

JOHN KINSELLA

Philip Neilsen, *Wildlife of Berlin*

UWAP, 2018, 108 pp, pb

ISBN 9781742589619, RRP \$22.99

This is a varied book thematically and stylistically, but also one held together by strong threads—climate change, ecology, animals, specific birds, personal reflection on subjectivity and vulnerability, and a perfectly poised irony that has that rare quality of being both empathetic and critical at once. Philip Neilsen is a known satirist, but one who has always had the ability to self-ironise, and also critique the ills of the human world whilst being so very human in voice. “He” can both “tell” and observe, can deploy a complex array of emotions within the one poem. There is real grit in these poems—strong beliefs we might say—but also enough self-ironising reflection mixed with a pathos for the circumstances of daily life. The absurdities, the devastating contradictions of a human world that can’t appreciate the implications towards its own health by its mistreatment of animals, and the fraught relationship between the human and “natural world” are concentrated through Philip Neilsen’s obvious sympathies and care for the environment, for ethical human behaviour.

But it’s the slip betwixt cup and lip that Philip Neilsen often explores in his poems, and it is in these “gaps” that the poems generate something beyond what is said, beyond what can be said. They so often have this enigmatic quality. Take the bird poems of Part 2—they are crisp, controlled, wry, empathetic with their subjects, but also highly attuned to the literary conceit they inevitably engage with. Take the “crow” poem: a well-known genre that Neilsen injects with new life and necessity. It’s a small and compact piece of genius. It also says something about Neilsen’s approach to prosodic issues—there’s a wonderful knowledge of the spoken line, of natural speech, of letting the line come out of the poem without it become intrusive. This said, it’s deceptive, because there’s such a measured sense of what the line is.

It’s another one of the “gaps” he develops and considers so well. Further, this control allows him to work variant themes smoothly into a single poem and still create major disruptions. The politics of the “noisy miner” poems and others are exemplary in this: the deconstruction of the colonial, the “autobiographical” parallel narratives, the critique of human privileging... all work together without cancelling each other out. The personal subtexts in this book are intense but also “offset” by the literary ironist: the university bureaucrat, the philosopher... the juxtapositions

between “character” and their “materials” (gardens, brothel etc), make for generative slippages that are wry but also deadly! This book should be published for these two lines alone:

will establish an Australian narrative
within flexible open plan design

never mind the many hundreds of other brilliant lines. Philip Neilsen is one of the most “extractable” Australian poets—his smarts are in his turns of phrase and conceptualising of ideas into pithy, sharply turned units of “saying” that always have good “sound quality.” He listens. He replays.

Another thread that enlivens this book is the literary text, or more specifically characters from literary texts, and even writers themselves as “characters.” His poem on Philip Roth gives a real sense of the way the threads of concern slip in and out of his reading and life experience, become distilled in conjecture and consideration of something outside the him/self. But he’s there, segueing in and out of the subject, the “he” is outside himself but the authorial voice is also implicated. It makes for a lush if dystopic interaction with the “world” (real or constructed):

Philip Roth is correcting novel proofs
when he looks out his French window
at the silver birches with their triangular leaves
and there is Alex Portnoy limping alongside him,
arguing, the two of them together.

The I, the “he,” the slippages of pronouns make this poetry elusive, sometimes distant, sometimes weirdly autobiographical. I love the array of voices that implicate the poet but also show “him” apart. This is a sophisticated control, manipulation and projection of voice.

Ventriloquism! A critique and irony develops disturbing subtexts when we consider the poems in this light:

From now I will hunt those who gossip and muck-rake,
who trade in rumour and innuendo.
I will update my skill-set

from psychopath to psychopomp,

to be a humble guide to the underworld
in the shape of a long eared owl.

and that's what poems should do, disturb! The satirist is implicated in his most forceful critiques, the deft satirist knows this and works with it. And confronting the directly "personal," the self survives the impact through a cool, collected distance that inflects almost catastrophic impact and damage, almost as if poetry becomes an act of survival:

My first dead body is when I am ten.
A buzz below the shimmer
tells us someone has drowned near the rocks.

There's also a strange relationship between the teacher and student, the writer and reader, between those in different relationships to authority. That authority might be the "state" (always to be questioned) or maybe a writer or philosopher. I have been wondering a lot about the uneasy presence of Nietzsche in this work, the stress of engagement, the desire for an ontology that will always be corrupted. This is a book full of loss and hopes for redemption, of elegy synched with epiphany, of the rock goddess and illness, of possibility and loss. In many ways, it's an elegy on multiple levels—personal, for friends, loved ones, family, the planet. But there's hope in the poetic gesture, the "seeing" that might illuminate. All the teaching, all the lessons, all the reports we make, will only create a distance between subjects, create objects in a world so in need of a compassionate subjectivity. How we perform and what we really want to be are at odds: there's a real tension and anxiety at work in many of these poems, which is excitingly unusual given the absolute confidence of delivery. This is a senior poet who has complete control over his material but the material surprises him as well. Maybe some of the answers I look for are in this stanza:

Lecturing from the afterlife
Nietzsche insists we must find a way
to catch the last moment
of ripeness before decay.

Ponder it. I am. A brilliant book. A standout.

About the author

John Kinsella's most recent books of poetry include *On the Outskirts* (UQP, 2017) and *Open Door* (UWAP, 2018), which is the final volume of his Jam Tree Gully trilogy. His latest novel is *Lucida Intervalla* (UWAP, 2018).