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*Seven doors into the labyrinth*

Aashish Kaul, *A Dream of Horses*

Winchester, UK, Roundfire 2013, 110pp pb

ISBN 9781782795360, RRP \$14.95

Aashish Kaul's first book of stories is the thread in and out of the labyrinth turned library of modernity. The *master* or *true* writer remains inside, his only escape is to create Icarus, whilst the traveller poet, *the penitent*, moves to find him and re-emerge.

The book consists of an introduction by Scott Esposito, the seven stories are united in voice and the collection is completed with an erudite essay on the seventh story entitled 'A Note on Two Travellers'. Each of the stories is epigraphed, the writers ranging in scope from Lao-Tzu to Lautréamont.

All our narrators here are seekers, tamers of Borges' *tigerish* time – an explicit image that Kaul invokes in his closing essay when he gives us the short sighted Borges moving close to the tiger's cage in his youth. And further, seekers of the ontological essence of language and space. Kaul's sentences are pure, strung out on meditative rhythms in search of the final, true image. The 'Parable of the Archer' exemplifies this approach. Here, literally, as Kaul will do metaphorically throughout, a famed archer goes in search of the mentor whom folklore says is the master of the art, 'the one who is beyond contest.' He travels into the interior where he meets a weather-beaten man who shows him the path to the 'blue rose.' When faced with this prize of knowledge, the famed archer trembles before it. The path is clear but treacherous. The prize is within reach but elusive, it demands risk and peril to grasp.

In *Light Ascending*, a writer travelling an identical path in a loop of days encounters a great novelist named J.C., 'less a writer than a monk,' whose literary pedigree reminds one of Coetzee. Coetzee coincidentally wrote the cover note for this collection. The master writer

seats the novice before a chess board filled with the literati of modernity. The two begin to 'burden them [the pieces] with names...' – Beckett, Faulkner, Joyce. The writer has found the teacher who will release him from his apathy, but the prize – further masters, further influence, further learning, through language and the act of naming (specifically, in Kaul, naming images) – is a burden and a test.' The writer as initiate again, the writer tested.

Surrendering to the long apprenticeship of the writer, the ever seeking path through the valley of ashes, in search of a mentor, who we may, anxiously, call *influence*, is the territory Kaul charts. It is the journey of the artist and the artist's examination of self that Kaul alludes to consistently in his fictions. Isolation, post-Benjamin, is the necessary endgame of the striving author. Exhaustion, necessarily, as well.

'Tahiti', the longest story of the book and the one which unifies many of the major Imagist strings also provides the Kaul coda I suspect:

I tell her that art has a precise function. To offer a glimpse of what it is *to be*. Every artist, every Poet knows this and strives for this. All his attempts are to catch, if only fleetingly, a pure image, or even a shimmer of it. But, alas, this isn't an easy task – not by a long shot.

'[I]mages, so many images...', Kaul will also write in the title story.

In 'A Dream of Horses' another storyteller – is it Krishna? – interrupts the narrative to advise the writer, who has just witnessed the birth of a book from an image of a melodious girl with a 'blue parasol' (the repeated 'blue' recalling the 'blue guitar' of Wallace Stevens, perhaps):

Rest a moment dear storyteller, move with caution, else the thread may slip past your fingers and defile that which you have persevered to present with a restrained elegance.

There is a plethora of modernist imagery to knit the stories together – the library above the abyss, the chess game, the reference to De Chirico's *Melancholy and Mystery of the Street* in the following, from the title story:

Nearby some children were playing hopscotch...Watching them at their game, a vague uneasiness came over me, as if dark sinister events were lurking around the corner...

'Two Travellers' imagines a boat journey shared by Beckett and Borges. There is, as Kaul writes in his notes to the story, some evidence that a brief encounter did take place. It is perhaps the work most centred upon 'ideas' rather than images and as fiction is less successful for that.

*A Dream of Horses* – the collection – is determined by the elegiac. The elegiac manifests in the sense of loss that accompanies the discoveries of these storytellers, the prose that lives hints at isolation and exhaustion, toil is an end of death, the 'blue' sustains the labour.

When Kaul writes in the by now textually familiar voice of the narrator in 'Tahiti':

But why have I held so close to my chest this slow roving sadness...this melancholy which has all but made me impervious to love or nostalgia

the reader is of course drawn to compare the varieties and origins of nostalgia and melancholy, especially when the various narrators of the book have walked between the two.

The writer's voice is meditative and its continuous dreaming strings the seven stories together. There is a deep structure to these links that occurs in the 'bon image,' as Kaul writes, invoking the great stylist Flaubert. Flaubert himself – *masters...so many masters* – appears in a dream to the apprentice and sensing the literariness of the narrator tells him, "Do not let this streak die in you, my boy...".

There is present the shadow of two of Australia's greatest modernist storytellers, David Brooks and Gerald Murnane – I am thinking here of *Sheep and the Diva* and *The Plains* foremost. There is also the shadow of Blanchot's limpidity, ambiguity and preoccupation with the protean :

Seasons change. Nights assault days more easily...But today? Today nothing.  
Nothing except this silence, this wish for the world to come anew simply through my being.

Kaul is a poet of space and silences, of absence and dream, a journeyman through text and the fictional experience. The lived is translated into the contemplated and is created in a brushstroke – such is the condition of the artist. His stories are like the *Oneirocritica* on the modernist urge and method, the dream of a dreamer who is aware of his dream. In 'The Passages' the book itself becomes totemic and illicit. Yet the book remains a dream object, never fully realised, fragmented, a puzzle:

A book is an enigma. Words that fill its pages present a shifty, relative universe.

Rounding off the book, the final paragraph of the aforementioned essay, which might have been written by Scot Esposito in his introduction – and which clearly identifies Kaul's ambition – states:

But what these two writers shared above all, what one rarely find in literature these days, was man's foredoomed quest to know his place in this gouache of space and time that he can't rid himself of, that which is the prison and the window out of the prison, that which...he calls the universal.

*A Dream of Horses* is a paean to modernity, and Kaul, correctly, identifies himself as an heir to the tradition. This is an admirable first collection that I suspect may become a singularity to Kaul's later work. Kaul writes in deeply rhythmic prose. There is on rare occasions the hint of the academic masque to the stories, a dance to the music of theory – particularly here I am thinking of the stories 'Light Ascending' and 'Phantom Days' – and a slight nervousness in the use of epigraphs. In rare instances, the reader may want a modicum more playfulness and divergence of register. Overall, however, Kaul has crafted seven seductive, necessarily orphic stories that linger like the taste of pomegranates.