

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Rachael Briggs, *Free Logic* (University of Queensland Press, 2013)**

In *Booby, Be Quiet!*, Icelandic poet and essayist Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl claims that the Icelandic literati

will now and again ordain a poet or writer a freeman, one that should no longer be revered as a mere servant of the language ... and grant them permission to play. Normally though, this permission is given afterwards, and it's nearly a matter of coincidence who gets it and who doesn't. (15)

It is somewhat baffling, in the wash-up of postmodernism, that the same could be said of Australian poetry. Of course such 'permission' is subtle rather than systematic, and all writers decide for themselves whether to yield to prevailing modes. With *Free Logic*, Rachael Briggs joins a growing list of innovators in Australian poetry who refuse to wait for posterity to grant them permission. And while this debut collection operates within certain formal parameters, the overriding impression is one of wild play, of unaffected exuberance. As she tells us in the poem 'Evening Wear', 'freedom makes the man' (41). The hero of the preceding poem, 'Paint it Pink', leaves us, 'calculating tangents in her head' (40). Ditto the poet.

Briggs was born in Syracuse, New York. Her exhilarations are not far removed from the so-called New York School of poets. Koch and O'Hara hover – the former's surreal speculation, the latter's credo: 'You just go on your nerve'.<sup>1</sup> 'Life zooms forth' (7) in *Free Logic*, and is captured in a matrix of forms modulated for each of the eight thematic sections. Love, gender, and logic are treated with wit, smarts, and a lyricism at once forensic and immediate. Both jacket blurbs attest to these poems being 'alive' in various senses of the word, alluding in part to a rare feel for narrative and character. Although none of the characters linger long (save the poet-speaker), all are successfully animated in the fewest of strokes. To this end Briggs cobbles together a kind of shorthand, free indirect style from snippets of internal monologue, dialogue, and description.

The speakers in the opening sequence, 'Twelve Love Stories', offer up their love-gifts. 'I wove you a rainbow bracelet' (9), 'I stood stark in a thicket, picking berries for my lover' (11), 'I knitted lichen shawls to warm his shoulders' (12). This is both a send-up of the besotted, and a set-up to elicit the reader's empathy when love invariably proves elusive. In the sequence, 'Solve for X and Y', protagonists are pitted against surreal scenarios, often in the form of impingements on the body. For example, 'Denise was born with a small pterodactyl / lodged in her gut' (23). The solving, or fleshing out, is done by the poems themselves as they veer into hilarious territory. The reader needn't seek metaphor and corollary in these self-contained worlds.

The crown of sonnets, 'Tough Luck', circles back on itself, the first line of the first poem, 'You think that I'm good-looking for a girl' (45), doubling as the denouement of the final poem, but serving as a question that is answered by the opening. Tiny shifts in punctuation between first and last lines create syntactical fissure, and prevent the structure becoming like a ribbon too cutely tied and curled. It is often homophones that serve as end-line rhymes – aural repetition and semantic variation, as form mirrors theme.

<sup>1</sup> Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems* (California: University of California Press, 1995) 498.

Book reviews: *Free Logic* by Rachael Briggs. Nicholas Powell.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

See how image, subject and style intersect in the closing lines of 'My Feet are Three Sizes Too Small':

Behind the mirror, sunk inside a massive  
dress-up suit, I glimpse a small, plain girl.  
She cracks her knuckles, acting butch, but then,  
she's crying in the bathroom yet again. (46)

If this is the inverse image of Rilke in his mother's frocks, it is also an inversion of the tone one might expect from themes of gender identity and childhood in a debut collection. The almost slapstick image of the girl in the oversized suit cracking her knuckles gives a comic edge to the chasm of gender binaries straddled by the speaker.

More interlinked sonnets make up 'Toothfish', which charts the bond between a funfair fish, Liszt, and a young girl, Gretchen. The narrative is cartoon fare, but the real special effects are in the language, a mix of concision and bravura that bubbles. 'He'll vanish goldfish / and sever tetras tip-from-tail'. (65)

Throughout *Free Logic* we find characters endowed with, or dreaming of, special powers with which to bust free from their physical, psychic, and linguistic limits. Little Gretchen grows bold as Ahab, but slays with love. The speaker of 'Wrath' is attacked by a bat, and fights back. Transcendence and transgression collide in 'Confessional':

The incredible human mind! It leaps a cathedral,  
soars over a sonata – and stumbles on the hillocks of the body.

I love my voice, which sings out to other women.  
Is that enough? Or must I also love my body?

You can't box up your sex and demand a refund. They'll call security.  
Security will ask where you buried the body. (85)

Every other line ends on the same abstract noun. Other poems in this sequence employ 'body', 'space', 'mind', 'time', 'world', 'pleasure', and 'will' as centrifugal forces, reverberating chords.

Of the two sequences of shorter poems, septets 'Deadly Sevenlings' deal with each of the capital vices, while 'Cryptid Riddles' drop clues to the identity of certain imaginary and mysterious animals whose proper nouns serve as double-punchlines to accounts of antipodean cultural quirks. Here is the opening of 'College Life':

Who ate all the fish fingers? Bill, your roommate  
blames some otter-beaver thing from New Zealand.  
Look, it ate your microwave meatloaf meal and  
goldfish crackers. Honestly, Bill? Fuck *you*, mate. (77)

'Logic Lectures', a suite of poems inspired by philosophy, is more persiflage than exposition, as lyric co-opts logic for some of the book's brightest poems. The generous annotations to this section will not be wasted on the curious or lay reader. The poem, 'The Phenomenal Paint Emporium', is a phantasmal tour of sensory intensities. 'Suck down a long drag of

durian / seasoned with superhighway skunk' (101).

Like Koch, Briggs has a sweet-tooth for lists: lists of candies, berries, twenty-nine slangy synonyms for tits, and male archetypes all called Ike. There is tactility and colour at every turn, and the effect is synesthetic. Pyrotechnics aside, there is also a fine sense of rhythm, and of poise:

Open your heart. Squeeze out another accordion tune for me.  
Open your watch. Dig between the gear teeth for extra time. (88)

There is riffing within repetition. Oddities distend the form endearingly, like De Saint-Exupéry's tophat/elephant inside the snake.<sup>2</sup> For all their play, these poems never preclude seriousness, and aim to be understood. The diction is clear, and instances of slang and idiom shine and delight. By bringing together the neo-formal and the playful, Briggs demonstrates the fluidity of conceptual frameworks for poetry. One wants to believe the enthusiastic naivete of *Free Logic*'s closing sentiment: 'Let's do it. Let's be anything' (112), and is charmed by this book, as by its resident, cryptid bunyip, who suggests: 'Let's be besties'. (76)

**Nicholas Powell**

---

<sup>2</sup> Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1995) 10.