

The Wings of Angels. A Memoir of Madness by Sandy Jeffs

Spinifex Press, 2004, 100pp

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The wings of angels A memoir of madness, continues Sandy Jeff's articulation of the spirit and reality of the underworld of the mind that pushes itself into existence through her own schizophrenia; a mental illness she has been living with for twenty-five years. Never romanticising madness, she writes with grit and candour of the dark confusion, the well of suffering inside mental illness, a topic she works with as a community educator. Describing herself as a 'sanity-challenged' poet, in all her work Jeffs writes with an astonishing frankness. As she wrote in her earlier book Blood Relations (Spinifex, 2000): 'If nothing else, I am a survivor. / After all these years / I cannot deny this truth. / I am a survivor!' On her experience of both madness and poetry she wrote in a powerful prose piece, 'Poetry and madness: a landscape of lunacy' (Write On, 2000, Vol 11/9) :

'When the voices and delusions come, I enter a realm of reclusive imagination and invulnerable privacy. There is nothing more harrowing than this wilderness of insanity. There is nothing more devastating than the depressions that throw one into the chasms of the mind's dark recesses ... Through this chaos my creative urge has been a lifeline that has sustained and enriched my life.'

Articulate and sharp, she has not spared herself in any of this brutally honest writing. In Blood Relations, she wrote about the terrifying experiences of a childhood bludgeoned with domestic violence and alcoholism. The fervour in the first poem in that book, 'Obsession', might be a mantra, a signature tune, for her earlier work in Poems from the Madhouse (Spinifex, 1993, 2000, 2002), to be followed in Blood Relations, and now in The Wings of Angels. A Memoir of Madness. There is a driven quality about the work, a fierceness based in the angry determination to recreate, to purify, those experiences; perhaps even to have them safely captured on the page. There, after all, lies a form of control.

You weigh heavily on my mind

poems ooze out of me about you

it's an obsession

I want the world to know

how awful it was

I want to exorcise my bitterness

I want to tell the children I never had

not to do what you did

not to feel as I feel now

not to let anger steel their hearts

you weigh heavily on my mind

and I don't know what to do

except write poems of love and hate. ('Obsession')

Powerful though Jeffs' story is, however, this is a book of poetry, not biography; and as such, it needs to emerge wrapped in imagery and concision. It must do what is required of poetry: bring the reader into the world of the poem, not just the life of the poet. This is difficult terrain for a poet so tied into her subject matter, as it is, also, for the reader. Only trust in the craft of poetry can armour both for the journey. Because this particular journey will be hard.

Wings of Angels is a sequential journey into the heart of madness with the poet as guide. Disturbing, at times frightening in its creation of the unchained pain of this darkness, the book begins with a struggle between dream and nightmare, but the nightmare vision has the upper hand: 'I ... wake to the nightmare / of madness visible.' ('Mounting the Tumbrel')

Here is the journey we take with the poet as guide. Beginning in the loveliness of nature and the paradise of tall and golden angels, nature is ravaged by 'The Hand' and the poet thrown out of the garden. Taken by a Tumbrel into descent, she is lifted by 'fleshless hands' into the vessel to cross the 'Rogue River'. Here is the first loss – her heart: 'My heart is dead now / there is no heart to suffer'.

The Pilot of this vessel has seen and heard it all. He 'denies himself the luxury of guilt' for his knowledge and occupation. Humour, which Jeffs often uses to relieve, is now enlisted to give us reprieve from the downward slide. At the opposite side of the river waits the three headed monster: Barbie, Ken and Ronald Mac Donald. The poet journeys on through ever-increasing horror, and suddenly we are in the theme park of death - www.underworld.com – with our host – Billy Graham! Eventually, he tosses the poet over and down the walls 'like a sheaf of wheat'. But we're still not at the end of the descent as she continues the search for 'life's veiled meaning' through a world she inhabits which is almost indescribable:

No utterance from my parched lips
could begin to describe this place.

Fires burn hard and hot
but nothing seems to turn to ash.

The fierce heat sears my skin
which blisters and weeps

but it does not fall away from my frame
loosely it hangs

bleeding like frayed meat
set upon a butcher's block.

It is as though I have to feel
the wrath of some tyrant

who likes to torture, but not to kill,
leaving me neither dead nor alive. ('Into the Flames on the Other Side')

Here is her second loss: the body itself.

Just when we might feel deluged in horror, Jeffs brings us the raft of dark humour again in 'God's body Odour' and 'The Song of the supermarket Sirens'. Yet still 'the wings of angels burn'. In 'Supermarket sirens' too, and 'Tinsel Paradise Lost', the poet brings her political analysis strongly through the smoke. Commercialisation, the destruction of nature, despair from gambling, are all woven through the satire, 'Tinsel Paradise Lost':

In the near past
this place had glittered
a cornucopia of the children of mammon
a pleasure palace of delights.

A tinsel paradise once dwelt here
where machines whirled and rang

announcing a win or loss.
Players with fixed eyes

stared at electronic screens
and ears rang with a tshing! tshing!

all keening for the sounds
of cascading coin.

In spite of references to ancient mythology in the book, there is a bonding thread in Christianity, which simultaneously comes in for a whipping. But here lies a greater irony. The tone, rhythms and voice of the Bible echo through the poet's own spiritual journey into the heart of darkness. 'The Tower of Lamentation' sings with the declarative rhetoric of a Billy Graham, and 'Where God is only a word' is a powerful Antichrist poem, reverberating with the rhythms of the beatitudes:

I come from a Christian culture
bringing my baggage with me
but here where everything
has been turned on its head.....

.... God is absent ...

the poor in spirit are miserable
the mourners not comforted
the meek do not inherit the earth
the hungry and thirsty for righteousness are not filled

the merciful do not obtain mercy
the pure in heart do not see God
the peacemakers are called the children of Satan
the persecuted do not reach the kingdom of heaven

This is the land of the empty tabernacle

Here God is only a word,
a word that even Moses stuttered
in a tongue tied tangle of syllables
that parched mouths refuse to utter.

The land we come to is the 'broken land' 'where the music has fallen silent'. There are pits and the voices of the mad, battering the poet with her supposed shortcomings. Voices, hallucinations, 'those death-croaked monsters of my mind' berate her: 'evil bitch, scum of the world, devil, whore'. Wandering through cyberspace, the poet meets finally 'The Iron Lady', 'her crown made of human bones / and dead people's eyes'. She sets a pack of ghouls upon the poet, to rape her brutally and 'drive my soul out of my body / leaving me to face this journey / craving / and 'without my soul to guide me.'

Here is her third loss: the soul guide itself. Then the poet decries:

Empty inside with nothing to call on
I know this is the end

and the beginning. ('Where my soul is driven out of my body')

So, as in true spiritual testing, all must be dropped, left behind, in order to begin the journey into newness. Without heart, without body, without soul, the poet struggles on. And what does she have as companion: a wry humour but most importantly, her craft. Because above all things, without craft, the writing from life is mere therapy. Jeffs has a sustained control of the narrative thread; and the gift of presenting to us a horror beyond our imagining, without oppressing the reader, or leaving us stranded. This is enabling for us; empowering for both poet and reader.

'How terrible my wanderings / to have to witness this land of burning shadows / Land of weeping women', she writes and 'still I have to witness this'. Yes, to be witness to all this is the role of the madwoman. To re-present it to us as poetry, is the role of the poet.

In 'Where the mad are pilloried' we hear the poet's fear. And though it is the fear of the mad within her, it is also the fear of the poet: that everything a poet struggles with, and struggles to represent, still goes unheard. Of the woman being pilloried she writes:

Her imagination is solitary
and in the pillory of madness

she withers away
simply disappears into her own mind

until one day she is gone
and no-one cares.

Likewise in the last poem in the book, 'The Witness', Cassandra, whose curse was that she would know truth, speak it, and no-one would hear her, listen, believe her, recites her knowledges – all she has learned. And the poet asks, 'Am I, Cassandra, the seer / mad again?' And she could be – just mad. Or mad with understanding; mad with impotence to renew that which has been destroyed; mad with silence.

Yet this Cassandra is not unheard, not unlistened to. Art makes us care. Art is the great liberator. Perhaps the great educator. Within art, suffering itself finds a purpose and nothing is wasted. Without it, all our specialness as individual humans is locked away.

The order of poems in a volume like this is important. It needs to carry its weight while not tiring the reader. If there is a criticism of the book, it lies in the sequence of the last poems. The journey starts to lose energy, as the theme tends toward repetition in 'The dead tell tales', and 'Sexless in this Tormented city.' The prose poem 'Postcard from the edge has Jeff's hallmark black humour (Club Mad being a send up of Club Med), but because of its prose form, it risks the didactic : 'everything is for sale.& the soul too – it is susceptible to a virus called information sickness that slowly and painfully liquidates it'.

The Wings of Angels continues Sandy Jeffs' battle to recreate and present to us, the terrible journeys on the other side of sanity. Unlike the usual heroic search, this tale cannot end simply and finally. As she writes: 'I have come thus far / and know no end'. (The Dead Tell Tales).

On this journey inside the horrifying and blackly humorous visions of psychosis, the poet tells us early in the book:

I will need many blessings
to illuminate the dark around me
to help me recognise this world
in which I find myself. ('Crossing the Rogue Rover. 1. Reeking of the dead.')

It is clear from the dedications in her books, that Sandy Jeffs has close friends from whom she draws love and support. She also acknowledges that most treasured gift, a poetic colleague, to assist in the editing them (particularly Judith Rodriguez and Patricia Sykes). It seems too that poetry sustains her sanity, as it also records her insanity. She has written:

'In times of distress and pain, whether personal or cultural, we more than ever need the healing powers of poetry. Poetry seeks to peel the layers from life's distortions and travails, to give meaning where meaning cannot be found. There is an exhilaration in this. Reason seems to be elevated to a new level that goes beyond reason's domain and poetry explores this unknown – some saying it enters a kind of madness. Some also say poetry is the view from the sickroom of life.'

With a powerful and distinctive voice, resistant to her own demons and inner chaos, Sandy Jeffs' poetry in *The Wings of Angels. A Memoir of Madness* is clear and concise with no smokescreens of pretence. Held in the tight constraints of poetry, it is directly from the unconscious yet nowhere is there babble. We hear about the babble, we come near to it, but always there is the driving force of intelligence, questioning the reality of delusion and, indeed, the reality of the concrete. Always, there is a powerful, simple and at times Biblical rhythm; a certainty of purpose; and a precision of craft.