

The Tram Conductor's Blue Cap

by Michael Harlow.

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It was a pleasure to be asked to review this latest book of poetry from Michael Harlow. Readers of this journal would be aware of my positive review of *Cassandra's Daughter*. This collection has an epigraph from German-French sculptor, painter, and poet, Jean Arp, one of the founders of the Dada movement in art: "Things that are familiar depend on this / magical, almost impossible subworld."

Magic and play characterise this collection. Even the title is hugely playful. It can be taken literally, of course, and you'll find that there is a poem in the collection with this title also. The word "conductor", however, has associations with music. Is this a man who conducts trams themselves, or a conductor who spends his life on trams? And why blue? Is blue here symbolic of the world of art... the defamiliarised world of the imagination – as it is in Wallace Stevens' famous poem "The man with the blue guitar", with its refrain: "Things as they are / are changed upon the blue guitar", in turn painted in response to a painting by Picasso.

We might expect in this book, then, a poetic that embraces transformation via defamiliarisation. A poem that occurs early in the book, "In a field of snow", won Harlow first prize in an international poetry competition in 2008. It is in sonnet form and this is the octave:

At the window the light rising out of its late lying
down with the night; called or uncalled how it enters
the deep hurt behind words; and you see as if again
for the first time, the piercing blue shoulder of the far

mountain scarfed in snow; the chevron patch of dark
firs below. And there: a solitary twig of a boy, face
down, no taller than the stalking post put there to
mark
the way someone said, to ease the pain of telling it.

Let me make a few brief points about this thematically, and then technically, since you're not going to exhaust this poem in a hurry. The dawning light – active and unheralded – functions as illumination (as it has done in countless poems anchored in a romantic discourse).

In this poem, the light operates as an incision, invading a region that has yet to achieve verbal form. It is the "you" of the poem that is subject to the transformative power of this particular kind of light. Notice that the poet does not write the rather clichéd "see again as if the first time" but rather "see as if again for the first time".

The scene unfolding here, in the "as if" light of the imagination, is a *first* revisiting. The scene begins with a panoramic shot ("the piercing blue shoulder of the far / mountain scarfed in snow" and moves to the close-up of a singular object, a "solitary twig of a boy, face /down...". "Stalking" is an odd adjective for "post", but the latter word suggests a message as well as a solid, wooden pole. "Way" also has two associations, a direction and a way (inadequate) of saying, particularly in relationship to the human condition's tragic underbelly. Is the boy dead? It's hard to tell, but there is something deeply tragic about the nature of his isolation in this landscape where the human and the natural are dissolved in one another: the mountain is scarfed, the boy is a twig and the post stalks. Personification here is not ornament. It is a condition of being.

There are a number of things going on technically here which are noteworthy. One is the use of the caesura in most of these lines. I'm referring to the syntactical pauses that occur within most of the lines rather than at the end. The end of each line becomes a moment of suspense – both pause and momentum which has an effect on meaning. For example, the word "mark" buys two meanings: *mark the way* and *mark the way someone said*. Something else of note here is the use of sound colouring. Take the first line and a half: "At the window the light rising out of its late lying / down with the night." You've got internal rhyme ("light"/"night"), internal half-rhyme ("light"/"late") and alliteration. There is also control of intonation which mirrors the meaning, namely, a rising intonation carried by the "ing" words leading to a falling intonation at the start of line two. What I'm drawing attention to here is craft and revision. You just don't get these effects by dashing off a poem and being satisfied with it.

The sestet reads:

His hat a thumb-stroke of yellow: on his back your red
bag: inside it, you swear you would hear all the lost
conversations we might have had; the few years
a vanished time. And time again, so little being said

when so much is meant, you are waiting for more
than this dark stain against the white page of snow.

Like the Shakespearean sonnet, the resolution (of sorts) has to wait until the final couplet. My interpretive comments above, of course, are my own gestures towards a meaning and hardly likely to suggest closure. The use of pronouns in this poem actually allows a reader to become the “you” from whom the poet has detached himself. The “he” is even more objectified – seen from a distance. The “we” allows a range of interpretations: the speaker and an intimate, the speaker and himself in a kind of inner dialogue. Overall, though, there is the sense of loss and a fragile sense of additional meanings that might arise from the act of sustained attention to the unresolved past that this poem seems to be emblematic of but which takes one only so far, since poems are a not quite adequate portal to that “impossible subworld” that Arp refers to. At the end of the poem, the boy of recall has become the poem on the page: “this dark stain against the white page of snow”, but there is always more to come. Poems are beginning and not ends.

You might find it something of a relief to move from the intensity of “In a field of snow” to “Canticle”, here quoted in its entirety.

This young boy and his sister
on their skipping way to school
and everywhere tossing shouts
of laughter into the air. In a shower

of light on the bright whitewash wall
of the Church of Saint Dionysia, they throw
their shadows. They sign themselves
and their animal friends, letting words

talk to each other; they tell their dreams.
They do no less that risk delight: despite
every dark thing there is in the world,
there will always be music. . And they
wonder: what is the name of this song?

The same crafty things are going on as in the first poem I discussed. The rhythm here, so important to tone, is much lighter: a basic three-stress line compared to a six-stress line in the former poem, but with the same use of caesura. The light is also key player, but with a presence that is more categorically redemptive. Release is in the air, and in this instance, words are the medium that afford the tapping into (“telling”) the underworld, the world of dream.

I hope that I’ve said enough here to convince readers that Harlow is at the peak of his powers and is in the top echelon of New Zealand poets currently practising their craft. The two examples I have given suggest something of the range that you’ll experience in reading this book. Like his own “tram conductor”, Harlow can be thought of as “inside a story that dreams / him”. At the best, the words of these poems capture the story or at least release it from captivity. Hopefully, they will do the same for the book’s readers.

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