

## AUTUMN ROYAL

Tamryn Bennett, *phosphene*,  
Rabbit Poetry Series 2016, 54pp pb  
ISBN 9780994273369, RRP \$15

*With eyes closed  
You light up within*  
– Octavio Paz

Visual perception does not cease in the dark. The fractals of light, geometric patterns, stars and spirals that may occur when our eyes are closed are known as phosphenes. The following lines from Octavio Paz’s essay “Reading and Contemplation” arguably correspond with the paradoxical occurrence of perceiving light without it actually entering the eye:

Between meaning and meaninglessness, between saying and silence, a spark is struck: a knowing without knowing, a comprehending without understanding, a speaking while remaining silent.<sup>1</sup>

As the term “phosphene” derives from the Greek words *phos* (light) and *phainein* (to show), the chosen title of Tamryn Bennett’s debut poetry collection immediately gestures towards the desire for something to be revealed and seen.

In Bennett’s case, the title *phosphene* evokes the concern for illuminating what has been erased due to centuries of colonisation and imperialism, specifically for the Latin American peoples. More generally, the title refers to the concept of awareness and the act of taking the time to look deeper in order to acknowledge complex histories. Bennett expresses this approach in the book’s introduction: “the fragmented elegies of *phosphene* are what remain after the light of the moment has passed”. Bennett uses the introduction to explain the significance of specific places for the book’s formation:

*phosphene* began in Mexico as a series of rituals and offerings at sacred sites. The process of writing stretched from El Tepozteco (the altar of the wind and birthplace of the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl) to the Seri community of the Sonoran desert.<sup>2</sup>

This framing is important as Bennett’s approach to the poetry within this collection occurs within a creative-nonfiction context. *phosphene* is the fourth book published by The Rabbit Poets Series, which has developed from the journal *Rabbit* founded by academic and poet Jessica Wilkinson. The *Rabbit* publishing collective exists to support poetry that engages with nonfiction elements and genres such as memoir, biography and history as well as more experimental expressions that challenge traditional expectations of both “nonfiction” and “poetry”. In a

declaration known as “The Realpoetik Manifesto,” written by Wilkinson and poet Ali Alizadeh, one of the statements communicated is that we need to appreciate “the unquantifiable potential of poetic writing to convey a deeper experience of reality and ‘real life’ accounts than may be possible through conventional non-fiction prose.”<sup>3</sup> By directing her gaze outward rather than inward Bennett’s *phosphene* considers how “the ground remembers // *el suelo recuerda*” the histories, cultures and peoples who have existed on the lands in which she is travelling through. As stated in the book’s introduction, this collection is Bennett’s “way of honouring the land, its myths and ancient tradition of poetic acts that link Latin American to its past.”<sup>4</sup>

In its entirety *phosphene* is comprised of four poems that are presented sparingly in fragments, enacting the way wind carries matter through the air. Circulating around Bennett’s poetry are Spanish translations from Guilleromo Batiz, intricate drawings from artist Jacqueline Cavallaro, and punctuation marks, each working together to demonstrate the multiple dimensions of both poetry and history. All four poems explore the impacts (both literal and metaphorical) of the intricacies between life and death, religion (predominately Catholicism) and nature, power and vulnerability, some of which can be demonstrated in the lines below, from the poem “tumbleweeds”:

sidewinders  
and coral snakes

*serpientes de coral  
y enrolladas lateral*

your scratched eye  
sees it coming too late

*tu ojo arañado  
lo ve venir demasiado tarde*

nowhere to swerve  
we collide

*sin donde virar  
chocamos<sup>5</sup>*

The fragmentation of Bennett’s poetry is imperative for the way it challenges the traditional concept of history and experiences as being “whole” and linear.

The disjointed verse is also mirrored within the poetry itself to create an echo and exchange between the poems, their translations and surrounding images and symbols. The below refrain occurring throughout the poem “at the temple of letters” is an example of this:

a breath,  
an echo,  
a trace

*un respire,  
un eco,  
un trazo<sup>6</sup>*

Each page contains no more than 16 lines to allow room for consideration and to perhaps create a new “echo” within the reader’s mind. Bennett’s use of empty parentheses—{ } and [ ]—as well as opened-ended ones— ( —signal to the reader that there are other voices and histories surrounding her own fragments that have not or may never be heard. Perhaps this is why Bennett’s *phosphene* “treads lightly”, as Bonny Cassidy writes on the book’s cover, as it exists to forge open spaces for other voices rather than to speak on behalf of any.

In the essay “Language is a Migrant”, the Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuna connects the two practices of poetry and translation:

I see the poet/translator as the person who goes into the darkness, seeking the “other” in ourselves, what we don’t wish to see, as if this act could reveal what the larger world keeps hidden.<sup>7</sup>

By simultaneously referring to the poet and translator, Vicuna also highlights the concept of authorship, which is something I believe Bennett is challenging in *phosphene*, specifically by entwining Batiz’s translations within her own poetry. Vicuna’s work, specifically the ephemeral art installations she calls the *precarios* (precarious), are referred to in Bennett’s introduction as an influence on *phosphene* and arguably Bennett’s extended multi-disciplinary practice as a poet and artist. You could also understand Bennett’s *phosphene* as an intentionally precarious entity in itself for the way it complicates the traditionally straightforward understandings of how poetry/translation/images/histories/travelogues may all reside together.

The titles of the four poems and the order in which they are placed also offer markers for the reader: “at the temple of letters”, “tumbleweeds”, “the invisible” and “a river grows”. These titles gesture towards a movement and growth that occurs during the course of the book. What begins at El Tepozteco develops into a stream, something that is continuously flowing, for who can measure when poetry starts and when it stops? My reading of *phosphene* enacts what Vicuna offers us in her poem “The Quasar”. Vicuna writes:

A poem only becomes poetry when its structure  
is made not of words but forces.

The force is poetry.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident from Bennett’s poetry that she views poetry as a force to move things forward or wrench them back again. In the final but not “closing” line of “The Quasar”, Vicuna writes of poetry being the phenomena “to be felt, but never apprehended” (121).<sup>9</sup> The incomprehensibility caused by colonialism is at the crux of *phosphene* and Bennett acknowledges this from the very beginning as she dedicates the collection to something that we sense but words will never seize: “for the wind / *para el viento*”.

We use language as a way to understand and move through the world and Bennett’s *phosphene* reveals the importance of why we also need to use poetry for retrospection and for the recognition that “the invisible / keep living / / *lo invisible / vive vive*.”<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, “Reading and Contemplation”, *Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature*, translated by Helen Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 48.
- <sup>2</sup> Tamryn Bennett, *phosphene* (Melbourne: Rabbit Poets Series, 2016), n.p.
- <sup>3</sup> Ali Alizadeh and Jessica Wilkinson, “The Realpoetik Manifesto”, *Cordite*, 2012, <https://cordite.org.au/guncotton/the-realpoetik-manifesto/>
- <sup>4</sup> Bennett, *phosphene*, 27, n.p.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Cecilia Vicuna, “Language is a Migrant”, *Harriet: a Poetry Blog*, Poetry Foundation, 2016, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2016/04/language-is-migrant/>
- <sup>8</sup> *Spit Temple: The Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña*, edited by Rosa Alcalá (Brooklyn, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), pp. 119-121.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. 121.
- <sup>10</sup> Bennett, *phosphene*, 31.