

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Jaya Savige, *Surface to Air* (UQP Poetry Series, 2011)

The poetry collection *Surface to Air*, written by Jaya Savige, an award-winning Australian poet and poetry editor for The Australian newspaper, creates a challenging and, at times, mystifying experience. His poems, collated in four sections, headed 'Snorkelling Lessons', 'Circular Breathing', 'A Brief History of Risk' and 'Memory Card', take the reader from the depths of the oceans, through the streets and piazzas of Rome, to a fireworks event in Brisbane and to the galaxies. His rich and succinct use of language is replete with wonderful imagery, metaphor and references to antiquity, poets and historical events. Throughout the collection Savige interweaves moments of personal experience, such as a deathbed vigil, with hints of cynicism at the plight of Western society. In touch with the past, he questions contemporary modernisation, risk management, technology, pollution and religion. Savige seeks a peaceful respite, breathing space, in the calm of nature and in the act of writing poetry.

The opening poem 'Sand Island' takes us to the depths of the ocean where Savige explores while urgently needing to leave: 'I must leave this place'. Possibly fear dictates this urgency (3). The notion of duality, suggested by words such as cleaves, bivalves, sunder and diode, hints at creation and implies ambivalence about his snorkelling experience and his desire to surface:

Time to resubscribe
to the photic zone,

place of sunlit algae rhythms. (6)

He asks:

Will this string
of words
highlight the way

through the shifting maze
of saltmarsh islets? (6)

In an earlier stanza he observes:

This morning a stingray
seeking a poem
of its own

strayed into the estuary
of this one.

Crestfallen, it turned
at my dismissive gesture. (5)

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Still in the ocean, '5.07 a.m.' touches on writing tools, vellum and zaffre, a blue pigment, and concludes:

thumb to palm we strum
toward something
akin to calm. (8)

A calm he describes as 'this thimbleful of stillness' (9) in 'Summer Fig', beautifully addressed to a loved one, and in 'Breathing Room', where he takes a break from his desk in 'a thumb/ of sun in a tumbler' (10). 'Skin Repair' combines Savige's references to writing materials, to palimpsest, with the cleansing power of aloe set in the galaxies and seeking to decipher the messages of Callisto, 'scripted/by the tip of a trailing spinifex seedhead' (11). As in other poems in this collection, an interpretation of 'Skin Repair' is rewarded through close scrutiny of Savige's use of references to astronomy and mythology.

Brief historical notes assist the interpretation of the poems in 'Circular Breathing'. 'La Quercia del Tasso' refers to the renaissance poet Torquato Tasso who sat under an oak tree struck by lightning in 1811, a place of contemplation now polluted by tourists:

Marry me
and I'll ensure we suffer no imposters: a few initials,
some condom packets, an empty bottles of Foster's
so that no guest
will ever guess a poet took
his lunch here once, breathing crumbs
of sun. (15)

The juxtaposition of designer label shopping tourists around the Spanish Steppes in Rome alongside '26 Piazza di Spagna', the Keats-Shelley house, now a repository of a vast collection of treasured literary works, delightfully captures the atmosphere of this city. Similarly, the poem 'Circular Breathing' depicts the poet wandering amongst gelati-licking crowds and illicit markets selling fake goods where he hears the didgeridoo, expresses guilt in ignoring such buskers in King George Square, reflecting that

He doesn't do the kangaroo, the mosquito or
the speeding Holden. Just the one dark warm lush hum,
the clean energy of circular breathing, lungs
and instrument the sum, familiar as the accordion
yet strange, as though not for money, nor just for fun,
but for reasons unknowable – some vast unhurried Om. (24)

Two poems appear to depict a vigil at the bed of a dying mother. In 'The Pain Switch' Savige refers to the morphine infusion, 'useless, morphine enough/to kill a horse bucked off' (17). The double entendre in his use of 'It's time', visiting hours over or the final moments of death, is particularly moving:

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Sunlight smirks through the curtain
When the nurse shakes my wrist,
Saying *It's time*. I grasp your hand,
realise you've been holding on for this.
Your vanquished sigh, a sharp, hot fist. (17)

'Duende' reads as a homage to a mother whose voice is heard as:

the warm flint of an urgent reprimand ...
in that liminal space, lamp off, ...

scratching the inner walls of my skull,
that used to make me stop quick smart
before the roar of cross-town traffic.

How I wanted to demolish that wall,
Retrieve the warm rubble of your breath.
How I shuddered like a bulldozer in winter. (18)

The words 'duende' and 'liminal' are suggestive of being on the brink of good and evil; life and death.

As identified in the opening paragraph, underlying themes swirl through the entire collection. However I particularly appreciated the pointed cynicism and glimpses of social commentary captured in the poems collated in 'A Brief History of Risk'. For instance, in 'Crisis', a child desires to ensure the world's peace through his mouse cupped hand to catch

the wild congealing light, so that
it wouldn't spill and burn the planet
and all the coughing creatures living on it. (33)

'January' addresses a brief history of risk as the poet and his companion rationalise the probability of a plane falling out of the sky whilst eating miso ramen. Savige chides his companion for her fondness for Xanax on transatlantic flights (34). Similarly, in 'First Person Shooter', reference is made to the shooting of bloodied world events through the camera lens and the capacity to reconstruct destruction digitally. Sufficient to view footage on the web, a companion claims, but is derided with the words:

but that can't tell you what it's like to be there.
You forget we like to call it *theatre*.
You need to harden up. Oh, go on then, grope in
the darkness of you purse for ibuprofen. (39)

'Shorts Weather' sends up the westerner's proclivity for sun-tanning in 'the kingdom of Vitamin D', reminding us that 'far off in Sudan/an amputee hones a phantom tan'

(40).

In the final poem of this collection, 'Riverfire', Savige takes us to the sights, sounds, colours and pulse of a pyrotechnic display from various vantage points such as the Channel 7 helicopter. He depicts the sonic sound of the grande finale that overwhelms the tots that:

teeter in the gutter, others lunge for mums
as lovers comfort one another unconvincingly.
A family of possums trembles beneath a table
deep in the Botanical Gardens; ferns cringe. (71)

Nature and humanity as one share an exhilarating Brisbane summer experience but the mood changes as Savige is reminded of the terrifying sounds of ordnance when he sees:

a terrified toddler grip his father's beard,
and cannot help but think of their counterparts in
Baghdad.
And this might be the thing I take from here.
Coupled with the simple thrill of military muscle
tonight I get a glimpse into the mighty game,
a game that's played beyond the speed of sound and bears
little poetry. (72-3)

'Dead Air', another poem in this final section, titled 'Memory Card', pays homage to Merlin Luck, a Big Brother participant in 2004, who was voted off the show and used the event to silently protest against the plight of refugees in mandatory detention by taping his lips and holding up a placard to the TV audience:

The gobsmacked host
couldn't turn to grist

your expensive silence,
mute shout out to those
like you, we locked up
then voted off the show. (63)

Perhaps as a reader who writes poems with a political nuance my review has been selective. However I have no doubt that *Surface to Air* will engage and excite poetry readers of diverse interests and persuasions.

Loula S. Rodopoulos