

Diane Fahey. *Sea Wall and River Light*. Carlton: Five Islands Press, 2006. ISBN 0 7340 3654 X.. **Reviewed by Werner Senn**, University of Berne, Switzerland.

S*ea Wall and River Light*, Diane Fahey's eighth volume of verse, is a strong addition to a substantial body of work comprising such fine and distinguished collections as *Voices from the Honeycomb* (1986), *Metamorphoses* (1988), *Turning the Hourglass* (1990) or *The Sixth Swan* (2001).

The formally crafted composition of this latest book is too striking not to attract attention: eighty-four pages hold eighty-four poems, each of the same length, fourteen lines, i.e. sonnets of a kind, many even arranged in octave and sestet though without the customary rhyme scheme. The present tense dominates and with it the sense of immediacy, of strong physical sensations and sensory experience of shore, sea and sky. The arrangement of the poems from "To the Estuary" to "Farewell to Summer" hints at a temporal sequence and progression, but this is countered by the foregrounded timelessness of the tides, the sea and its tributary river. No single item is made to stand out but all contribute subtle nuances to this rich and colourful panorama.

The setting of the poems is the Victorian coastal town of Barwon Heads, although the location is never specifically named. Shore and estuary are places marked by liminality, a characteristic image also of the dominant experiences (e.g. "this tideless hour", 11, "a liminal paradise", 37). These places offer innumerable sweeping and changing views – "all boundaries are fictions" (p. 47) – but also occasions for meditation and strange encounters, e.g. with a dead penguin, a stranded dolphin, dried starfish, a manta ray (devilfish), an elephant seal, ghost-shrimps, moon snails, sea-dragons, and birds of all kinds. Beyond mere description each of the eighty-four texts aims at fathoming, assessing, interpreting the occasion, the moment, as each day offers both "gift and lesson" ("White-Faced Heron", 44).

The overall tonality, subdued and controlled, suggests emotion recollected in tranquillity. The speaker presents herself very much as

an experiencing self and at the same time positions herself as a figure in the landscape/seascape, which is sometimes empty, sometimes peopled: involvement and distance are combined in highly poetic and often rhythmical language:

On a rise of sand, my body foregrounds
the scene of which it forms a minute part.
("Sunbathing", 12)

A space opened
as one kind of seeing lapsed, and I flowed,
a minute part of everything – then glimpsed
my own absence from all this process and
particularity: the world as poem. ("The Wind", 31)

Animal life, especially birdlife, is rendered with extraordinary empathy but the discourse remains centered in the individual self and never abandons the human perspective, never attempts translations from the natural world, as it were, even though its signs call for interpretation. The speaker strives to render as accurately and as imaginatively as possible the natural phenomena and objects of her observation. A flying tern is seen as "brave and / subtle beyond belief: a silent Mozart" (84). "Cormorants at Solstice":

Body shapes – comic, ingenious or
statuesque – evoke an alphabet
of pictograms, odd pieces of furniture. (36)

There is a particularly strong focus on the physical encounter and intimate contact with water. Many of the texts figure an immersion, often quite a literal one: "[I] bathe / and float myself into serenity" (82), or: „Bolsters of surf roll you in over wrinkled / jade sheets" (66); or: "I wade, / half water, half flesh" (61).

But although swimming, sunbathing, paddling, diving, struggling with surf or being buoyed up by it, are part of the daily experience, these texts have nothing of the hedonism of popular Australian beach culture. Their mood is largely serene, poised, contemplative, only rarely disturbed by outside events: a thunderstorm, or the experience of panic at an unexpected, dangerous crosscurrent. At such a time the usually calm sense of being "a minute part of

everything“ can suddenly and dramatically fall over to its inverse side:

I was taken beyond my depth, my strength –
sideswiped by the sea – to become a cypher
in stretched crystal. (“Rip 2“, 68)

After this it takes the speaker a long time to regain her poise,

breathing
my body back into self-possession,
gazing, under a bone-white sun, at
unstoppable waves, the unanswering sea. (“Rip 3“, 69)

This is the strongest reminder, in this book, that human beings, in spite of feeling accommodated, are never quite at home in the world of nature, while animals go about their business in it with the unerring certainty of instinct. Thus, watching albatrosses makes the speaker doubt her ability “to be as actively at ease in life / as they are in flight“ (“Albatrosses“ p. 79), or, like a gull, to be

at the will of
each moment – but in a completeness,
rowing the abyss with voluptuous ease. (“Pacific Gull“ p. 78)

Or again:

Only the white-faced heron airing its wings
has mastery of the way ceaseless change
may find accord with complete stillness. (“High Summer“ p. 58)

Throughout the collection the poetic voice displays a quiet, impressive assurance and astounding inventiveness not only to render adequately the infinite variety of lights, shadows and tidal movements, of the animal life that goes on in the air and the water, but also to explore the human position and role in this apparently shifting universe. The insight into the (at best) moderate success of this endeavour gives a wistful beauty to the conclusion of the last poem, a kind of summing up:

One last swim before I stand, mirror-skinned,
centering myself, till I no longer know
what I am looking at, and there is only
a cormorant high above the bridge,
heading off to where it needs to go,
to where it is being taken. ("Farewell to Summer" p. 84)

With this collection Diane Fahey has again proved herself a poet of great sensitivity and impressive linguistic ability, fully in control of her craft. *Sea Wall and River Light* will appeal not only to nature lovers but to lovers of poetry.