview-with-Michael-Farrell/en)  
(accessed 12 June 2013).