REVIEW ESSAY

Robyn Rowland. *Seasons of Doubt & Burning: New & Selected Poems*. Parkville, Vic.: Five Island Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-7340-4160-9; **Diane Fahey. *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems***. Glebe NSW: Puncher and Wattmann, 2011. ISBN 978-1-921-450-25-9. **Reviewed by Werner Senn**, University of Bern, Switzerland.

Two major and well-established contemporary women poets now writing in Australia have within a few months of each other produced a substantial and representative selection from their work over the last decades, enriched in both cases by new poems. Although they are very different in emphasis, preoccupations and style it is an attractive task to review the two books side by side.

As Robyn Rowland pointed out in her autobiographical essay "Life in the Raw with the Personal Muse" (*Meanjin Quarterly* 67:4, 2008): "my poetry has always been about my life, and that can be the interior life as well as the love affairs (mostly doomed!), the health crises, the political positions." In their frankness and yet tactful restraint some of her love poems are among the best and most appealing texts in this rich selection. Equally vital, however, are those texts that deal with the inner life as well as with the public and political issues of which the author is so acutely aware. Whatever the themes, her poems all seem to spring from an intense personal engagement and to be informed by an alert critical awareness.

Rowland's book contains texts selected from her volumes *Filigree in blood* (1982), *Perverse Serenity* (1990), *Fiery Waters* (2001), *Shadows at the Gate* (2004) and *Silence & its tongues* (2006). A substantial first section fittingly entitled "Beyond that season" offers new poems. The opening text of the entire book, "Perishing," thoughtfully meditates on the death of icebergs through global warming. In its elegiac mood it sets the tone for much of what is to follow in this first section and testifies to

Rowland's undiminished control of language, imagery and evocative power, uniting both emotional response and critical awareness:

> Tendril limbs dangling begin their disappearing
> even as cheeks, raised towards the blank sky
> feel for the first time, tears,
> melting down, melting,
> until those violet hearts vanish from weeping,
> a dark ocean rising across their lost shadow. (13)

Among the new poems, in free verse like all others, a regular stanza form prevails, as if the powerful emotional commitment called for stronger containment. "The deep sigh: Katoomba Falls" e.g. is an attempt to capture something of the extraordinary impact of this famous rainforest waterfall exuding an almost mystical atmosphere:

> Hidden bellows of wind suddenly fill this marquisette veil, rippling.
> Shafts of white light strike it aflame, flickering against dark rock.
> Out of its wet smoke, messages struggle to form, then thinning, dissipate.
> Life flies in the face of this exertion. Dragonflies flit oblivious.
> Butterflies chance it so close as to risk damp death. (25)

Rowland's first book of poems, *Filigree in blood*, already displayed the range and variety of her work: poems on friendships, on personal and family matters, travels, such 'Australian' themes as drought and bush fires, a "Ballad for Jimmie Governor" and a "Lament for Ethel Governor" (his widow), which shows her characteristic empathy:

> Stunned and tarnished
> you sit among the embers

and strain to match the memories
with the man. (63)

"The Waikato River" illustrates another feature recurring in her poetry right up to the recent "This moon" (218), her gift for rendering sense impressions:

Currents woo
the last shades of day
and the tissue of willows
swish their cheeks
onto the glazed depths. (73)

The reverse of this lyrical softness is the harsh forcefulness with which Rowland depicts a bush fire:

All day the fires
sear into the hills,
tangling themselves in the bracken,
bellowing scarlet
into the blistered night. ("The trip back," 76)

Perverse Serenity (1990) focuses on what an authorial gloss describes as "a narrative sequence on the end of a relationship between a woman and a man in Australia and a love between that woman and a man in Ireland" (83). The author gives powerful expression to this autobiographical theme: a turmoil of emotions recollected not in Wordsworthian tranquility but in a storm of conflicting passions, with a speaker torn between elation, frustration, anger, hope, and longing:

Each night I wake
to this silence
strong and lung-filled,

as when a spear shreds bone,
or a scream burns at the stake. ("When love goes," 90)

The new love affair has its own inherent problems, as the lover, it emerges, is an Irish priest, remembered for his "Kerry-blue eyes" and "their seasons of doubt and burning" (99). The threatening tensions build up to a defiant, blasphemous outburst in "Perverse serenity:"

Smash this death
false submission
I am the life and the way
here is the living flame
Through love alone
all things live. (95)

Anger and sadness continue to trouble the speaker, often highlighted by fire imagery. In the later volume *Shadows at the gate* (2004) memories of that passionate but doomed affair were still to haunt the speaker and flare up into the perhaps most violent statement on this theme:

That
is what I knew:
incineration,

being torched alive,
scorched in the feverous caress
that sears its way into flesh ("Trees," 148)

While this personal, vibrant and passionate love poetry is undoubtedly a dominant strain in Rowland's work, it should not be allowed to distract from her other concerns, equally vitally expressed. In *Fiery Waters* (2001), her first book after a long silence, she addresses such public and political issues as the Stolen Generation, the heroism of Greek women during and since

World War II, the massacres in East Timor, the terrible bush fires in South Australia and Victoria that killed over seventy people ("Ash Wednesday, 1983"), or the intense public debate over land ownership. The problem of "belonging" to a country invaded, colonized, appropriated from the indigenous peoples and cultivated for generations by white settlers, often with devastating consequences, is sharply perceived. But despite the cynical observation of the ecological catastrophes resulting from colonization, the speaker writes sympathetically of the back-breaking labour invested by early settlers

> stacking hour on hour, year on year
> against their youth
> that dried with the billabongs;
> a land coughing up bitterness
> while they worked it sternly, slowly
> into their skin, their lungs, and down
> bred into their children,
>
> and she is equally aware of the endurance of the wives
> left month on month
> for roundups or droves,
> looking out across the vast plains of marriage. ("Belonging," 115)

The selection from *Shadows at the gate* (2004) offers a similar variety of topics and concerns, although now in a somewhat darker mood. Ageing and illness begin to cast their shadow over daily life. But this anxiety about personal health does not prevent the author from addressing public issues with her former critical sharpness, as in "The Fallen," a poem about the fate of a migrant, or in "Aerodynamics of death," on an Australian cameraman killed in Afghanistan. Given these interests it may come as a surprise to see Rowland revisiting the Ireland of her passionate, long drawn-out and "doomed" love affair in the sequence *Last poems before the eclipse*. But this revisiting of the past seems a necessary

exercise, a way for her to liberate herself from this obsessive relationship never fully lived. "Love lament for the dispossessed" in a way sums up the entire experience. It is one of the longest texts in Rowland's oeuvre and very moving in the simplicity and limpidity it finally achieves, though the balancing of regret and consolation may be deceptive:

> Now love is shelved.
> I have folded I neatly,
> all edges carefully tucked;
> slid it into the tall cupboard (169)

One of the texts selected from Rowland's latest collection, *Silence & and its tongues*, poses the question whether she got from her mother and her Irish forebears that "inheritance of yearning, / the small burning gene that carries it pulsing" (196) and concludes: "Perhaps it was Ireland and not yourself / has handed me so much loss" (196). The conciliatory point has some importance since in the most powerful texts reproduced here, from the sequence "Dead Mother Poems," the traumatic impact of that relationship is strikingly foregrounded. To write those poems, sixteen years after her mother's death, was an effort that, as Rowland wrote elsewhere, "nearly killed [her]". But it helped her to work through and leave behind this pain-ridden experience of her childhood: "Never grown, how you clung. [. . .] / You were my burden, my debtors's note" (210). In their restraint and subtle control of language and emotion these poems form a fitting conclusion to a rich and varied volume.

In contrast to Rowland's chronological arrangement of her texts, which to some extent invites an autobiographical reading, Diane Fahey in *The Wing Collection* organizes her material (selected from her previous nine volumes of verse and augmented by new and unpublished poems) in thematic terms. It is structured in six sections containing texts of a certain thematic affinity. This particular arrangement by content or theme enables readers to appreciate the scope of Fahey's poetic universe, which ranges

from the minutiae of insect life to the great Western myths as recounted in the classical sources, above all Homer and Ovid. Myth and fairy tale, and the natural world with its infinite variety of animal species, figure prominently in Fahey's oeuvre and hence in this selection.

"Small wonders," the first and largest section, offers many poems on the truly wondrous variety of winged creatures, from bee, butterfly, and dragonfly to hummingbird, owl, and pelican, but also on such exquisite and fragile animals as seahorse, starfish and nautilus. Each of these is closely observed and depicted with the poet's eye and mind. Despite the factual accuracy which characterizes these texts (at times supplemented by helpful notes) the poet does not merely attempt to render with precision the individuality of each species. Placing each creature in its natural context and habitat she seeks by poetic means to highlight its idiosyncrasies, as it were, its intrinsic animal being. Watching albatrosses in flight, she sees them

> climbing or gliding, as simple-subtle
> as a dialogue of speech with silence,
> the stroking of a beloved into deep calm ("Albatrosses," 19)

The scientist knows that the owl has "the most soundless feathers, the sharpest hearing," but the poet wonders above all about the eyes:

> Who does not long, somewhere in themselves,
> [. . .]
> to be met by that startled eldritch gaze
> searching the furthest corners of their soul? ("Owl," 24)

The two sequences "Small Wonders" and "The Hummingbird Suite" are virtuoso variations on a theme. The poet gallantly meets the challenge she has set herself, and in her poetic

bestiarium even the most humble and unpopular animals such as earwig or cockroach are given their due. In "Butterflies: a Meditation," the connaisseur of butterflies blends with the poet suggesting a metapoetic dimension in the opening lines:

> The poem's creation:
> a flight path seemingly
> without pattern,
> bewildering to the naked eye;
> at moments
> an incomprehensible lightness. (48)

"Mosquito" begins:

> What if *you* could move freely through darkness
> with the ability to miss all slapping hands –
> wouldn't you make that continuous raspberry sound,
> blowing your own trumpet, slicing through
> wakefulness, sleep, dream? (59)

In its inclusiveness, its verbal exuberance and sophistication this section is a celebration of natural life, its infinite variety and amazing versatility.

Linguistic dexterity and poetic imagination are also in evidence in the next section, "The Wing Collection," which extends the theme of wings by including that supreme winged creature, the angel. By implication, nature here gives place to culture, although the transition from the previous section is astutely made by the opening text, a poem on Albrecht Dürer's watercolour "The Little Owl." Poems on paintings were a favourite genre with Fahey in her early work. Some are collected here, especially poems on the Annunciation painted by Fra Angelico or Jan van Eyck with their obligatory angel. The elevated tone and stately rhetoric suited to this theme are perhaps best illustrated in the poem "Praise," which also gives spiritual depth to that all-embracing celebration of life in the previous section:

on this planet
whose every plant and creature
seeks fullness of being –
a poignant efflorescence –
we cannot hear those choirs that praise,
under the cathedral light of heaven,
the Source, the Mystery,
which holds us all in life
yet catch echoes of their frequencies
in sacred music here,
rising like incense
from chapel, mosque and temple,
from grasslands, rainforest, desert. (76-77)

Section 3, "The Gold Honeycomb," draws on *Metamorphoses* (1988) and *Listening to a Far Sea* (1998). The transition from the previous section is again beautifully effected by the introductory poem "Philomela," about the victimized woman in the Greek myth transformed by the gods into a nightingale. Fahey engages imaginatively with versions of Greek myths, explores and interprets their meaning for the present. She often treats them freely, giving a twist to the traditional story or raising an awkward question about it. "Philomela" can be read as a programmatic poem in this section: a woman raped and imprisoned by her brother-in-law, who also has her tongue cut out, finds, as a bird, the power and the voice to express her grief and utter her plaintive song.

To empower women seems a strategy that Fahey puts to considerable effect in these texts. Niobe, whose children were killed by envious gods, is transformed not into a bird but into a stone, yet even this can be turned to advantage:

But as stone that can weep, it will take
immeasurably longer for you to wear yourself away:
the grieving commensurate with the loss;
that slow trickle down flesh as cold as the gods. ("Niobe," 105)

A specious, questionable triumph perhaps, but a triumph nevertheless. Leda, seduced by Jove in the shape of a swan, remembers his rape as "this sordid disturbance of a dream" and asserts her undiminished selfhood: "If I nestle deep down inside the mud, a new self / may hatch and arise, as if from fire…" (Leda's Story," 114). Arachne, in a weaving contest with Athena, wove "rape after rape / by gods of mortals" into her tapestry and was punished by the goddess for "this groundling's view" (117) and turned into a spider but retained her pride and creative power:

> Now, ringed planet, nucleus of atom,
> she waits in a network of dew
> to catch and hold the sky,
> moves with every wind,
> anchored close to earth…
> Trapped in that tiny globe,
> her self is inexhaustible:
> it spins and spins. ("Weaver," 117)

In the section "The Sixth Swan" all texts refer to or rewrite fairy tales, from "Rapunzel" to "The Frog Prince" and "Rumpelstiltskin." What is striking and delightful is the freedom with which Fahey treats the familiar stories, sometimes by avoiding the expected closure, sometimes by turning the story into a first-person narrative, thus producing unexpected effects of defamiliarization, as in "The Robber Bridegroom," where the bride tells the horrid story from her own perspective. In "Secret Lives" (section 5) we find texts of a more personal and philosophical kind, not a few of them from her 1995 collection *The Body in Time*. "Rooms" raises the intriguing question of the secret life of rooms:

> Could one surprise a room,
> fling open a door to discover
> some unknown mood of silence

or, in the air, a busyness
one could not quite read –
memories, stored in brick flesh,

now seeping back into space
to be sparked by sunlight
into a sky of milling planets? (176)

In spare and precise yet also suggestive language the poem develops into a questioning of identity and the shaping power of contexts, of the spaces we inhabit. The loving attention to objects and animals, demonstrated literally in sections 1 and 2, is a virtue celebrated here e.g. in "Longcase Clock" or "Feeding the Birds," while "Breath" is a moving tribute of a loving daughter for her aged mother. What these texts seem to promote is a way of caring and attention to the world and the people who live in it, our fellow-humans. There are also some more private poems, and the author even ventures on autobiographical ground. In "Dressmaker," her love of fabric remains a life-long predilection whereas the dresses change in the course of time. It is in the present, after long illness, that she is at her most personal, in a mixture of frankness, courage and modest self-assertion:

Since then I have put on the garment of my womanhood.
It marks the curves and leanings of my flesh,
holds in, reveals, what I have come to be,
beyond promise and blight. I know its weight,
its transparency, its rawness, its flawed smoothness.
I wear it now with something close to ease,
with the freedom, almost, of nakedness. (182)

Acceptance of the world and the body is beautifully figured also in "Hourglass in an Interior (On becoming forty)," a text reminiscent of a Flemish still life with an hourglass among plants and flowers, itself an image of mutability:

The plant holds, resists, light in shapes

akin to the hourglass, angles its sensuous,
papery satin – on which I would like to record
such poems as this. (183)

In the final section, "The World as Poem," the texts drawn from four collections foreground the poetic vision of things and people. Whether the setting is the seacoast, the estuary, or a room, the I is prominent, an alert, reflecting observer who tries carefully and patiently to delve beneath the surface of things. The various themes and preoccupations displayed in the previous sections seem to come together here. Winged creatures are present in the shape of birds, e.g. an ibis probing the seashore, "off-white plumage, / unbeautiful till its hidden life / fans into myth" (237), or flying low, "the lilt of [its] languorous black wings / a footnote in the unwritten book of days" (236). The sea is an enduring presence, benign and threatening at the same time - "the cradling, uncradling sea" – (215), an almost mythical power: "Resoundingly, ocean writes on itself / thick lines that slide towards foam on jade – illumined ciphers in a dissolving script" (212). The self is firmly placed in the world and in time:

Can I breathe time as I breathe the wind,
draw its strength into my lungs, resist
its strength with my body? Today, this is not
gale-force time: we are evenly matched. ("Time," 211)

The experience of a lifetime of writing, the careful attention to the living world, result in an equanimity and wisdom expressed with calm simplicity in "Headland:"

Like stone, the body carries at its core,
in its textures, a history of becoming
and erosion. [. . .]
The wind
strips clean the skin of rocks; scours flesh.
The sea, too, is theft and gift and fusion,
its cliffs storeyed with aeons of drowning, spawning. (224)

Robyn Rowland and Diane Fahey, although quite different in their themes, approaches and poetic methods, have over the years made a distinctive contribution to contemporary Australian poetry. What is more, their books stimulate heart and mind and are a pleasure to read.