

Robyn Rowland. Review of Anthony Lynch's **Night train**. (Clouds of Magellan, 2011)

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Anthony Lynch is a publisher, editor at Deakin University, reviewer, prose writer and widely anthologised poet. His contribution to Australian poetry is admired through his work with the journal *Space* and now through Whitmore Press. His book of short stories, *Redfin* (Arcadia, 2007) was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. Uncluttered and moving, stories there show an astute observational eye, a hovering dread and a sense of the unfinished, so that Barry Oakley described them as being a 'world of tangents'.

Lynch's first book of poetry, *Night Train*, contains poetry written with a fine eye for detail and a storyteller's uneasy observations. Poetry often gives us the interior journey of the poet's mind as well as the intimations of all they hold dear. His work is subtle, compassionate, eerie and hangs its last lines into the ether, as if we can follow or not, interpret or accept. His voice is one that swerves and climbs, while we view his world as if from the window of a train, often with our breath against the glass, sometimes with the frame down.

There are three sections to this book – Topography, Interiors, Splitting space – and there is a puzzle-nature in determining the intent of some poems which requires multiple readings.

With the word 'Topography', we think landscapes, maps and geographies. The poems in this section engage with the natural world, specifically the landscapes of Lynch's home-place.

The presentation of the 'real' is concrete, visceral. There is a richness of image but it is sparsely used. In 'Topography',

The canola  
is fitful, shutting down  
for half a year before its furious  
yellow electrifies the fence.  
Flowering gums  
are manufacturing magenta,  
along the drive  
agapanthus nod and chant  
*We can do this. We can do this.*

Lynch has a way of using words that strengthens them as they are presented in a novel, often slanted way: a fox is 'brushtailing into dusk' and an animal wail is 'scoring' the night. This skill brings an energetic newness to words.

Corio Bay, Geelong, Point Lonsdale, Queenscliff all light up in his line of vision. He knows them well. On the ferry from Queenscliff to Sorrento:

Out here a dark tin foil unwraps  
the home town's confidences  
as a single strip of empty sun  
makes an empty mall of a dolphinless sea  
  
and with one long, languid step we are thrust  
toward Sorrento, inviolable  
in its all-weather whiteness,  
its occidental logic and unimpeachable veneer ...

In the title poem, 'Night train', we are given the 'slideshow' as it will unfold through the book. The 'clone of self', foggy anachronisms of the past, the country represented by the You Yangs, 'industrial gothic', the city of Geelong, and the personal: 'The hospital you were born in. / The school where you were clapped / and buggered, the church / where you begged forgiveness. / Your whole life'.

In this poem and in the anthropomorphic 'Jaguar', possibly the most visceral poem in the collection, there is an energy charge through the interconnection of memory and idea:

something of the fox  
and of the cat –  
discreet and russet,  
an outsider lying low...

a snakepit of hoses ...

... interior a frayed glove  
with leather seats well-thumbed  
and smelling of neglected libraries  
Dash of walnut sans airbag  
holding a kernel of the old country.

And again in 'Light', a gentle loving exploration of day opening, we can see the grip the poet has on small things. The poem is moving in its simplicity and sense of truth:

There it is again, the world  
turning over in bed.

The first magpie  
undoes the dark, the dog

wet-noses our sleep  
craving the back door.

The huntsman leaves off  
its meditation on wall fixtures

...

This is what some call  
*the stark reality of day.*

And finally into that domestic world: 'A plane comes and tells us / of the bigness of things.'

Opposed to the 'bigness of things' is the section 'Interiors'. In it 'Noise' is a highlight. Intelligent, subtle, it is a dialogue on the nature of sound which the poet convinces us has both colour and scent. Having transformed coathangers into an aviary with 'twitterers, skeletal birds' on opening his wardrobe, noise can be 'soft and smells / of mothballs', but also of 'burnt rubber and freshly cut steel'.

The poetic movement flows from one image to the next building complexity out of simplicity. Finally passing 'alarm bell red' and 'the green line on the cardiac monitor', we arrive at white noise, then black, 'the colour of absolute silence.' Now:

My wardrobe will consist of black and white.  
Like an old-time nun or priest  
I'll pass my days in silent prayer  
embryoed in rhythms of monotone chant.  
Sometimes I want my words ironed flat,

the soundwaves in space a waveless sea.  
I want the universe to smell of starch again.

Just when you thought you the poem tamed, its final line throws out the quandary of meaning. Lynch's style of poetry demands a finish that is uncertain. His work leans into possibilities. Where does the smell of starch fit in the scent and colour of sound? In between? Possibly, as the poems often seem to inhabit those liminal places, being one and another; not one nor the other.

Many of Lynch's last lines do this – throw you off the scent of meaning. Deceptively simple, they are often multi-messaged. They draw you back through the subtlety of the poem, again, puzzling. No easy answers. It must be deliberate. In 'Sonnet', the card is 'left blank for your thoughts'.

Poems in 'Interiors' darken, take on weight. 'Plot' is biting, fierce:

You do the table plan and round up night  
I'll prepare toothpicks and dig  
'till there's a dark space underneath the house.

We'll need an unflinching gaze  
an eye for the future  
and every last drop of disinfectant.

'Blood plums' and 'The vexing', as 'the past exits the back door /where pot plants do their time', are eerie and somehow threatening. Sadness and inevitability intrude and become exposed as in 'Small things that lie ahead' and 'Subsequently' in which 'a slow siren / called from far off /and that was one of us'.

The use of the 'window' emerges in these poems, as do frames and their 'sense of proportion above / a not-quite-flat mantelpiece'. Are things safer that way; clearer or blurred? Is it self-protective, a distancing method for dealing with the past or the dark?

I would like to see you / though  
beyond the window only  
the neighbour's kelpie cross yawns  
at the sun ...

The third section, 'Splitting spaces' finds that death is always with us. So too are terror and love. But some of Lynch's poems cross into subtle, ironic and often dark humour: 'Pookie believes in Santa Claus' and 'Burying Mary'. It's embarrassing that in 'Duck season' you can't help but smile at Jemima Puddleduck 'flying alone / and weighted with onions'. It finishes on: 'Come be my quilt / or my quill'!

The final two poems of the book return us to trains and long or not-so-long journeys. The tragic train derailing in Traveston in 1925 is the subject of a powerful poem, 'Crossing'. Softly composed, it is eloquent in its restraint and immediate in its use of the concrete:

Wingless, we drew  
a downward arc through the sky.

There was a moment  
of stillness, as if our capsule  
might forever split space.  
I remember the slow dislodgment  
of a feeding bottle,  
a woman's hat taking leave.

Before the new configuration  
of tissue and kindling,  
before our bodies embossed earth,  
I hear a whirring of air.

A howl. A child's brief,  
disembodied cry.

No uncertain final line there.

And then the rise of understanding and acceptance in 'The Face', a powerful final poem that intimates the 'seven billion ways' of travelling with 'the Other', the call and response of the present and the past:

so that we and all our effects arrive on schedule  
not knowing the coming after.

*Night Train* occasionally has the nature of an enigma code if you choose to enter it that way. If not, it can be simply read and accepted as poetry written slightly aslant, slightly opaque. But with the poem 'Blooming', Anthony Lynch suggests his method: ., It is one that comes from within his process of writing as if unguided by the poet, Yet the uncertainty of that 'guided' moment' is after all, constructed by the poet.

It's the same with saying a word  
too many times and suddenly you've forgotten  
what *earth, stamen, light, desire* mean.

All too strange  
or too familiar, we can't decide.

But this mouth explodes  
or we think it does  
and it speaks to us in tongues.

We don't always know the language  
and sometimes it isn't subtle  
yet it's an art of sorts  
and we have one colour committed to memory.

A garment shrugged off,  
a doorway with red light open then closed  
then open again.

This book deserves to be read many times over. Its unassuming simplicity holds a multitude of meaning.

**Dr Robyn Rowland AO** has published nine books, six of poetry, most recently *Seasons of doubt & burning. New & Selected Poems* (2010) representing 40 years of poetry. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Being Human*, ed. Neil Astley, (Bloodaxe Books, UK, 2011). *Silence & its tongues* (2006) was shortlisted for the 2007 ACT Judith Wright Poetry Prize. Robyn is winner of poetry prizes, including the *Writing Spirit Poetry Award*, Ireland 2010. She has created two CD's: *Off the tongue* and *Silver Leaving - Poems & Harp* with Irish harpist Lynn Saoirse. Robyn has read her poetry in Portugal, Ireland, UK, USA, Greece, India, Austria, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey & Italy, where, along with Canada, Spain and Japan she has been published. She is an Honorary Fellow, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Australia and a member of the National Advisory Council for Australia Poetry Ltd. Robyn curates and presents the *Poetry & Conversation* Series for the Geelong Library Corporation. [www.robynrowland.com](http://www.robynrowland.com)