

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Teri Louise Kelly. *Girls Like Me* (Wakefield Press, 2009)

Girls Like Me is Teri Louise Kelly's debut poetry collection, though she is no stranger to performance. This new collection follows two volumes of memoirs – *Sex, Knives & Bouillabaisse* (2008) and *Last Bed on Earth* (2009), all published by Wakefield Press. Its publication was supported by a grant from the Richard Llewellyn Arts and Disability Trust and it contains a generous 111 poems over 95 pages.

This is punk poetry. It is 'in ya face'. A blend of dirty realism that has its roots in Charles Bukowski with possibly a hint of e.e. cummings. There are lashings of lower case typeface and more than the occasional, possibly intentional, misspelling. This is poetry that doesn't conform and doesn't behave. Forget grammar and forget the rules! This is dysfunctional, marginalised, outsider poetics that interrogates saccharine versions of the world and flaunts its own paradigm of psychoses and desire.

At the outset, by title alone, *Girls Like Me* indicates its *différance* (in the Derridean sense) and difference (in the literal sense). It declares 'I am not like the other girls' but holds out the hope that maybe there are other 'girls like me'. It seeks to represent the experiences of a 'girl like me' to an audience that is very likely 'other', while it also hopes to connect with readers who are metaphorically, or actually, 'like me', or who at least have the empathy to enter a different world and strive to understand it.

Teri Louise Kelly has lived more than one life in her time or, as the cover blurb states, her 'life has been lived both within, and beyond, the borders of the genetic binary system.' She began life as a boy, Luiz, in the Northern hemisphere, and now lives as a transgender woman in the Southern hemisphere. It is unsurprising then that the majority of the poems in this collection deal in some way with issues of identity and gender. Other poems incorporate topics such as sex, death, survival, drugs, self-harm, and the attractions of love and minor crushes. There are additional subjects – a poem about the sinking of the Titanic for instance – several about people, such as 'Pam', 'Ian Curtis' and 'Camille Carcrash', and a couple about *the gaze*.

The contents page offers titles such as 'Girl With a Glass Eye', 'YOU ARE NOT A PUNK PUNK', 'Thatz Feminista Mista!', 'L.U.S.T.' and 'australian blow job' to name but a few. The second to last poem in the book, 'The Libertine (End)' – a five word poem – asks: 'DO YOU LIKE ME NOW?' and placed thus seems to seek approval for what has been revealed in the preceding pages. The poet has opened her heart, bared her soul and wants to be accepted, or conversely, expects that her frank disclosure will elicit the predictable response of aversion.

There are four collaborative poems. 'Feral Dykes' was written with female artist Recyclopath and is essentially a poem about lesbians who fish, wear flannel, guzzle home brew, grow vegetables and talk trash. It is a poem of eleven lines, with only three to four syllables in each line, which does little more than associate a handful of traits with 'feral dykes'. 'Slippery When Wet', written with Amelia

Book reviews: *Girls Like Me* by Teri-Louise Kelly. Debra Zott.
Transnational Literature Volume 2 No 2 May 2010.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Walker, could be about the reality of the human condition and a refutation of spiritual love/experience. It begins

After all that hype,
turned out my heart was nothing more,
than a thirsty red muscle.

and ends with the lines ‘as my precious fluid drips incessantly / onto a sistine floor’ (66).

A poem written in collaboration with Jenny Toune is titled ‘superfluous to all extents’. It is clearly a poem dealing with gender reassignment

woman sighs across the mire as man
consecrates his gender: cauterizes
their place in the sect of metabolism
...
poisons her manhood with shooting stars (69)

The imagery is predominantly Biblical – tower of Babel, Eden, a wailing woman, and prophets of doom – and the focus seems to be on external attitudes to physical transformation, told in the third person, rather than inner feelings. A first-person narrative might have brought readers closer to an understanding of the poem’s intent, and left them feeling less alienated.

The final collaborative poem in the collection was written with Kerryn Tredrea. ‘immorality now’ is the most accomplished of the collaborative poems. It employs sustained imagery throughout its two stanzas, each of thirteen lines. Art is the medium, so there are references to the tools and associations of making and exhibiting art, deftly blended with sexual desire. The first stanza will provide a taste of the whole.

blow me up and hang me in a gallery
i would be the nude in the ruben’s room.
feel my libido being smeared across a
palette of indecencies, make me a
water coloured harlot for dante to admire.
source my oils from exotic places,
paint my pécadillos down to the creases,
stroke, lick, breathe me a heartbeat
in a body that has no boundaries.
Drip my desire onto pre raphaelite men
then wipe me clean with a turpentine rag.
decorate your cube with a spattered vulgarity,
it will be worth it. (72)

The poem continues in this vein and ends with the satisfying lines: ‘the subtle shade of knowing that however deep the / dive my eyes will follow’ (72).

Girls Like Me won’t be everyone’s cup of tea or drug of choice but it dares to lift the shades on a world of hypocrisy and stands naked at the window, ready to share its observations and occasional witticisms, along with its inimitable experience and its desire.

Deb Matthews-Zott