

ROBYN ROWLAND – LAUNCH OF JOHN FOULCHER'S 'THE SUNSET ASSUMPTION'

The Sunset Assumption Pitt Street Poetry, 2012

Adapted from the launch speech on 19 July, 2012 at Collected Works Bookshop, Melbourne.

At Pitt Street Poetry, a new poetry imprint in Sydney, the venture begins with the production of John Foulcher's ninth book of poetry, *The Sunset Assumption*. I fell in love during the reading of this book – so strong were my feelings. But 'in love with what?', I kept querying. Not the expressions of love itself: human love is an assumed thing in this book.

Earlier work by Foulcher has canvassed the children, the marriage. Here, in Paris, there are only 'fragments from home': a smooth comfort of long-term loving, the shared memories that cannot be come by in any other way. In a foreign city, the poet dreams 'about houses that sprout familiar walls', where the light is 'wild moonlight'.

This book is rather about spiritual living and history; about light and dark but not always in an oppositional way. It concerns our beliefs about religion and about art, and also about the rightness and wrongness in historical moment and politics.

The poems are mature and reflective, emerging out of Paris, yet not confined by the place or its history. 'City of Light', the place also has its shadows, and the book explores both as it flows back and forth between concrete solidity and the ethereal, intangibles.

The form of poetry ranges from prose poems to couplets, with short-ended lines and mostly short poems. There is an astonishing newness of image, a stunning gift of presenting the old as alive, as in 'Snow':

Snow

One morning there's snow, peeling from the great frescoes of sunrise. Big flakes, as intricate as feathers. It's like the end of the world. Going outside, you raise your eyes to the snow, and it feels as if some kind of insect were crawling all over your face. Small steps of cold, the warmth in your blood. The snow has an air of providence. It forgives the streets for the thing they've become, it lets the future get on with itself. It allows the trees a dark underside and it makes no judgment about cobblestones or bitumen. When you walk across it, your footsteps sound like the crunching of bones.

Foulcher's early work was starkly imagist: 'no ideas but in things' as William Carlos Williams put it. It moved then towards the 'learning curve' of narrative, before entering a more surrealist form. In this book, the flowering of all those developments becomes a brilliant companionship of clarity, opaque possibility

and imagist beauty as we are drawn along the trajectory of an unveiling of a spiritual belief both diffuse and full of an absent presence. This book is playing with light in many forms, a preoccupation of Foulcher's. Perhaps because it light is as ethereal as soul. Perhaps because it carries its companion, the dark. Possibly because it is a useful shape-shifter for a poet. The first poem in this book introduces light as character witness, the active element at play, and it flows with a kind of tenderness:

Visit

Light slips in past the curtain,
shuffling like a guest,
though it knows this room.
You get on with things,
while the light makes itself at home.
It gives back to the room
those colours you left in another place.
You try to convince it to stay,
but the afternoon comes calling for it, hurries it on
into the long evening that drifts
in and out of the air.
It leaves you the lamps in the street.
Small moons, loose change. The glow from an open door.

In 'The Suit', his mother, during his dream, inhabits a house not hers in reality but one that is 'sprinkled with light like icing sugar'. Later in the book, light spills from the paintings Foulcher uses to enter into the French Revolution, with its extremes and madness. Regarding Monet's painting *Camille Monet sur son lit de mort*, 1879:

you wonder about that light,
that tipped bowl of light
that's spilled everywhere. Where does it come from,
that light he pours over coastlines,
over the haystacks
and the shimmering lilies,
that's trickled across her bed,
her face as still as a lily, the ripples of her white nightdress?

Light assumes shape everywhere; the light of the Age of Enlightenment, the light of the spirit, of ritual or God and of the ordinary windows of home 'glinting like staples'. Yet finally, in 'Cathedral notes' near the end of the book, the poet concludes:

But the light of heaven is not bright light.
It is the light embedded in things,
that makes things as they are, as they will come to be.

'The City of light', the first sequence of 13 poems, has two personae. There is 'you' and 'the orphan' – or is it the lost child in the adult in that guise? This child reappears in poems particularly about the dark. The most powerful example of which is 'Dark ways', set under Paris in the catacombs. Children there are making their explorations of adventure and running into skinheads. It makes you scared for the child – scared for the child in a way we all can still be afraid of the dark – of that final dark. And perhaps its underground, crying our 'pink tears'.

And then, coming with him to the City of Light, there is a 'she', the lover of an ethereal sort, one suggesting a companionship, a sexual seductress, yet a companion also of loss. And 'loss is a good place to start', he writes.

We cannot know this light unless we know its companion, the dark: 'It isn't as you thought it would be. The City of Light is as dark as a grave' he writes. And it has a river that 'slices the city in two' swinging between the living and the dead; the present and the past.

And you worry about the darkness as it swings in and out. In 'Pigeons', birds that 'have crafted the art of waiting... made a profession of the dirt', know only grey instead of colour. You worry about the insinuation of despair in – 'you understand the language of pigeons. You know their place'.

In the poem 'Words', hinging on language and meaning – life's meaning – the unanswerable question is clearly posed: 'Comment ça va? In the city of light, you must find an answer to that.'

And so, the quest.

There is a swaying between the carnal and the ephemeral in *The Sunset Assumption*. In 'Body', making love, 'everything is dark', and 'it's only the body that holds you', yet that body is 'still and cold' like death. Focus is often on hands: the hands of Botticelli's Mary in his *Annunciation* as Gabriel reaches towards her – not touching, as conception will be immaculate –but aching for the open hands, the gift.

Yet in 'Winter Evening', the hands of the nuns are open in supplication. They request. They do not offer.

Physical death is the final and obvious end to the body. Death haunts these pages, scurrying out of sight in dreams at times, blood-rich on the guillotine at others. There is the dramatic murder of Marat in the bath by Corday. And the guillotining of Corday, her head 'like a piece of delicate lace', 'her blood still humming its melody of skin'.

Artists are important in *The Sunset Assumption* as historians of people and of feeling; triggers for poems coupling history and art. Monet is there, as is Rodin, Jacques-Louis David, Botticelli and a doff to Pollack. 'There's safety in art', Foulcher writes in the aptly titled 'Art'. 'You keep it an arm's length while you hold it in both hands'.

With the intimate voice of the painter Jacques-Louis David, we enter art through the French Revolution via the confronting poem 'Belief'. We are struck by the way any belief can justify perspective and action. A powerfully intimate biography of Robespierre then follows – and hence the Revolution – in poems based on the months of the Revolutionary Calendar and tagged titles reflecting the movement of seasons. Here is a complex, dark and forceful unveiling.

A major unifying thread through this book is belief; its murderous results and its astonishing compassion. And so, we come to religion. Or more specifically at first, God.

In the 'The City of Lights' sequence, God comes into the lines early. Next after the lovers! Here he is the god of judgement and rejection, standing by the bed and wanting to know about the stains. In Paris, he is everywhere, surrounded by gold and 'his prettiness draws people in'.

The struggle is on again between institutionalised religion and a true sense of spirit, reminiscent of Foulcher's wonderful earlier poem, 'Why I go to church' in *The Honeymoon Snaps* (1996), where he senses the divine in a forgetfulness of mind:

Often in the stone-yellow light of a Sunday morning service,
I'll feel something
in the congregation's forgetfulness.
something, for a moment,
more real than commerce, more physical than a kiss,
humming with the echo of stars,
the thin ice of galaxies
on those nights when everyone else is asleep.

Back into *The Sunset Assumption*, the poem 'Soul' proposes a sense of self-disappointment at his own yielding. Sitting by the Seine in the dark, pulled by the bells of the church, 'in the end where else do you [does he] go', but back to the old god with 'white hair and a white beard, wearing a robe of bloody red'. And, 'He's all those things you've come to deride'. Yet, still, 'In the end, everything is a prayer.'

Later in the book the vast space of Notre Dame is invoked, and the real question pegs itself cleanly to 'The Sunset Assumption' (the long, stunning title poem).

Here, 'absence is presence' attempting to capture spiritual essence, the moment of human/spirit connection and to 'leave in a blessing of light'. Yet this practice, these walls, limit that possibility, while outside

On the sunny side
of worship,
no-one is particular
about all the things you should think
or where a dream should go.

So what is the sunset assumption? Sunset – the final moments of light for the day, but cyclical, rising again the next. Assumption – meaning both something we take for granted and the religious meaning of transformation without death (as Mary rose into heaven). The former is our assumption of time; that our own personal histories are larger than life and have meaning beyond ourselves.

The lesson of Brother Luc – one of seven Algerian monks who refused to leave Muslim villagers and was murdered by terrorists – is that time is short:

... the brothers know
their separate lives amount to weeks or days;
Brother Luc is little more than seconds in the wind.

It is at Notre Dame where we learn that ‘everything runs into air’, and as the sun sets in Fitzroy Gardens back ‘home’ in the final poem, ‘Nothing, other than the world, goes on’.

Is spirit then too an assumption? Perhaps that latter definition holds. That personal transformation is possible before death, that the heaven we seek is here after all in a City of Light is the fulcrum of this book; its patience of pigeons, its lovers’ breath, its stars rushing to earth, or as in ‘Visit’, in its ‘small moons, loose change. The glow from an open door’.

Robert Gray once wrote of Foulcher’s work that it ‘says that the life of the spirit is a continual beginning’. Something here reminds me of Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

This book is aural, full of voices, bells and music. It’s visual with paintings, place and architectural landscapes; full of interior spaces – rooms, houses, catacombs, churches, cathedrals. It is tender and loving in the broadest sense of humanity, and full of yearning.

The poetry rides that wonderful, mysterious border between the conscious and the unconscious. That fecund place, somehow at the same time, both familiar and unknown to poets. There is a risk in that place of not finding the poem, of not finding our way. As Foulcher wrote once:

Poetry isn’t an occupation in itself; rather it’s a risk you take in responding to life, and it depends on having a life to lead. And it is risky: you’re never sure what’s going to happen when poetry comes to you ...

Writing a poem is like fishing in the dark pool of the subconscious: when there’s a tug on the line, you’re filled with excitement, but the exact shape of the creature you’ll pull in from the murky depths of the mind will only become clear in the act of its capture on the page.’ (‘A word from the poet’

in *What on Earth Possessed You*. Selected, Halstead Press, 2008)

The poems in this book have captured the vow of marrying the surreal with the solid, and we wander a little uncertain and anxious with the poet through Paris' churches and back streets, along the river, and through the snapshots of the past, to seek the answer to that question in 'Cathedral notes' at Notre Dame: 'as the centuries pile around / what difference does it make / that anyone raised these stones?'

It is important that the lines in 'Cathedral notes' – 'I'm lost, as I always am' and 'we are lost, and almost at rest' – come near the end of the book. The journey through Paris is not a search that will be finalised. It will not provide answers. It provides pathways, a processes to move forward into an almost-grasped understanding.

What is discarded – old versions of god, religious certainty and dogma, past violence and political surety – leads to what is kept: a faith in the natural world as a beating pulse of meaning; love in its tenderness for things that arise out of the meeting between a natural world and human-made cities; a desire to keep probing the soul and a real power in the way words and art and music can become pure enough to have real meaning in that journey.

Lovely in its poetic balance, *The Sunset Assumption* is well-crafted with its deep and subtle 'voice' and a unique imagination. I fell in love with this book because there is so much questioning and rich beauty within it.

You feel the qualities of the man in the book: his sensitivity to confusion, his understanding of loss and his compulsion towards insight. He embodies the tenderness for the human condition – as 'Star' shows:

Star

Midnight, and something has fallen into the grass.
We go out to see what it is:

a little chip of light
that's hard for us to look at.

We kneel and shield our eyes,
we think of those paintings of the shepherds

and the glazed angels
who bring such truth, such happiness.

Above, the stars are wrapped around the world.
There are so many of them,

jostling for space.
In parts of the sky they're dense, like breath in the cold,

others are off by themselves,
lifted as gently as debris on that calm, black sea.

When we pick it up, its heat
is a marsupial heat, fleshy and generous.

We take it inside, cradling it
in our arms, hoping the night won't miss this one small star.