

Launch of *Seasons of Doubt & Burning: New & Selected Poems* by Robyn Rowland

Wheeler Centre, 14 October 2010

Today is a significant day. If you've ever wondered what Dwight Eisenhower, e. e. Cummings, Roger Moore and Cliff Richard have in common, let me remind you: they were all born on this day, 14 October. Today is also the day that Mary, Queen of Scots, went on trial (1586), the day *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne was published (1926), and the day the Cuban Missile Crisis began (1962) – not to mention the Battle of Hastings, which took place exactly 944 years ago today. The more astute among you, especially if you hail from Robyn Rowland's neck of the sand, will be aware that today is also Geelong Show Day. But if you've come here specifically to commemorate any of these landmarks, you should leave now. Because the principal reason we're here this evening is to celebrate the publication of Robyn's New and Selected Poems, *Seasons of Doubt & Burning* – and I am pleased and honoured that Robyn has entrusted me with launching this rich, handsome and absorbing volume.

Robyn and I go back about a quarter of a century. I first came across her in the mid-1980s at La Mama Poetica, where among the readers one Monday night was this exuberant blonde in bright plumage – probably the trademark 'blues and purples' mentioned in one of her poems [169]. I would soon learn that as well as a poet, she was a prominent public academic in the field of reproductive technology and genetic engineering. (Google her and you'll discover her impressive credentials, accomplishments and publications.) But today it's about the poetry.

Seasons of Doubt & Burning embraces Robyn's five published books of poetry to date, plus a brand-new collection, *Beyond that Season*. The previous collections, all vividly titled, are *Filigree in Blood* (1982), *Perverse Serenity* (1990), *Fiery Waters* (2001), *Shadows at the Gate* (2004) and *Silence & its Tongues* (2006). Read together, they form a coherent body of work, and in the process paint a warm and intimate portrait of the poet. One hallmark of this coherence, found across all the books, is the constant interplay between close observation and intensely felt experience – a 'flowing-through', as it were, from the external, objective world into the tides and undertows of thought and emotion. Time and again, a poem will draw on some facet of the natural environment (such as flora or fauna, climate or terrain) to set the scene, or to sketch-in the context, for an exploration of some inner unease, inspired reflection, or the vectors of a decisive or significant moment.

These explorations frequently focus on personal relationships: the poet as parent, child, wife or lover. Indeed, love – described in one poem as ‘a mystery more unclear than God’ [171] – love in its many guises is one touchstone of this poet’s work. Love and its shadow, loss. Another is Ireland – again, a love of Ireland, and the Ireland of her love, a kind of magical talisman, ‘woven into my dreams’, she writes [185], a siren-call forever tugging at her heart with its song. A song of the heart, but of the body too – don’t worry, there’s a healthy dose of the erotic here as well, but always in its place, and handled with alluring dexterity and tact. I’ll have more to say shortly about the striking sensuality of Robyn’s poetry.

A good number of the poems in this book transport us to other lands. Robyn is a much travelled poet, forever taking off to international gigs – not just to Ireland but, over the years, to New Zealand, Italy, Turkey, Portugal, Greece, the UK; these are all represented here. (The next book will include two more recent jaunts, to Serbia and to Bosnia.) But Robyn’s greater atlas is a poetic charting of her discoveries and preoccupations, and it traverses a variety of domains, pausing along the way to dwell on many a fine detail or endeavour – the world, with its splendid inscriptions and shadowy enigmas, is everywhere. There is art, of course – such as Michelangelo’s *David*, who makes a couple of important appearances. Meditating on that remarkable sculpture, the poet declares [207]:

Unblemished,
here is the last moment of innocence
captured in cold rock.

Many currents and undercurrents run through these pages. There is a time-swept poem titled ‘Belonging’ [114-15] about the pioneering women – ‘Women who broke themselves / along the length of the land’s spine’, lonely women who stood ‘looking out across the vast plains of marriage’. The story of a young girl’s survival of the wreck of the *Loch Ard* off Port Campbell in 1878 is retold in ‘The free air’ [16-17], an engrossing poem with a driving narrative and deliciously ambivalent ending. And then there are personal poems about illness, especially what the poet calls ‘the hard knowing’ of cancer [142].

Public events and history play a prominent and suitably eclectic part. We encounter Aztec human sacrifice [68-9], the lives and deaths of kamikaze pilots [45-8], a poignant portrait from the Stolen Generations [116-18], September 11 from the vantage of Ireland [162-5], Afghanistan and the murder of Australian cameraman Harry Burton [158-60], a graphic, powerful sequence about Ash Wednesday [134-8], even a glimpse into the Bill Henson controversy [20]. There are also several noteworthy eclipses; and as for global warming, there is a poem about icebergs melting – from the

point of view of the ice! [13]; it ought to bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened climate-change denier.

I have referred to Robyn's observations of nature. These are generously plentiful – be they of plants, birds, trees, the seasons (which provide a recurring motif and metaphor); or landscape and geography (including of course Irish peat bogs), the moon, weather, or water. Venice is 'an old lover still wet with longing / her body unashamed' [194]. In one poem, the sea becomes a giant squid, 'trawling for me again' [173]; in another, drought is 'the sun's / malicious fingers, / prying day open' [65]; a cockatoo's crest is 'a frayed cuff of sulphur'[25]; a seahorse: 'body a question mark, answer awash in evolution' [29]; and horseshoe crabs: 'Pearly green, they shimmer with / three hundred million years of history.' [27] Not much comfort for classical Young Earth creationists here. Did I forget to mention fruit? Robyn's way of seeing is mediated by an open intimacy, and resummoned in a slow dance of memory, mind and heart. The poem 'Connections' [132-3] begins with an epiphany that 'stuns' her 'silent' while slicing an avocado, but soon transmutes into a homage to her father, his 'pleasure of precision' and his hands, 'gifted with surety'. It concludes:

I finger the stone,
touch the creamy fruit
with its rock-like cone,
wonder at this taste for delicacy,
and I am moved, simply,
by loving him.

The new collection also contains a recent poem for Robyn's father called 'What we made' [30-1], a tender tribute to her dad at ninety, while from her first book we are given 'Construction', a portrait of the man some forty years earlier: 'I was there / and remember my age / ', she writes, 'by the smallness of my step beside his.' [70] One of a number of poems for or about her two children is 'Close' [122-3], which relates Robyn's near-death at the birth of her first son, Ennis; another is 'And then truth' [128-9], for the younger boy Tully, where a child's innocent questions about news photographs from the war in East Timor spark an exchange that wrenches at the emotions. Elsewhere, we find the lovely image of 'the children sleeping oblivious in their tousled trust' [144]. Motherhood is a grounding or earthing influence for this poet. Her own mother is deftly sketched in 'Portrait' [82], in which Robyn is arrested by a colourized photograph of her mum at fourteen. 'How strange to look so like another', she confides.

The most concentrated poems about Robyn's mother come in the later collection *Silence & its Tongues*. These are the bluntly-titled 'Dead Mother Poems' [210-17], which, fifteen years after her mother's death, the poet felt inescapably compelled to write:

I had to do this, mother.
It got too dark and lonely here with you, living underground,
only the sound of the earth
as it rubs against the walls turning in its sleep.

This haunting sequence – the chronicle of a daughter's struggle with some of the complex forces that have shaped her – is a testament of remembrance, regret and (finally) reconciliation. Represented here by five poems from the complete, much larger cycle, it is marked by a flowing conversational rhetoric and, like all of Robyn's poetry, a disarming, even brutal honesty. A similar honesty is found in the poems impelled by the love affair at the heart of *Perverse Serenity*, a love of crucial significance in the poet's life; accordingly, it crops up in the later volumes as well.

Whether written out of keen personal experience or quiet observation of the textures of life around her, Robyn's is a poetry intent on probing into the secret meanings that reside beneath the intricate surfaces of things, and on giving voice to a sincere engagement with the world in all its swirl and sentiment. The world is immense, and small, and mysterious, and glorious, and difficult, but the world is also sensual, seductive, and irresistible. Frequently throughout these poems we are confronted by imagery of temptation, flirtation, sex, desire, a kind of loveplay of the senses. The birds and animals are certainly at it. Here are two ravens mating in 'Black loving' [52], a short poem from the new collection which I'll read in full. Notice the rococo of detail with which the birds' love-choreography is ornamented:

Oh and did she tremble, sheen on her wings
from vibrating in blue winter air, ferocious
her quivering, wings spread into great black fans
shuddering, feather tips splayed, fringe on a black
flamenco shawl; her dance fast, body wholly ashiver
with allure, lust; and he, strutting before her, head
dipping then aloft, flamenco-tail shaking, chest
puffed and gleaming, mounts her, all power and care,
their moment a brief union of coal-dark raven power,
wings spread as if in flight, yearning for the wind
for everything new in open fields.

But let's not forget the insects. This is the first stanza from 'The weight of a man' [199]; it's almost as erotic as the second, which I'll leave you to read.

Dragonflies are shimmering,
mating in the green breeze over the ocean.
Their wings levitate delight, hovering – then dart.
Sometimes they fall exhausted into vivid blue,
the wine-stain of rock, dark beneath.
Mostly, they shiver, light as threadbare gauze.

And here is the opening four-line stanza of 'Young men' [124]. Listen to the creamy sensuousness of these lines, with their sinuous enjambments:

The bodies of young men are firm and
brown all over, silky skinned they
smooth move like dolphins rolling
fluidic in the fluttering slip of sheet.

A few more words about language. Robyn is not a rhyming poet – she writes mostly in free verse. And you won't find too many postmodern games here, nor any cryptic wordplays or withholdings. As I've already suggested, her premium is on clarity, a sharpness in the filling-in of detail that gradually builds into the poem; her word-pictures and extended metaphors circle in on the desired sense of what she wishes to communicate to the reader – often by way of a dialogue with herself. Many of her poems are infused with a rhetoric of longing, a telling that can animate even the natural world she so lovingly relates to. There is ample humour here too, but usually subtle or understated. She has a sure touch with endings, and a knack for the memorable phrase: 'the matchbox history of our passing' [138], 'the open gulp of loss' [150], rain that 'comes suddenly thrapping' [161]. Such images abound.

Like most volumes of Selected Poems, this book traces a journey – a poetic journey through language, of course, and through the vicissitudes of experience; but also a journey, both worldly and spiritual, in search of something akin to a wisdom, to an accommodation with time, self and circumstance. Emerging from life-threatening illness, the poet exclaims: 'Nothing is as beautiful / as this present moment.' [143] Elsewhere she concedes that 'a life might wait too long / to know / what is enough' [57]. In the end, because we are so incorrigibly human, we only half-believe what living teaches us to understand. Here is the closing stanza of 'Ink, paper, voice' [34-5]:

Poetry and music carry us through the little deaths, and the great;
float us along a current we still imagine is endless,

though we know better.
Earth revolves relentlessly, tides helpless,
and we, in our shortness of life
plan as if the years don't matter,
unaware almost that this transience *is* the gift,
time being something we can neither ravage nor store.

Or, as Robyn ultimately puts it [226]:

Behind us is, as it is; before us, as it will be,
and on the hill, a swinging gate.

And so, let me conclude by congratulating Robyn Rowland on the publication of *Seasons of Doubt & Burning* – a splendid and timely bringing-together of some of the best work of a poet in full and colourful flight, and a book that affords a proper frame in which to contemplate and admire her eloquent achievement. Congratulations likewise to Five Islands Press on a crisply designed and produced volume, with its brilliant cover painting by the Irish artist Vera Gaffney. I invite you to join Robyn on her journey – come on, the gate is swinging! – and I am delighted to declare *Seasons of Doubt & Burning* officially launched.

Alex Skovron