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Cameron Lowe, *Circle Work*
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Anne Elvey, *Kin*
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William Blake's exultation of "minute particulars" in his enormous *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (also expressed with his assertion "all Sublimity is founded on Minute Discrimination" in *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses*) has over the centuries rippled through fields of theology, psychology, science and of course, various schools of poetry. Taking heed of and tending to the specific and the subtle, for Blake, offered both a window to creation and God, and a template for social improvement.

Cameron Lowe's Jerusalem, it could be said, is suburban Geelong, Corio Bay and the house he lives in with his partner and his cat Edith, who is the occasional star of his poetry. Lowe's own minute particulars, heavily influenced by the imagism of William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky and perhaps Ezra Pound's notion of "luminous detail", are mostly not infused with holiness or transcendence. But his preoccupation with the minutiae of his unspectacular surroundings as they change character according to light, season and weather has made for a collection that is accessible, witty, surprising and often breathtakingly atmospheric.

Maintaining the spirit of his first book *Porch Music*, *Circle Work* rarely departs from what can be witnessed from the poet's own house and neighbourhood. Though consistently warm towards and almost loving of suburban typicality, his pointed refusal to elevate these scenes or suggest they are representative of anything more than what they seem, brings a certain blunt clarity to his work. Parts of 'Theatre', for example, read almost like a describe-what-you-see exercise in objective writing:

> Streetlights, that in between time
> as evening settles; rooflines,
> aerials, the cross on St Mary's spire,
> the smell of fish and chips
> hanging in the air.
> A crow calls—
> another answers.
> Across the road
> the curtains are closing.

Poetry emerges from, and indeed *is*, the world (or in Lowe's case, things, or scenes) more than it is the result of the mind's creative faculties. There is in *Circle Work*, therefore, an attractive suspicion and mocking of poets and poetic motives. Among the book's best poems is 'The skin of it', in which, evoking Wallace Stevens, Lowe presents the natural world in such a way as to provoke the reader to consider ideas of

artistic perception and inspiration. And poets do not come off well. Among the most cutting lines is:

> …the *I-as-sensitive-register*
>
> noted in passing, dismissed as diary of emotion—

Later, the poem refers to the "flawed science of reflections" and advocates simplicity and instinct when responding to nature, rather than seeking any transcendent interpretation:

> *the fish*, darting, flickering as shadow over sand, out of which
> is drawn no allusion,
> only a pause—

This majestic poem, unusually long for Lowe, goes on to question the "dubious test // of words" and implores us when considering our surroundings "not to measure, but to follow in its passage—" – an invitation to be, rather than to think.

This holistic sense, this blurring of the supposed separation between world and poetry, draws one's mind back to the collection's title. "Circle work" is of course a reference to careering around in a car making 'doughnuts' in the dirt. It is also, apparently, a sort of gathering or bonding exercise for overcoming conflict and promoting harmony within groups.

However, when reading these poems that hint at the oneness between individual and environment, and that question the process of composition in favour of the instant impression, I could not get the image of the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail, out of my head. To many, the Ouroboros represents cyclicality and rebirth, and importantly, according to psychologist Erich Neumann, a state of being beyond ego – ego being something very much downplayed in Lowe's poetry. Using this pantheism (that verges on Whitman-esque Buddhism at times) as a vague backdrop to *Circle Work*, it is therefore a particular pleasure to come across 'Grass Messiah', where mortality and renewal are delicately juxtaposed:

> Flowers of a form cultivated to deceive
> the senses,
>
> blooming from the sockets
> of a sheep's skull.
>
> Rigid petals smoulder
> in the sun,
>
> children stir blue ashes
> with twisted sticks.
>
> It is a game they play—
> a game all their own.
>
> They laugh, and in their
> laughing they dance,
>
> as the flowers rise anew.

Formally, Lowe's poetry floats across the page, defined by liberal use of space and line breaks that reflect his instruction to "pause", and we might add breathe, in 'The skin of it'. His shortest poems are without exception a delight, particularly 'Civil Disobedience in the Chinese garden', a work that has the rare distinction of being set in a public place.

Lowe's fascinating book is at heart a musing on the relationship with one's physical surroundings. In rather different ways, this is also the guiding preoccupation of Anne Elvey's *Kin*, even if this more emotional, perhaps sentimental, certainly challenging collection probably does adhere to the concept of "I as sensitive register", which Lowe so witheringly rejects.

Until now, Elvey had published three chapbooks, but perhaps her most significant contribution in recent times has been as managing editor of the increasingly vital Plumwood Mountain, an online journal of ecopoetics. Admirably, the journal is extremely elastic regarding what constitutes this, but in the elegant *Kin*, Elvey offers a compelling and sonorous interpretation. For her, it is the poetics of compassion and kindness, extending in every direction possible.

Kin is split into three parts, with the poems becoming more and more experimental, elusive and sometimes hallucinatory (such as the wonderful 'Divining') as the book progresses. Roughly speaking, the first section, 'Skin to Skin', addresses compassion toward self and family (the loveliest of these poems being inspired by Elvey's late father); the second, 'Kin', toward earth and nature, and concluding section 'Coming home' toward community and humanity.

If that sounds as if *Kin* suggests a division between man and nature, in some of the book's most moving poems Elvey explores the limitations of this view. In 'Paperbark', 'River gum' and especially 'Cormorant', there simmers a mild unease at regarding nature in humanist terms; that means a distrust of classification, language and other constructed systems designed to understand, or harness, the natural world. In 'Cormorant' she writes:

> A bird
>
> drops to a branch,
> overhangs
>
> the slow water. He's
> sculpted
>
> to a shape the eye
> measures
>
> to match a name.

As Lowe points out, to "measure" is no good. An alternative is to regard such beasts with the kind of in-the-moment awe that Lowe would probably approve of, expressed in 'The Egret'. Indeed, in the illuminating notes at the back of the book Elvey alludes to the "practice of attentiveness" in relation to her three 'Claimed By Country' poems,

which one might associate with things like mindfulness, consciousness and awareness, all essential to the compassion towards all life that pervades Elvey's work.

Occasionally, *Kin* does veer toward more direct political statement. The 'Claimed By Country' trio of poems, beautiful meditations on the Aboriginal connection with land, makes a chilling reference to "Massacre Bay" and asks: "Is this the colonising moment once again?" Perhaps more startling is 'Cargo…? Notes for another way', in which the poet proposes a simple, humane and civic-minded alternative to Manus Island as a camp "near Geraldton", in which fear, paranoia and violence give way to "adopting kin" in a "place big enough to get lost" where the only monitoring comes from "the surveillance of owls".

It is significant that this poem immediately follows the 'Claimed by country' poems in the book's third section, proving that *Kin*'s philosophy of tenderness extends equally to those who were dispossessed on this soil, and those outsiders who seek refuge on it. It is also to Elvey's credit that any anger towards government or policy is kept firmly between the lines. Blame is not her style.

Some poems do drift a little, becoming unfocused and lacking the ambiguous electricity of the finest pieces. Yet Elvey has a knack for the jarring line to jolt a poem back to life. Usually, this is done with bodily imagery – in 'A finite catalogue of self' she produces the disconcerting:

> the soft ripe ache of a pimple budding
> the threads that spring from the scalp, white
> the tug of flesh

Such a ploy is more effective in the slightly cloying 'What is a soul?', when amid some flighty lines ("On the sky // a soul writes // itself" for example) she returns to "the watermark of the fingernail that lifted a scab".

Other poems, such as 'Spirit' and 'Mortal Life', are musings on the overwhelming mystery of animation, or what we might imperfectly call God, both of which suggest a faith in a connectedness between things that is sensed, if not grasped. Lowe's book hints at something similar, if in more dispassionate terms and with more of an obvious nod to its influences and poetic lineage. For Elvey, the key to understanding nature and soul (which emerges as a dominant theme in *Kin*'s third section) is empathy and an understanding that our place on Earth is, as she puts it in 'Some gentle thing enters the sea', made up of a "landscape of kin", as well as the essential minute particulars.