

Jennifer Harrison and Kate Waterhouse, eds.: *Motherlode. Australian Women's Poetry, 1986-2008*. Punter & Wattman, Glebe, N.S.W., 2009. 342 pp. ISBN 978 1 921450 16 7. By Miriam H. Auer, Universität Klagenfurt.

Occasionally gold can be found. Once in a while things precious emerge - even if we did not dig for them. Rarely do treasures born from empathic minds reveal themselves to us. The poetry anthology *Motherlode*, however, is such a rare lode of gold. Jennifer Harrison and Kate Waterhouse gave shape to the individual nuggets and thus enabled the readers to gain precious, poetic insights into the lives of Australian women via this book. This is exactly what turns the pages, and subsequently the reading experience, golden.

The 172 poems may be read both as individual works of art, each in its own right, and as a collective, emotional testimony of Australian women's destiny. *Motherlode* serves as a document of female identity that can be regarded as an attempt to resolve the eternal enigma of what it means to be a woman under usual, but also - more importantly - the unusual circumstances of inevitable feminine reconciliation with the twists of fate. In a nutshell, the book tells a story. Poem after poem a unique women's tale of love, spirituality, ignorance, prejudice, endurance, loss, failure, joy, dolour, strength and weakness unfolds. Miraculously, this one tale of twelve sections which function like chapters told by 125 authors with seemingly different lives unveils parallels. The terms 'mother-' and 'womanhood' qualify to be used synonymously in the framework of this anthology, because the voices of many women, motherly and aware of their lasting responsibilities even when they have not given birth to children yet, call out to our social conscience. While some do it silently and subtly, using metaphor to appeal also to those readers seeking escapism, others do it in a more pronounced manner. Emphatically they express their critical views, leaving no doubts about their determination to fight social inequities. Australian women writers as well as female poets of Indigenous ancestry comment on private and

political issues. Their poetic brainchildren join hands in order to mimic the closed circle of life in which bitterness, tragedy and numb resignation have an incontestable right to exist alongside moments of elation and inner peace.

Despite the abundant incontestable qualities of the anthology, however, it needs to be mentioned that a few poems seem to have been included merely for the sake of quantitative completeness. This is not intended to imply that each and every poem has to be an enthusiastic celebration of word and metaphor, because in certain cases a minimalist style is the only gateway to perceptive efficiency. Nevertheless, single examples fail to emotionally touch the reader, which might be considered a flaw especially by recipients who believe a poem to be a nexus of emotion, intuition and impulse.

Motherlode's title clearly alludes to the main – i.e. mother – lode, known from underground mining. In the context of the volume, the reference to the major vein of Australian women's poetry is obvious. This mother lode could ensure an endless supply. Furthermore, an association with the homonym 'load' might occur because the burden of the female is the central issue all poems gravitate towards.

The attempt to raise public awareness and to encourage reconsideration of racial injustice in all its shapes and guises towards Australia's native population is manifest in *Motherlode*, too. Indigenous matters have a central function in the volume. Various examples of poetry against the forgetting could, in my opinion, be divided into six categories.

The first one deals with the Stolen Generations whose destiny was determined by humiliating assimilation policies like in Ruby Langford Ginibi's "The Gubberments" and Brenda Saunder's "Passionflower" (185, 187). "Lost Child" (208) by Jennifer A. Martiniello tells the story of mother and child, emblematic of Indigenous reality in the face of prejudice, who yield to the force of destiny. From the child's per-

spective, a language rich in metaphor conducts a 'loss song' including the key-references to governmental 'playing God' by unjust marginalisation sealed with the false pretences of legality. The lines

crying I track
 black ink ashes
 down corridors of legislative
 dispossession
 the blood of evidence
 dark upon my skin
 and I follow you my dreaming
 into another place
 where I
 will not lie down

functions as the main message. Summing up, it means that resistance and endurance collapse when resignation in the face of a deprivation of identity and cultural heritage sets in. Martiniello sensitively lends her poetic words to the silenced mourning of those sacrificed to inhuman policies intended to proclaim and institutionalise white men's superiority.

The toll the assimilation into a segregationist society took becomes the main focus in the second category. Attempts to disguise or to justify racist views, but also the phoniness of those pretending to be non-racist are in the centre of attention. Two-faced puppets on the government's strings are targeted in Elizabeth Hodgson's "I am in a room, it is day but the room is dark", and in Bobbi Skyes' "Black Woman" (186, 170-171). Hodgson's poem focuses on the status of Indigenous children as domestic servants in white households. The power executed by the masters, who forced them into linguistic, behavioural and cognitive assimilation processes is discussed. Distinctively, this poem makes use of native Australian cultural artefacts to intensify the overall effect. In this concluding extract, Indigenous bark paintings in the master's house symbolise his duplicitous mentality. "[...] Once I tried to touch the edge of a painting/ but his anger and his hands were quick./ I am learning how to please." The

master knows little about the artefact's significance, but nonetheless insists on possessing them. In the same way, he 'owns' his Indigenous servant's identity by suppressing her character traits. She is forced to adapt.

Stigmatisation by abuse, both sexual and as workforce, shapes the poems of the third category, which includes, for instance, Josephine Rowe's "She Tells Stories" and Judith Beveridge's "The Saffron Picker" (189, 292). In "She Tells Stories" Rowe demonstrates the crucial art of story-telling combined with sharp social criticism. Unbroken confidence in a change for the better allows the tragic heroine of the poem to bear even the hardest of lives.

A fourth dimension opens up with Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "Gooboora, the Silent Pool", Brenda Saunders' "Innargang", Lee Cataldi's "from *kuukuu kardiya* and the women who live on the ground", and Robyn Rowland's "Adhesion" (210, 230-231, 232-233, 250-251). Australia's native population was sacrificed to progress and driven off the land which had been given to the peoples by their Dreaming Ancestors. Western concepts of landownership blurred their visions of a future one with nature. Silenced and outnumbered, their search for means to survive is an ordeal.

A possible fifth category is conducive to (re-)familiarising the readers with Indigenous culture and spirituality. Ancestral protectors continue to play a role in Romaine Moreton's "mamillates and tresses" and Diane Fahey's "The Juniper Tree" (57-61, 206-207), whereas Daisy Utemorrah's "Our Mother Land" (27) melancholically glances back to an involuntarily abandoned unity of humans and the land. It concludes with the observation "The moon shines on the water, all is ended – and the dreamtime gone".

Poems on conflicts elsewhere in the world like Tatjana Lukic's "nothing else" on the war in former Yugoslavia and J S Harry's "Braid on

Braid" (272, 277), focusing on civil violence in Baghdad are granted a platform. "Nothing else" can be read as emblematic of women's 'loads': superhuman strength is usually expected and thus they need to master the "art of pretending to be alright". No weakness must be shown. It is all about being able to say "no, i did not see anyone dying" albeit the truth may be: "yes, i saw the corpses floating along the river". To make others believe in one's own strength is a survival strategy.

Barbara Giles' engaging "Night Piece" on accidental infanticide (122) describes the numbness cast on a mother holding her dead baby, following a fatal reaction. The infanticide committed will never sink into oblivion and the mother will feel guilty forever. The final lines "[...] At the end of her tether, /she shakes it / silent. / Just like that, not meaning it"

seem rather indifferent, which only increases the effect of the raw tragedy. Life's demands sometimes consume sanity.

The lion's share of poems on birth concentrates on sudden infant death or the fate of the stillborn and their families. Melissa Ashley's "The Hospital for Dolls" or Claire Gaskin's "There is a word" (79-83, 95) can be read as documents of a search for emotional rehabilitation by uttering the ineffable. By contrast, Jan Owen's "Small" and Alison Croggon's "Nights" (91, 117-119) welcome the helpless newborn, although in these two poems the authorial voices admit that the world is a threat to innocence. Nameless but alive, if only for short a while, the baby in "Small" proves true the aphorism by George Bernard Shaw that "it is much darker when a star sets than it would be if it never shone". From the mother's perspective, the relationship between her and the vulnerable guest to this world is described in the following way: "So I have known you only/ as a chill in the blood,/ a rumour in the dark [...]". She verbalises her suspicion that "[...] in that quick flash you saw/ all the monstrous evil of

this world". The memories of that chill and that rumour will always remain, though. They *are* immortal.

Having the ultimate aim of emotional equilibrium born from instances of contended restoration in mind, Jeri Kroll's "Water to Water (*from A Coastal Grammar*)" and Lisa Gorton's "Solitaire" (253-254, 255-256) potentially alleviate the imperative process of letting beloved ones go. Gorton's and Holt's texts recommend other ways of accepting time's limitedness. Similarly, a conciliatory undertone can be attributed to Kroll's poem on the consequences of Alzheimer's disease. The mother, as a patient often at a loss of words, familiarises her daughter with the fact that sometimes silence is alright:

My mother has taught me a lesson without a sound.
Words wash over her now.
It doesn't matter what she's floating in.
Even the word *sea* means nothing
because she becomes it.

Sometimes words are just words. It is the emotion that counts.

The embrace of the end as a pathway to a new beginning or a re-entrance into the circle of life is longed for in Alison Croggon's "Where are the dark woods?", Margaret Scott's "Nocturne" and in an extract from Dorothy Hewett's "The Last Peninsula" (302, 303, 304-307). The impression is created that, regardless of the dark veil of silence that advanced age and history's inalterability spread over the abilities to cherish life, acceptance holds the key to inner peace, even in contemplation of death. Hewett raises the question "is love a compass/ life an allegory?" and by doing so emphasises the importance of always choosing the path of love.

From birth into profanity, through years of cultural imprinting and partly indispensable pragmatism, to the overtly spiritualised moment of death and the uncertainty about what follows, the poems in

Motherlode accompany the development of relationships between women and the world into a story of diverse experience. It is a story that concerns us all, no matter if we are female, male, young or old, because countless chapters are yet to be written.