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Jennifer Maiden, Drones and Phantoms
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Jennifer Maiden's latest collection *Drones and Phantoms* has received a lot of good press. For a moderate, collegiate assessment of its prosody and poetics I recommend David McCooey's review for *Cordite*, Geoff Page's for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, or Siobhan Hodge's for *Writ*.

Ben Etherington's recent article in the *Sydney Review of Books* makes a convincing case against polite equivocation in criticism, and from the other side of the equation Maiden mocks "The / policy of the belittling alternative". So, without the gloves: halfway through my first reading I took a marked dislike to this book that subsequently would not leave its tinct.

It's not a matter of aesthetics in any conventional sense. *Drones* is a distilled and disquieting collection that interweaves lyrical and discursive modes to stage and question the brittle oppositions that structure discourse, and it does so in the sharp vernacular for which Maiden is justly admired. However - and here's the ambivalent alternative of this particular discursive opposition - it makes arguments for its own worth in political and moral terms which it does not fulfil, and uses these as a pious cloak for its own agendas. The arguments themselves, political, ethical, environmental, I either share or appreciate as valid contributions. But the balance, the "proportions", as Maiden writes in the collection's last, which attempts to anticipate precisely this criticism, is skewed in a way that sours otherwise rich offerings.

Drones consists of observational 'Diary' poems, pseudo-political 'dialogue' poems, some more George Jeffreys poems, and some hawkish lyrics about negative reviews which writing as a tender young critic reviewing an established poet, ripple with symbolic threat.

Despite this formal variance, it does read as a thematic unity. The ostensibly private, that is, intimate, diary poems avail themselves of sudden distances and cold, or public, languages. Further, the dialogues between, say Queen Victoria and Tony Abbott are full of strange tenderness. This pattern of contradictions reverberates throughout the architecture of the work.

The eponymous poem juxtaposes two roughly contemporaneous headlines: Gillard's interview with Kyle Sandilands punctuated by an offer to drive his Rolls for a day, and Obama's extension of drone strikes to suspected - rather than confirmed - militants. It's a precarious comparison, one that stages the essential distance of the collection, that falling between general atrocities elsewhere and individual feeling here.

'Phantom', from the Greek 'phántasma' means: ghost, phenomenon, fantasy, and illusion. The titular emphasis here foregrounds the haunted public consciences dramatized by Maiden's dialogue poems, and more subtly figures the collection's rather paranoid performance of authenticity. Further, in the

context of aerial warfare, invoked by coordinate with 'drone', 'phantom' alludes to the McDonnel Douglas F-4 Phantom II, a jet aggressively deployed by the U.S between the sixties and the eighties. Recently the Phantom has been used primarily as a 'target drone' for training anti-aircraft crews. The difference between the Phantom and the Predator Drone depicted in the cover image – eerily, among quiet suburban stars – encapsulates yet another of the collection's dualisms: that between quiescence and aggression, the sheep and the goats.

These oppositions work to frustrate the readers "who need a tone made hard by ethical security", who Maiden accuses of hypocrisy in 'The Day of Atonement'. To stretch the analogy a little, these stealth techniques attempt to distort the reader's, or the critic's, defensive apparatus, and, as she writes in 'Diary Poem: Uses of Judith Wright', "slip the net".

Why, though, is a murkier question. There's an extent to which the poems might elude ideological reading to strike some global nerve of quiet empathy, and in the old humanist sense make its readers fractionally kinder people. But frequently, that is not their material activity. In the aforementioned use of Judith Wright for instance, the poet fires off a few flares labelled "politics", "cause", and "Vietnam", and then uses them to distract from *ad hominem* attacks on "reviewers who decided/ I was not Judith Wright's successor", and Peter Skryznecki "(Wright's) protégé" who is described treating an aged Wright indifferently. Worse though, is the cumulative image of Wright herself ""lost and found in the kitchen/ quietly washing up." Wright emerges as frail, insecure, domestic, and unquestioning, while Maiden, twice insinuated into the meanings of 'successor' annexes the former's legacy in the poem's conclusion:

> "I'd add, however, that the politics
> is overpowered if empowered by poetry, its
> successor, and which always slips the net"

'The Sweet Sheep Gone' dramatizes a spat between Maiden and an unnamed editor whose identity I neither know nor care about. The rancour of the piece, and its constructed offence at critical independence, strike me as distasteful, but they're venial sins. My issue is with the paratactic logic with which Maiden compares this personal disagreement to the kidnapping and decade long abuse of Michelle Knight by Ariel Castro, and to the murder of Nona Belomesoff. These are, by any standards, repellent conjunctions.

Drones concludes with 'In Proportion', which I quote in large part:

> The Director of a Writers' Society tweets
> flatly that my book is not her 'thing'
> because it is too political with only
> a 'niche' of poetry: my proportions
> aren't correct. In Copenhagen an animal
> is fed and its brain destroyed by
> a steel bolt before flat 'autopsy'. On
> Manus a man is fed and his brain
> destroyed by a steel bolt before a real

autopsy…
…Not cut up,
the politics is still poetry, the giraffe
the man, and there is no part less
which we can save from the flat jigsaw death.

This poem's organizing logic is the parataxis of the Twitter feed, and its sole site the poet's eye. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, and the case for the validity of "animal death grief" is solid too. The way the artful repetition of 'flat' equates an expression of contrary opinion with rent flesh however is, in my opinion, demeaning to the discourse of poetry and to the dead.

Seamus Heaney wrote of Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' "(it is) so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy". Many of these poems make comparable demands.

The penultimate poem 'My heart has a Deep Water Harbour' echoes a similarly titled one from *Liquid Nitrogen* (2012). Where in the earlier poem empathy is associated with the flowing water and warmth of Ecuador, in the latter it cools in the "icy mazes" of Sevastopol. Plasma being mostly water, rather than nitrogen, the speaker's heart becomes "landlocked". Overall I found that this collection performs a similar process, as Coleridge wrote of another phantom, it thicks the blood with cold.