

Judy Johnson

Nomadic

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Reviewed by Robyn Rowland

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There is a deep satisfaction in reading poetry when its craft presents us with an innovative way of viewing imagistic connection, or surprises us with unusual juxtapositions of objects and nature. Judy Johnson invites us in *Nomadic* (Black Pepper Press, 2004) to journey with her like this, both through time and place, and through threaded images, into the heart of those things that matter to her. At the personal level, there is the end of love; the small child closeted literally in the past; a girl dealing with her father's death; her father's love frozen behind photography and her mother's passing away. At the political level, there is the poet's desire to hold up to us our own unjustified dissatisfaction with life compared to, for example, the deprivation and suffering of Africa.

Her first book, *Wing Corrections* (Five Islands Press, 1998) contained well-crafted short poems that used a brightness of image powerfully. In *Nomadic*, this skill with images has expanded into a mature and more complex form. Often, rather than evoking feeling, the poems strike the reader with awe at the turned image, at the way they clarify understanding. The craft is impressive. Here there are chains of images – lines on a map perhaps – often discrete and seemingly disconnected objects or creatures, that become our trail: their relationship to each other exposed by the poet so that we see them anew, reshaped.

In 'Girl on a Paling Fence', we move from the image of the girl balancing on the fence, to her dead father lying in the house, ready for visitors. The experience is woven through a sweep of particulars that draw us into a visual picture of the moment. The girl's sandals are blue, like the colour of a plastic necklace of her mother's that the girl once broke and hid, 'piling its kaleidoscope of/ planets into a box under her bed. Now she threads herself / along the string of fence ...'

We look down at the the girl's 'two striped feet with their strapped-in cargo / of toes'. Her mother is drowning in grief: 'all morning her mother's / eyes have been brown stones sinking beneath the weight of / water'. The girl has taken objects from her father's bedside table – a tobacco tin and a pipe: she doesn't touch 'the heaviness of the objects she has taken for fear of a similar / drowning'.

She keeps the two apart by the

warmth of a body-width. She measures their coldness this way

as she measures the fence

by the flat spaces where she can place her feet and not by the

spikes that divide them.

Finally, her lonely grief is caught as she balances '... the pipe / on one side, tobacco tin / on the other and in the middle, her unlit heart.'

Johnson has a deft hand with nature. I am delighted by the variations on the moon that as a crescent in 'Excavation' ('Nomadic' sequence) 'hangs like a pale cheese in a muslin sack', and transforms into 'the ghost gum moon' in 'Thirty-four years on'. In 'Going home for her dying' it becomes 'that jack-o-lantern / tuber/ the moon, the colour of pumpkin the only way my mother / liked it. Rind / as hard as charity and inside, the flesh dry as orange dessicated / coral'.

In her hands, the ocean is brim-full of intent, of secrets and of a fever for understanding. In 'Shipwrecks' 'The ocean / mocks the geometric absolutes land aspires to, and surface / becomes another dimension, as the breeze-pampered sailcloth / of your skin adapts to the heavy press of atmospheres.' 'Diving the Westralian coast' leaves us 'just suspended at the / border between estrangements.' In the captivating poem 'The Way a Lighthouse Knows her Keeper', it is the inanimate lighthouse made living that holds the keeper above the 'caw and cackle of ocean' the 'colour of that middle-blue Faber / Castelle pencil.'

In another fine poem, 'Stone', it is the land that becomes animate as it draws the carvers to itself 'yearning for transformations.' 'Stone predicts in its own time and way' and as the suicide falls, it 'is practising its shapechanging' :

...The faster they fall, the

smoother

and more impassive the face, until those who go this way are

so reminded

of their own elusive god, that in the end the brokenness barely

surprises them.

Johnson knows that she's playing the line between image and reality; between image and its meaning; between image and feeling, felt and conveyed. 'Image' she warns, 'divides us from who we really are' ('Light and skin'). She is at her best when interlocked images flow from her naturally, without expectation. It may fall flat though, when the stretch of the image is overdone and the poem seems to be trying too hard to find that odd juxtaposition which is her forte. In 'The Giant Statues and the Birdman' ('Encountering Easter Island sequence') the statues are ventriloquists that moan in the wind 'exhaling warm breath on summer nights / like honey mixed with talc.' Here the lightness of breath and talc, mix uncomfortably with dense honey, so the line doesn't succeed for me.

A lot is travelling on those directed collages of image. They frequently set us up for the last significant lines. Nature and animals are often transformed into otherness, our selves in some form, so that we are enticed to anthropomorphize ourselves in order to find the nub of meaning in the poem; in life. In 'Amphibian', there is a merging of lover with tadpole/ frog. In 'Rainforest Bats' the 'ghosts of orgasms' drift from bedrooms to inhabit the bats and their squeaks are 'our playful pillow talk'. The 'points of inevitability we pass in / lovemaking acts', 'move us towards a larger dying'. The rustling of leaves and bats in the forest leaves us

...unable to decide

if the corresponding flutters we feel

are the beginnings of arousal, or the unfolding wings of fear.

In 'The African Spider Cures', a substantial and complex sequence, we are to become the spider, to 'lurch side to side.../ until you feel the shuffle of fine hair on your legs and back... extend your incisors..'

This sequence takes us wandering through Africa: its colour, its pain, its endurance. We are shown how we weave our discontent while others live life hard. Inside the spider – trapdoor, huntsmen – on the floor of the forest or strung across the river – we are without language and can 'consider the wisdom of silence'. We are admonished to admit our self-pity, our inner poison, and in our smallness, the animal we have become:

Watch it twist and turn inside the silk it's rolled in, stuck to

what you are determined it will neither die of, nor escape from

while ever you are so dexterous at weaving discontent. ('2 Self Pity')

The web becomes the image of entanglement, of connection, of death, of safety, of buoyancy and of persistence. The web itself is a powerful symbol: when spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion, so the Ethiopian saying goes. Spider silk itself can be curative. I'm searching for meaning here. We are I think, left with the poet's own challenging ambivalence in the meaning of the spider's cure.

Moving from the creation of a drum from the Baobab tree, as spider we move up into the trees, along the Argungu, thrown from Krakatoa, through Kampala alongside the Masai, into Levubu, Fez, Morocco, Somalia, the Sahara and finally Victoria Falls. All the while, the harsh driving tone of the poet, is making sure we haven't missed the sharp edges of the journey. And why? To drop our easy self-indulgence, our one-eyed first world vision, while recognising the connections between all things and the web that holds us:

Take it as a sign. Know that there's nothing else for it, but to

persist.

It's either that, or stand stiff as a cliff-edge old testament

prophecy

and be eroded just the same, while the migratory world keeps

falling and falling.

In this sequence Johnson also reveals her poetics, her process. In 'Flying' in her first book, she wrote:

Not so easy to dismantle the puzzle

and see flying for what it is,

what most things are:

a set of compromises – a series

of subtle wing corrections

to make the pieces fit.

Reminiscent of this unveiling, she writes in 'The African Spider Cures':

*... Let these images collide, as well as all
those other
childhood antidotes and poisons. Allow each its own freeze
frame, but see

how they are all recorded against the same backdrop, so, like
an early
animation, the light thumb of dreams may flick through the
pages
creating a seamless movie. (1. Disappointment)*

This 'freeze frame' recurs throughout the book as method and image: in 'Heat', 'Thirty-four years on', 'Watching the storm' (in 'Five Poems of Light'). In 'Photography at Dingo creek, 1967' the father photographer misses the lived moment to capture it in the camera, 'her childhood / preserved like the fossil of some sea-going creature ..to trap her in the infinitesimal shutter-speed wink / between the moment and the moment's loss.' Ironically, she is caught too, between the living of it and the recording of it. Yet here is a purpose of poetry: to be the snapshot album of moment.

Interestingly, poems about a girl's father dying that occur in three poems, speak from the third person. Yet the poem on her mother's dying is first person direct. In these poems feeling is more strongly conveyed in comparison to the more distanced, yet finely crafted, 'traveller' works, through Easter Island, New Guinea, Africa.

Personally, I like to be moved by poetry, and the title sequence, 'Nomadic', which captured the sadness of a relationship ending, and the familial poems, are closest to the heart. The 'Five poems of Light' for the poet's mother are deeply moving and loving poems, as Johnson remembers a childhood ('childhood splinters are working their way out' we are told in 'Splinters') through to her mother's death. Some of the strongest writing is here, with its crisp imagery, moving narrative and precision of craft. I love the crystalline beauty of '3. The Day of the Toboggan – Kosciusko 1973' and the beautiful flowing lines following a kite outside the hospital window to the inevitable death: her mother 'hungry all her life', at the end

*... relaxed on the pillow, intent on becoming
the bone
the flesh spends all its life peeling back from in incidental
layers.

Until, by nightfall, the spars shone through, devoid of
unnecessary material: a frame*

that the air eventually lost patience with supporting

and plummeted to earth. Leaving nothing

to show she had ever flown except,

in the broken room, still attached,

our long trail of sorrow. (5. Her Last Day)

Rarely does Johnson seem uncertain of what she wants to convey. But with the folding and unfolding of image, there is a risk that purpose outside image might become lost, the poem fading merely into a made thing, an artifact. 'Heat' might be one of these, the concluding lines falling diffidently, compared to the wonderful twisted word usage of 'Splinters' with its 'lung-thirst of sawdust; a smell of / imprisoned forests and hard rain sifted / from an axe-cut sky.'

I felt that the two sequences following Chinese poetry read a little like exercises in mimicry, detracting from Johnson's own voice. Line endings seem crucial to me in the creation of the poet's voice: the voice that captivates; that guides; that invigorates or impassions. Line breaks direct the living pulse of breath, with its essential shadow - stillness/no breath. The breath units of voice drive the rhythm of the poem, which is crucial to the success of free verse poetry. Sometimes movement into varying form on the page enhances the quality of directness in communication of voice.

Johnson wrote in 'The woman who painted the sky' (Wing Corrections): 'the critics said for years she was too predictable, / painting only one shade of sky'... so 'in the end she compromised' – 'they said her art had come of age./ but it felt like selling out' and 'she never had the dream again where her body/ let go its own blue centre and spiralled / up to light like egg white/ in glass blown air.'

This is always the risk of falling for fashions in form, and Johnson tells us here that she knows it. So I felt disappointed when I read the prose poems. Unpunctuated, they made the inner reader stumble looking for breath, trying to find a flow that was blockaded by an invisible fence. They seemed to lack the energy and intensity of the free verse forms. I was, however, delighted to find such faults, bearing in mind the Persian carpet makers' belief that flaws have to exist in, or in fact need to be added to, the best of rugs to ensure the weaver will not be struck down for impersonating the perfection of god. Nomadic carries the weft and weave of well-made poetry, and for this, it is a pleasure to read.