

Launch of *Anywhy* by Jennifer Harrison
North Fitzroy Arms Hotel, 6 December 2018

Jennifer Harrison and I have been friends for some thirty years, give or take, and it's close enough to exactly a decade since Jenny, with her customary style and eloquent grace, sent my book of prose-poems, *Autographs*, out into the world. Well, I'm honoured and delighted to be standing here tonight to launch *her* splendid new collection, *Anywhy*.

We are offered, here, the solid anchorage and authority of a poetry we can immediately trust, and the rich colourings of a horizon that shifts and undulates—within the lines on a page and across the pages, outward and inward and back again, each poem like a fresh pearl in a subtly constructed necklace of object, observation, thought and experience. The subjects and settings flow in a generous opening-up of poetic concerns—from a street in France on page 1, straight to the microcosm of 'Fungi', over to the planetary macrocosm of 'Absolute Zero', then cutaways to 'Batik', Horatio Nelson's 'Emma Hamilton', beyond 'Shells' on a quiet beach, and off into itineraries that visit archaeology, an anatomy room, René Char, possums, phrenology (a foretaste of a book to come), films, gardens, Sumi Jo, the Warsaw Zoo—and so it goes.

The opening poem, 'Provence' [1], sets a mood of both public ceremony and private unease: an imminent street protest march in Avignon, somehow intensified by the zoological details embossed on a two-cent coin discovered in the poet's pocket:

What threat can there be? What trepidation
catches inside me somewhere primitive
and old, somewhere deep inside creation—

The unease may lift, or hover, or vanish, or become transformed—the scene opens, and recedes, into mixed and ambiguous possibility. Something similar happens in the very next poem, 'Fungi' [3], where we read:

There is no ending
to shadow, to the

nature that explains
us to the deep earth

But shadows, like light, can bend, or arrive, or disappear—they *travel*, and we learn to travel with them, with both shadow and light, while we continue to question and, perhaps sometimes, explain. The book's title hints at this. The world may be explained in limitless ways, and almost any *why* is capable of opening an aperture into one of its infinite domains. Because at the same time, we must not forget that *why* also contains *why not*.

The title word *anywhy* actually occurs close to the middle of the book, in the poem ‘The Exchange, Blackwood Village’ [34], in a moment typical of this open-hearted awareness of what abides within and about us. The lines dance around the rhetoric of question and non-answer while weaving a poem out of widely diverse strands—in this case: cockatoos, Lucretius and his *De Rerum Natura*, DNA, cancer, a clock more than time, and ‘the stars arranged / in a show unparalleled’ [78].

I might mention here Jennifer’s use, also, of a variation on her neologism: the real but rare word *anywhen*, found in ‘Grand Final’ [14]—a poem, incidentally, not quite what you might imagine from the title. Like much of this poet’s work, it carries us

forward, somewhere new
somewhere we didn’t realise we wanted to go

Under Jenny’s gaze, the natural world itself, both cosmic and microscopic, can become ‘somewhere new’—its found wonders, its fractals and filigrees, viewed (*almost* always) through the human observer’s prism. See for example ‘Coorong’ [18], or ‘Cuttlefish’ [52] (described as a *flâneuse*), or ‘Ideas of Shore’ [20], the latter a *tour de force* with its anaphoric narrative of looking and listing and, above all, feeling. It also reminds me of the significance of *walking* in these and certain other poems—*travelling*, if you will, across landscape, across time, across experience. And for an oblique glimpse of the inner life of birds, read the poem under that title [38], which concludes:

Everyone knows that Audubon shot all the birds he painted
but even his world would look drab to us now

Then there is ‘The Animals’ [56], an incantation whose lines repeat and accrue stanza by stanza, memorializing the wartime fate of more than 12,000 creatures; followed a couple of pages later by ‘Animal Mummies of Istabl Antar’ [60], its couplets a sad catalogue of what we can and yet ultimately cannot preserve:

And so they lie consecrated, anointed
brown faces decaying in papyrus

and linen sealed with melted frankincense...
They were buried with their trinkets

as they themselves were trinkets once:
bejewelled and dressed in silk pyjamas [...]

And speaking of the natural world, the exquisite painting by John Wolseley reproduced on the cover of the book is a poem in itself. You can admire it at a glance, or immerse yourself at length among its depths and contours.

With regard to length, I'd like to say something about the two long poems that form, as it were, the joint central pillars of the collection, its twin centres of gravity. They occupy an identical number of pages, and are strategically placed and spaced within the book. The first is the suite 'Nine Doors: A Curriculum of Rune Work' [24]. Its open form perfectly carries the timeless urgency of its concerns. Notably, punctuation is completely suppressed, with lines interrupted only by strategic caesuras of five character-spaces. These are far more than elegies or laments—each Door is a cry against a different face of darkness, a cry for light, and ultimately for life. (Two of the poems are dedicated *in memoriam*—one to Gillian Meagher, the other to the poet's close friend Janet Zeleznikow.)

The second extended sequence and equally longest piece is 'War Photography and the Minaret of Umayyad' [41]. It unfolds in a compelling progression of spare, short-lined, pungent poems, some almost like minimalist journal entries, in a chain structure, with the last word or phrase in each of its 13 sections repeated as the heading for the next. This effective device is a hinge propelling the reader across the changing yet unchanging face of warfare through the ages, pausing to gaze briefly at each.

But of course there are many moods at work, and at play in this book—from the solemn and level-headed to the exuberant, the witty, the humorous. Playfulness and irony combine in the alphabetically calm but deadly serious list-poem 'Air Variations in C & D' [10]. It has a companion-piece later in the book, 'Air Variations in L & M' [51], which begins:

 this is my mother's lavender
 leaning on an archipelago of bees
 but what is methodology?
 the lottery of lost millions?
 minor birds mating above a middling lawn?

As for politics, it was a mischievous but inspired touch to place 'First Female Prime Minister' [13] opposite '*Cacciata dei progenitori dall'Eden*' [12], the response of the world's first woman to Masaccio's painting *Adam and Eve*!

We even get a quirky glance into the fraught science of genetic mutation with this sobering thought from 'DeoxyriboNucleic Acid' [62], which imagines:

 the possibility of errors miscopies dead-edits
 mutations like typos ruining the body's page

A great image, isn't it? Jenny's poems abound with similes, metaphors, and many surprising, exhilarating turns of phrase. Her vocabulary seems prodigious—in the very first poem I learnt two words I didn't know: *deimatic* and *poikilotherm*. These weren't the only ones: later came *meiotic* [62] and *hiemal* [71]. Each of them sent me straight to the *OED*. But this erudition is

the opposite of showy—lightly-wielded, it's always in the service of the poem. After all, as with all serious poets, Jenny's work is in large part about language itself. The meditation titled 'Cnidarian' [58] (another interesting word, referring to aquatic invertebrates of the phylum Cnidaria), is one of many examples of how she brings together language, science and the human realm. Here are its closing lines:

love itself
like coral is tenanted, occupied:
a trophy without pedestal, a vase
within the old mind where sorrow shelters
which we protect from harm with our lives

And I can't resist quoting here also from 'Brief Reflection on Words' [23], a sonnet dedicated to Miroslav Holub:

science almost intends us to outwit conceit
but doesn't poetry make conceit as obsolete
as that suitcase of paper dolls (so pretty)
I once carried everywhere, lonely as a city?

The dimension of the personal is seldom far from the surface in *Anywhy*—Jenny's is a searching, sensitive, honest poetic in which knowledge of the outer world is intricately linked to a striving to locate and understand the inner. I think it's fair to say that, for most poets, memory's narrative is a medium readily channelled; but some of the poems in this collection show how deftly and insightfully observation and recollection can be intertwined.

This can emerge, for instance, in the eloquence of a sudden character-sketch in the poem 'Hardware' [11]:

and when I stand before my father's favourite place—
the tiers of bolts, screws and nails—
I imitate his knowing look and priestly air

Or it can luxuriate in pure reminiscence, as in 'Movie Night' [67], which recalls, among its memorabilia:

the first time you held
a boy's hand, his fingers

pressing
pressing yours for more

Look also at 'Naos of the Decades' [16], with Egyptology as a fulcrum for a delicate meditation on grief.

The shapes and tonalities of the poems, of course, shift with their terrain. Traversing the poems in *Anywhy*, one becomes aware of the poet's formal and architectural versatility, and her command of rhythm. Jenny employs a mixture of stanzaic approaches and patterning: some regular or conventional, others inventively individual, even experimental. This variety includes two rhymed sonnets—'Night Light' [32] and the aforementioned 'Brief Reflections on Words'—and a pantoum, 'Photograph by Walker Evans, 1937' [40]. Line-lengths vary considerably, and the careful ordering of the poems also ensures a comfortable alternation of poetic densities as we advance through the book.

And something interesting happens with the punctuation. There are absolutely no end-of-line commas, and no full-stops, in any of the poems! Their job is taken over throughout by ellipses (three dots). This insistence on uniformity lends an extra layer of stylistic integrity to this collection, and to the atmosphere of its poemscape. (Dashes, colons, semicolons and question-marks, by the way, are not banished.)

As I head towards the close of these reflections, it seems appropriate to mention two more poems, both of them, in a sense, ekphrastic—one foregrounding the musical arts, the other the visual. In 'Seven Phrasings for Sumi Jo' [69] the poet explores the artistry of the Korean lyric coloratura soprano—and extols the power of music. She writes:

her archaeology repairs something damaged in me
her voice tests the places
where the acid of life has burned a little scar
I am inexactly healed open to where I've been

And right near the end of the book we find 'Garawan' [76], a moving tribute to the Yirrkala artist Garawan Wanambi—another sonnet, its lines unfolding in real time. The subtitle references the work *Marrangu, ceremonial pole*. I'd like to quote this poem in full:

From the world's pattern of shapes you chose
to paint the geometry of diamonds and though we
have not met I too will introduce myself to you
through art—this pen my stick, this line my line—
a broken circle tracking back from lichen to bark
past iconostasis, back to the land that existed
before land's market-price defined the ocean's edge...
Linear time is not time, but a form
clenching, unclenching its cold heat, the fist of a tree
its surface cracking open under burning sun...
Four more lines to decorate, Garawan, with sea mist, shells
a delicate fish spine; certainty, uncertainty: yours and mine—
all our presence is brief but before art was ceremony
and before memory: the moon's leaf

What I greatly enjoy and admire in *Anywhy* (as elsewhere in Jennifer’s poetry) is the rich flow of ideas, a chequerboard more than a jigsaw, a journey with many branch-lines that meet, cross, intersect—in an effort to distil, to crystallize ‘a knowledge that belongs to a larger universe of time...’ [37]. Jenny displays a talent for celebrating the fascination of the unusual or obscure, the hidden intricacies of the commonplace. Her writing reveals a Renaissance woman to whom there is virtually nothing ‘in heaven and earth’ that is not deserving of interest and poetic scrutiny. This questing intelligence, a profound compassion, and a deep love of the world in all its multiplicities—evident in all her work (within and outside of poetry)—forms an undercurrent that flows steadily and strongly through the pages of this collection.

Congratulations to Jennifer Harrison on a superb new volume of poetry; and congratulations as well to Kevin Pearson and Gail Hannah. Black Pepper has been a true stalwart among independent poetry publishers for nearly thirty years, and we wish them continued success. So on that note, as I vacate the floor to Jenny, it’s with enormous pleasure that I now declare *Anywhy* officially launched.

[*Alex Skovron*]