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Phillip Hall reviews *Unexpected Clearing* by Rose Lucas and *Line of Drift* by Robyn Rowland

Rose Lucas. *Unexpected Clearing*: Crawley, Western Australia: University Western Australia Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-74258-805-6

Robyn Rowland. *Line of Drift*: Aille, Inverin, County Galway: Doire Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-907682-39-1

Phillip Hall

Robyn Rowland and Rose Lucas write hymns of praise to the natural world where the anticipation of regeneration in domestic routine, intimacy and travel is juxtaposed with the disturbance of bushfire, old age and bereavement. And both poets are steadfast in advocating for the transformative capacity of the arts in documenting these moments. As Rose Lucas writes:

*To know the shining world
of skin and breadth,
abstraction of thought and desire
transubstantiated
into the gesture of a hand,
the luminosity of marble flesh –

or the way in which a smear of pigment
and painstaking brushstrokes
might render the motility of a human face,
its longings,
a chiaroscuro of the mind –*

an interior life
made visible –
then given wings.

(Unexpected Clearing, 69)

In the way that Rowland and Lucas do not require a mountain lookout, or remote gorge, in order to rhapsodise we are reminded of the idealism of Kate Rigby when she writes that “the challenge is not to flee to the rural countryside or bush but to reinhabit the world as it is given to us ... accepting that it is in this world that we must find happiness, or not at all” (Rigby 2004, 261). As Lucas writes in “Back Garden”:

All through this mild spring day
washing waves
peaceably
on the line,
its patches of colour,
its variables of shape

conversing equitably with little puffs of breeze,

smiling indulgently at the language of birds;

over the spires of the rosemary

the air is thick with insects,

while a young cat cavorts,

leaping for a bee –

oblivious to harm,

in love with the daylight.

(Unexpected Clearing, 69)

These are poems that grow with the “tenacity of little flowers” (13):

undaunted, they lift their flushed faces

*to the air,
where butterflies and small birds
chase the movement of layers,
newly exposed:

a roiling of stars,
the deep curve of dreaming.*

(Unexpected Clearing, II)

Lucas dances on the precipice of sentimentality but her sparse lyrical imagism and plastic stance that concertinas between micro and macro viewpoints are dazzling. And her line breaks hinge on such delicate touch. So in “Orb” Lucas writes:

*Today, the world is
a ripe peach,
late in the summer,
delicately furred;*

its pale cheeks are

flushed

with delight:

feel

the juice flowing –

lip, to wrist,

sticky

to the elbow –

taste this world;

it is the sweetness of your

entire life.

(Unexpected Clearing, 15)

Lucas, surprisingly, continues in this celebratory vein even when responding to a landscape that has been subjected to mining. So in “Goldfields” she writes:

The air hangs

still

and fragrant in

gentle sun;

white iron-bark blossoms

stir,

they are heavy with bees;

and the heady aroma

of eucalyptus leaves and warm,

dusty earth

rises

intoxicating

from beneath our feet.

Through the sparse trees on the

ridge up ahead,

a man comes swinging –

pick, shovel, pan

swag;

daylight flickers

and glimmers in the clearings,

catching

on mullock heap

and down the blackening mouths of shafts

with their shimmering, subterranean promise;

to an accompaniment of parrots,

he sings the song of the earth below –

the yellow of clay

shot through with quartz,

the reach of sinuous tree roots

groping the length

of the dry creek bank,

or water rushing,

clear and alluvial,

the grit that sparkles in the sunlight.

(Unexpected Clearing, 20-21)

These poems appeal for an experience of living in place that is generous and attentive in the way that Bruce Dawe describes in his poem “Beforehand” (1983, 226):

Treasure the burgeoning sky,

the ample air,

*treasure the million leaves,
the seasons where
you walk with your loving kind
like a child again;
savour the summer sun
and the tall rain.*

Robyn Rowland continues this celebratory poetics of place in her evocations of Irish and Australian landscapes. So the opening of “Thanksgiving” has Rowland sitting at a window in the Tyrone Guthrie Artists’ Centre in Newbliss, County Monaghan where she rhapsodises:

*Sweet green crush of cut grass
full-bodied through the open window,
loosestrife, fragrant purple in a soft afternoon,
and honeysuckle, bruising the belly of day,
pull me from my John Jordan Room*

towards the lake and island

sailing into a new tremor of breeze.

Emerald lawn with stripes now

where the ride-on-mower's precision

swathed its path through the rich

growth and silent afternoon, tumbles away

from pale terracotta walls and slate grey roof

of a house where laughter and play were part of

Tony Guthrie's stage-magic made real.

(Line of Drift, 34-35)

The poem concludes with Rowland reflecting on what is to be gained from living a life so attentively to its natural surrounds:

This suspended moment,

*everything is stilled except the breath
that slips along the tongue, or the charge
that fires the fingers to work
out of the body, as the gift comes, here
where air and water, drumlin and bloom
float into view, hesitate, fluid with time.*

(Line of Drift, 34-35)

Back in Australia, Rowland continues this richly evocative lyricism in the poem “Discovering White”:

*The settle of winter is upon us
trees long rusted away.
Passing slowly in traffic,
once swampy ground*

near the river is dry now,

a pan with thickets

of raw grasses tall suddenly

in the flat paddock.

You see where the frost has

quilted the ground,

and the high wild grass

is a kind of shining.

Not dull white as if the sun is dim,

weak on it and suffering.

But luminous;

so dazzling in the early

crisp morning, polished

so bright it catches a breath.

And flowing there on the frozen heads

white becoming its own bloom.

(Line of Drift, 39)

Rowland and Lucas also write of the destructive force of bushfire while marvelling at both the capacity of nature for regeneration in the face of apparent disaster, and in nature's opportunism in adapting to changed circumstances. In "After Black Saturday" Rowland begins:

*This morning sea is gentle, sun kind.
Skin takes both upon itself with gladness
and the heart, forgetting in the moment
a dark smoke-haze that seems no longer
to shroud the air, opens in ragged relief.*

And the poem concludes:

*Magpies warble their carillon into full swing,
the big-band sound of early day. Ravens*

rest on dry boughs in their shining onyx coats.

Cockatoos even, seem less raucous, and the gang-gangs

chew their vowels in luscious melody.

Traffic is absent along the park's edge

where one long feather has just fallen, spiked upright,

florescent-blue, titanium-blue, a blue-bird's

treasure that, when held flat, gleams turquoise

toward its pale grey shaft, lightly ashed.

So vivid – as if flight were still in it –

as if the bird dipped into deep-blue sky,

and trailing, trawled the heavens to earth.

We can't stop the light pouring into things – or out –

can't stop the earth creating its worst and its best.

Twelve days and still the toll rises.

(Line of Drift, 20-21)

In “Burnt Days” Rowland is more fatalistic as she situates the devastation of “Black Saturday” in a wider narrative of climate change:

We knew the world was altering.

*We were told – look to the waters, the shoreline,
ice-storms, poles with their melting caps.*

No-one mentioned firestorm, air-ignition.

*No-one talked of trees raging with their bursting
heads of fire, sky a turmoil of blood-orange air.*

*That our forest would ignite
fuelled by its own eucalypt oil,*

Mountain Ash dried keen enough for self-immolation.

(Line of Drift, 18-19)

Lucas opens her poem, “Burning” with the following:

Ravenous:

for the dryness of grass,

the crackle of trees and

twists of

melted metal

abandoned

where whole forests

blazing

have crashed across a mountain road;

for the flickering

embers of somebody's

home,

a desolation of scorch and smoke –

(Unexpected Clearing, 65-66)

This is poetry of praise that sees in the juxtaposition of imminent conflagration with a defiant assertion of the continued possibility of spontaneity and renewal, a reason for celebration and pride. So Lucas can see in her poem, “At the Borrow Pit”, at the site of the West Melbourne Sewage Treatment Plant a site of reclaimed wetlands. The poem concludes:

In a purposeful wilderness of pond

and grassy bank,

of drain and gate,

water birds gather

and leave,

fan out across the dreamy expanses of

elsewhere and

return,

dipping their beaks;

A meditation of watching

from the bench at the bend in the track,

where cherry wort creeps across a patchiness of green

and wavelets chase,

peaking

across the lagoon –

And we see three pelicans circle

and settle

in gargantuan glide,

while a congregation of red-necked stints

*turn their tiny,
proud backs to us,
facing into an afternoon wind.*

(Unexpected Clearing, 108-9)

Regeneration turning back the tides of loss: Rowland and Lucas also write poems commemorating the lives of friends and family either facing terminal illness or recently departed. In “Death Dream” (pp 44-45) Rowland evokes the moment of passing:

*We glide out into that brilliance,
that unbroken light now above the sea,
moving through no barrier

dissolving with unhurried calm
going smoothly into its radiance
as if that torn veil simply opens,
as if sails of rain have caught us up, into the drift of light.*

(Line of Drift, 44-45)

In “Autumnal Drift” Rowland begins:

It's just so tidal.

This March moon larger than ever,

A supermoon, closer,

swollen with gold and pulling, tides pounding,

you ebbing.

This poem concludes with the unforgettable:

Even the dam has its own highs and lows.

You'd stand there with late-light lapping it,

rosellas cracking their last seeds for the day

sighing into the dusk with pleasure.

It was tidal really – pleasure.

After the first invasion,

the burn of chemo, the drugs, the rebuilding,

you swam back into life,

painting, learning to play piano,

sluicing your fluted notes into the silence of the bush.

You loved that place at Bellbrae, ‘the land’,

peace grew into you there among the gathering of friends.

Wary of ‘jumping-jacks’ – a real danger for you –

nothing much else seemed to make you afraid.

I sometimes ring you there

to hear your voice on the phone's machine.

I went there the day after you flowed away,
wagtail flitting around me, chattering.

Your voice seemed suspended there like mist
no matter what they say – in and out –
breath remains a dewy kiss,
invisible droplets long accepted into the trees,
the lake, the wet memory-marshes,
the summer sky.

It's all just so tidal.

(Line of Drift, 40-41)

Lucas writes a beautiful sequence called “Still Beating Heart” (*Unexpected Clearing*, 75-85) for her mother. With such sparse understated brilliance she remembers:

while weariness draws her

heavy and fast,

her body's weight an impress on the chenille quilt

as the moorings of wakefulness are loosed –

surfacing just enough to catch the twist,

the would-be flight of

unsubdued energy.

(Unexpected Clearing, 77)

Neither of these poets suffers from the sort of postmodernist uncertainties described by Peter Kirkpatrick in his prize-winning poem, “Bucolic Plague or This Eco-Lodge My Prison” when he reminds: “And never overlook the fact that we / invented nature when we went to live / in words: there’s nothing natural about it” (2006, 59-63). Nor are they concerned with the ironic teasing of John Watson when he challenges (2003, 65-66):

But what is the purpose of these repeated

Attempts to put you, O Reader, here,

In the picture, at the forefront of

This scurrying flurrying sun flitter, this flattery

Of all that's here, to filter out features

And replay them to you almost physically

So that the page resounds to the fleet wings,

The plop of heavy landings and take-offs,

The ribbons thrown out horizontally?

Rowland and Lucas confidently, and richly, evoke peopled natural landscapes of great scenic beauty, and the memory of intimate human relationships. Their poetry is not perfect (what art is?). Sometimes Rowland becomes a little prosaic and unnecessarily explanatory, such as in “Golden Flight”, when she writes: “Even the great Golden Eagles of Ireland Yeats never saw – / symbol of wisdom and power for the Druids – / are resurrected, three pair mating in Donegal” (*Line of Drift*, 28). And Lucas, very occasionally, slips into an unthoughtful anthropomorphism, such as in the naïve “Every Thing” (*Unexpected Clearing*, 67-68): “Every / thing in this fine and / complicated world asks to be considered /... waits to be held / in the eye / of someone's / attention”. Natural History has a much richer context for the understanding of “purpose” in ecosystems. But these are minor quibbles in two books that are as lush and keen in observation as they are emotionally stirring and daring.

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Phillip Hall lives in Melbourne's Sunshine (western suburbs) where he works as a poet and reviewer for such publications as *Cordite* and *Plumwood Mountain*. He is a very passionate member of the Western Bulldogs Football Club. He also continues, through his writing, to honour First Nations in the Northern Territory's Gulf of Carpentaria where he has family and friends.

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