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Diane Fahey, *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems*
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Mark Tredinnick, *Fire Diary*
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Diane Fahey's *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* is her first broad selection from her eight books of poetry and it offers a timely reassessment of one of Australia's finest contemporary poets. My first encounter with Fahey's poetry was *Metamorphoses* (1988), her second book. I was struck by how skilfully these poems reinterpreted ancient Greek mythological stories, and by the fierce exigencies of the imagery; for this reader, then and now, *Metamorphoses* presents tough and gritty narratives. Over many years, I have watched Fahey's poetry evolve to include richly diverse interests and she effortlessly casts her voice for the poem at hand. Her distinctly narrative stance can be varyingly hard and resolute, compassionate and ironic, or it can delicately hover over its subject.

The many facets in Fahey's poetry range from ecological observation to ekphrastic, to reflections on travel, place and landscape, to meditations on family and relationships, to an engagement with writers and the act of writing, to feminist questionings. Across all these, the language keeps illuminating the particularities of the human and the natural world. The book has six thematic sections and three of these include some new and uncollected poems. Among the best new work are these poems, which have a mythological touch: "Dürer's *The Little Owl*", "The Annunciation", "Angels: a Dossier", "Walpurgisnacht", "Dracula", "Remembering Ophelia" and "Sower".

Fahey is well known for her observations of birds, insects and animals. A circumspective curiosity towards wildlife is clearly complemented by research on her subjects. That habit continues in new poems, such as "Lyrebirds", "Cockatoos at Dawn", "Macaws" and "Pearly Nautilus". In these, and her earlier nature poetry, Fahey's language and imagery continually surprise, and perhaps more so when she writes several poems about creatures in the same species – sea dragons and seahorses; midges, mosquitoes and other insects; wrens and hummingbirds. The behaviour of animals and creatures is sometimes closely associated with that of human beings, but as the poet says, with typical grace, in "Butterflies: a Meditation" (1993), "Metaphor is such a dance of / possibility, a weightless touching". The ineffable weightlessness of Fahey's own language works to catch the energies that are precise to each species of creature. Here are the opening lines to "Weedy Seadragons" (2006):

With something of a race-horse's
vigilance of eye,
taut slenderness,
they move just faster than

the speed of stagnation –
 by drift, out of
 sheer necessity –
 sip plankton through a straw,
sport manes of kelp
 that ripple like tourney flags
 as they flow nowhere –
at one with their milieu.

On the page, the uneven indentations and rhythmic free verse, with its deft line-turns, may well be mimicking the shape of the seadragons, or the litheness with which they move through water, or both. There is a lively tranquillity of tone in those lines. This poet observes things intimately and in doing so conveys a delight in making – in seeing a subject and transforming it and, equally, in letting it be.

Fahey has diligently revised all but a small handful of her older poems, for the better. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. Some of the revisions are a matter of slight rewordings, and minor changes to punctuation and stanza breaks; others involve acute adjustments to line-turns. “Diver”, for instance, from Fahey’s first book *Voices from the Honeycomb* (1986), is a poem about spring-boarding into a river, and simultaneously about plunging deeply into the self to work through something utterly private. The original version had emotional force, but the changes have brought a new clarity and strength. In “The Gold Honeycomb” section, Fahey has made revisions to all except three of the poems from *Metamorphoses* (“Niobe”, “Danaë” and “Underworld”), and to all but one (“Ares”) from *Listening to a Far Sea* (1998).

Every poem in “The Sixth Swan” section has been revised, some quite radically. “Rumpelstiltskin”, for example, has a new final stanza and a number of lines and phrases have been totally re-written; and “The Handless Maiden” has a new opening stanza, with major re-writings throughout.

Fahey has even made slight, but finely judged revisions to the sonnets in “The World as Poem” section, taken from a very recent book, *Sea Wall and River Light* (2006). These sonnets are quiet meditations on the sea, the natural world and the townspeople of Barwon Heads, a coastal town in Victoria. On first reading, they seemed too low-key, but their refinement has grown on me in subsequent readings. The language catches at the continual shifts and flows of the natural world in time – as the poet says in “Tides”, “the tremendous drift of things” – and they respond to nature’s landscapes, and the self too, as endlessly changing. “Time” decisively hits this note: “I watch time pass in the dip and bounce / of branches, the spiral dance of my stripling / eucalyptus”. But there is also an idea of encountering “time”: “Outside, I enter the pressure / and pull of it, my ten thousand footprints / mark sand as the river ruffles to fish-scaled / silver, and waves leave the ocean beach / scalloped with fine piping”. This voice reaches through to the ephemeral with a fine precision. In this group of poems, but often elsewhere too, Fahey has “time” in mind. Her question is not so much with what “time” signifies, but with the self in time, and it is the immensity of the temporal world, with its wonder and hardship, that she homes in on and unaffectedly brings to expression.

An early poem, “Assemblage” from *The Body in Time* (1995), is significantly revised. The opening lines have a light-hearted gravity:

I wake, reposition my head carefully
back on my shoulders, revolve the bolt.

Dents in the teapot on my breakfast-tray evoke
the dimples, oily with light, I'll dive into at the pool,
a liquid bowling green draining through shark gills.

I wear a twenties' costume – black wool, knee to neck –
but anyone can see my skin's rough patchwork;
that my joints have metal accessories.
I am what I appear to be – a walking industrial accident.
Thirsty for reassurance, I lope to the spa:

the circle widens with distant looks, its temperature rises.

“Assemblage” was originally published in three-line free verse stanzas with mostly choppy, short lines. Fahey has replaced the original 16 stanzas with five (of five lines) and the revised longer lines bring out the drive of thought and narrative; the complex thought is also steadied by the few word changes. The poem is dignified and sensual as it observes a human body convalescing – this experience may or may not be drawn from the poet's personal story. In an interview from 1996, Fahey talks about the need for a “measure of distance” when “dealing with potentially overwhelming material” (Fahey 77): “First, how to get a handle on that experience. Second, how to avoid imposing on the reader. And third, how to preserve one's private space” (Fahey 78).

A certain detachment from a private space is an imperative part of all Fahey's poetry, and indeed it is fundamental to poetry in many traditions. “Seeing”, with Fahey, is not restricted to sight, but can encompass a wider awareness of a physical encounter with things in themselves, bodily and emotionally. The next lines from “Assemblage” nimbly balance seriousness and a warm-hearted humour:

Resolute fingers clamp bubbling thighs, I check my toes.
Back in the change room, I fiddle with scar cremes,
anti-rust spray, busy as a drag queen.

A half-fogged mirror shows two eyes, almost level,
almost equally blue, in this botched, transparent face
that will never tan. I'm an artefact, I know,
yet some kind of human – I can think with halting
fluency, admire sunsets, want love.

The images move with ease between personal and communal spheres – made to look easy, but hard-fought-for – and there is no self-pity. This voice resonantly catches intimate moments in time. “Assemblage” is a remarkable, celebratory poem.

In *The Wing Collection*, the division into six thematic sections inevitably means that some poems will have been chosen because they fit in neatly. The section, “The Gold Honeycomb” includes only fifteen of the sixty-two poems that were originally published in *Metamorphoses*, along with twenty of the sixty-eight other Greek myth poems from *Listening to a Far Sea* – approximately one-third of each original book. These two books, I believe, are signature Fahey. Through a female-centred mythology, *Metamorphoses* is daring and provocative in its concern for the female self and in its anger against oppression and violence. *Listening to a Far Sea* explores broader concerns of the human psyche, particularly in relation to the gender dichotomies that women and men face – socially,

culturally and politically. The poems chosen from each are powerful, but the selection is a lean one in comparison to the number of animal and nature poems in the section, “Small Wonders” – an expansive selection that weighs the book a little towards ecology. From *Metamorphoses*, for instance, I would love to have seen “Medea”, “Polyxena”, “Oreithyia”, “Callisto” and “Semele”; and these from *Listening to a Far Sea*: “Astyanax Remembered”, “Medea’s Cauldron”, “The Sibylline Books”, “Calchas”, “Medusa”, “Marsyas” and “Sphinx”. “Cassandra”, among those chosen, shows the potency of this poetry:

She, who knew her own end would be
rape and murder, told herself this cell
was a haven. *If only, oh if only . . .*
A doorway of light shone at the centre
of the floor; dry leaves shuffled, whispered.

Lightness and dark, and the complex interplay between them, are key motifs across Fahey’s oeuvre and so too is her refusal to present female mythological characters as victims. Cassandra is trapped “in that stone cage, surviving, dying”, but this bleakness is resisted through the strangeness of “haven” and the turn to light.

The original publication of *The Sixth Swan* (2001) has largesse: 101 pages of poetry inspired by Grimm’s Fairy Tales; twenty of its eighty-two poems are chosen for a self-titled section. Formally a re-writing of mythical stories, *The Sixth Swan* is in some ways a coda to *Metamorphoses* and *Listening to a Far Sea*. The tightly ironic “I” of those two books, however, is turned in *The Sixth Swan* to a more laconic narrative mode. Quite independently of the original tale, many of the poems conclude by opening out to mystery or to irresolution (sometimes both) through an open-ended questioning or a playfully disconcerting refusal of stability. For example, in the final lines of “The Robber Bridegroom”:

The wine on the table was the crimson
of blood and pain. I drank deeply
then broke my glass, ready to choose
 peace, have done with all this –
 to follow rumours of joy.

There is wryness throughout Fahey’s oeuvre. At times, this shifts into something fanciful and out-of-the-blue. Here is the opening stanza of “Walpurgisnacht”, one of her new poems:

After we drove through the peasants with their clogs and alpine teeth
and eerie whisperings, (“Walpurgisnacht”), the coachman doubled our speed.
The sound he uttered was voiceless – a ghost sound: *Wal-purg-is-nacht*.
I savoured the word, quaffed its vertiginous brandy,
then lapsed back among cushions: I do enjoy my travel.

This two-page narrative about vampires and the strange callings of the writer’s craft should be read aloud. It glistens with mirth and agility.

Mark Tredinnick has been described as a poet of observation with an interest in nature and landscape. In fact, in this first book of poetry, *Fire Diary*, these elements form the

backdrop to an exploration of a poet's self and the writing of poetry. "Diary" is right as a title – the poems can be read as a journal account of ordinary daily happenings. *Fire Diary* won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award, and Tredinnick has subsequently won the prestigious Montreal and Cardiff prizes for separate individual poems.

Readers who turn to the work of a prize-winning poet are entitled to expect that the poetry will imaginatively and perceptively engage with the world, and possibly the self, in ways that show anew what poetry can do. However, *Fire Diary* feels to me neither fresh nor immediate on first or repeated reading. I mention the prizes to allow that some readers may feel otherwise. Yet listen to the concluding lines of "Saturday Afternoon at Exeter":

Raindrops sob

On the pavement, and above my head soft consonants
 clatter the tin. Thunder in the east is God's bass drum;
but all his angels are home in their beds, wings dishevelled
 and trumpets asleep on the floor.
If I sit here long enough, perhaps the rain will stop
 and I will learn who I really am and what
 in hell I'm supposed to do about that.

These lines have some attractiveness of language and imagery, but there is something troubling about this poem. A hint towards the self-referential angst is set up in earlier lines through a solitary figure, "I sit on the balcony and let a cigarette burn in my fingers", and the rain becomes a metaphor for this speaker's "grief", which seems to arise from the oblique reference to a global concern: "the ten thousand sorrows / the world's forgotten the names of". Rather than opening out these allusions, the language slides across the surface of one bright image after another, tapping in to a vaguely defined melancholy. The last three lines above might be imitating James Wright's famous, affecting final line, "I have wasted my life", from "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" – and also that poet's own shadowing of Rilke's, "You must change your life", from "Archaic Torso of Apollo". But in those two dense poems, the pressure of emotion and thought steadily builds up, precipitating their sudden exclamations. Any trace of reflective thought in "Saturday Afternoon at Exeter" is thrown away as the poem comes down to an arbitrary end-note of inertia. Furthermore, the use of onomatopoeia and consonance seem to be simply mood-settings; so too with the religious allusions, which are brief castings not made relevant here or elsewhere in the poem. In short, the craft itself is tidy enough, but depth of engagement with emotion and thought – which seem to be promised by an alert mind, and also gestured at – is wanting.

This habit of relying on atmospheric image-making and self-intrusive references to impel the lines is a defining attribute of the poetry throughout *Fire Diary*. The opportunity missed at every turn is for a meditative layering of thought.

"A Poem with No Beginning", is a poem about writing a poem. This idea should be highly interesting and the language itself presents a series of capable, sensory gestures. Here is an extract:

A pair of rosellas,
dawdling home late from a Christmas party,
takes breakfast on my lawn. I sit at my desk
bereft. I've left the door open at my back
for happiness to find me when she wakes,

if she wants to wake. Around ten, the poem
trips, like the morning's lover, on soft feet
naked through the door. Her scent arrives
first, cut grass and gardenia. She slips between
the overplucked strings of Ravel's lyre, spinning
on the CD player, and she finds me.

Ted Hughes's "The Thought Fox" comes to mind, but the lines above are quite unlike the delicate immediacy of Hughes's fox and his emerging poem, as one, entering "the dark hole of the head". Rather, it seems to me that Tredinnick relies on a flurry of imagery and activity, and the reader cannot but notice that the poem is crafted for beauty while ostensibly being crafted for thought. Finally, it leaves us with very little to reflect on, or return to.

Fire Diary includes fourteen narrative-sequence poems. This form can enable a poet to discursively open out images or themes and leisurely or excitedly to build up layer upon layer of meaning through the length of the sequence. But this rarely happens here. For example, take the opening poem of "Wingecarribee Eclogues":

My daughter, not yet one,
 crawls to my chair and takes my pens
and tries to steal the book I try to write in. This could be a metaphor,
but who knows? My son, fresh from the bath and naked yet,
steps into my boots. This could be another, but I hope not. I sit in the corner
of the thick of my life, and I think I'll keep on writing till I run out of pens.

On one level, we are given an engaging glimpse into a family scene of an ordinary kind, which might gather strength in a reader's own private memories. But underlying the cuteness of this setting is the presiding image of the poet's own reluctance, a mock exasperation going along with it. The poet is the subject, reinforcing his own helplessness at being beset by the rival demands of writing and the intruding joys of fatherhood. Routinely in this poetry, everyday happenings are directed towards, or rather collapsed into, references to writing as a vocation. The move is both repetitive and lightweight. Where for instance is the line, "This could be a metaphor / but who knows?", meant to take the reader? Continually, attention is drawn to a picture of the hopeful, unsatisfied writer around whom everything else revolves. A self-deprecating stance of this kind is evident in other narrative sequences, among them, "Eclogues", "The Economics of Spring" and "Things I'm trying to Believe". But it is also pervasive in single poems across this book, such as "And You", "Maybe", "Red Tulips" and "Stopped by the Road at the End of the World".

Poem 2 from "Wingecarribee Eclogues" follows with another self-conscious linguistic image, "I write to sound the world / and to try the shallow syntax of myself / within it". And Poem 6 also conveys an unwieldy emphasis on self, and nature, as language:

What I want is the intelligence
 incarnate here, or hereabouts.
I'd like to know the mind whose ideas I step out into daily – this stream
of consciousness, which is never the same stream twice. I want
the grammar of the dialect my days are spoken in. Mauve cloud passes west
to east. A spinebill scatters some phrases about. There's some of it.

Here, the poet's move is to dissolve bright imagery of a self and nature into linguistic terminology in order to show language itself as complex. But the subject matter is threadbare: it is not enough to call on intelligence and stream of consciousness writing, willing these two strong abstractions to be relevant when there is little depth of thought. A perplexing irony hangs over the Heraclitean allusion, "never the same stream twice". In fact, the "mind" in these poems is transfixed with repetition – at once yearning for a revitalising of a fluid self, while endlessly confessing reluctance. Is the reader meant to be patient with this?

Other reviewers of *Fire Diary* have referred to the influence of Charles Wright on this poetry, and Tredinnick's "Reading Charles Wright at Thirty Thousand Feet" deliberately expresses an affinity with that poet. The likeness could well run to the use of long lines, varying with short, and personal revelatory narrative: "I sit inside the delicate envelope of the aeroplane, reading / Charles Wright, who's writing all my poems again in his bashful Knoxville / Scrawl". Wright's own thinking on poetry in "Improvisations: The Poem as Journey" is intriguing:

At the heart of every poem is a journey of discovery. Something is being found out. Often the discovery is merely technical – architectural, metrical, or spatial – though, when lucky, the technical revelation is not just "merely" but is an uncovered new thing. Poetic structures sometimes end up in that fortunate "field". New concepts of lineation often do as well. From time to time the discovery is spiritual, a way of looking at the world that affects the way we lead our lives, or how we think of them. Poems that cause us to say, after having read them, "Oh, that's nice," or "Ummm, not bad," do not participate in this voyage of discovery. No matter how new their paint job is, no matter how smart and crisp their sails, they never get out of the harbour. The journey belongs to others. (Wright 32-33)

Charles Wright picks up on those vital matters of inspiration and imagination, and where any given poem may carry its readers, and "discovery" is nearly always into the unknown. It seems that in Wright's thinking, the "Ummm" and merely bright poems (perhaps also self-satisfying?) are those where the speaker is too utterly in control to allow discovery to take place.

Tredinnick seemingly bears in mind Charles Wright's metaphysical exploration and yearning for a spiritual transcendence. "Sleeping with the Anima" tries nature as revelation. These are the final lines:

Some of the gods are rain tonight,
And some of the rain is you,
and some of it falls on me as I lie without sleep
in a borrowed bed. I feel it on my face, fine as moonlight, the sediment of divine
apprehension, filtered through fly-wire. Love trans-substantiated,
a thing my body didn't know till now
it craved. If I were god,
I'd come like this. This is how I'd bounce prayers back to their sender's account.
This is how I'd remember.
This is how I'd forget.

life—have been a profound influence on my poetry. My poems often come out of the stories from my life.

This account is very close to Diane Fahey's quoted above. Wright's and Fahey's poetics both focus on personal space and personal response, transmuted thoughtfully. Tredinnick's *Fire Diary* chronicles a speaker's diurnal experience and, within this, the dominant concern is with expressing the angst and disquiet of an individual self and this self's relationship with writing. The project is enacted fairly simply and narrowly.

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