

David Brooks: *The Balcony*. University of Queensland Press, 2008. 120 pages, pb. Isbn: 978 0 7022 3669 3. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer** (University of Klagenfurt)

This is David Brooks' fifth volume of poetry. He has also published two novels, three short stories, a book of essays, and has distinguished himself as an editor – of the journal *Southerly* for example, or of three volumes of A.D. Hope poetry and criticism. The "balcony" of the volume's title provides a vantage point of view onto two lives and the discourses running between them. It is also a collection that views two worlds, Australian suburbia and rural Slovenia. Why Slovenia? Because that is where the poet met and fell in love with Teja who is David Brooks' third wife. In "Tilt" the speaker declares: "sometimes the heart shifts / and there is nothing to be done. / Sometimes the soul speaks in another tongue / and there is nothing to do but learn" (8).

The line "sometimes the soul speaks in another tongue" is repeated, like a coda, indicating that the speaker now has a love speaking a tongue different from his own; the sensual aspects of her "tongue" are explored elsewhere. The whole volume is dedicated to Teja. In fact, Brooks' dedication claims that 77 of the volume's 91 poems are love poems. So the majority of the poems in this volume are autobiographical, are about Teja and the speaker's overpowering love for her. In the poem "Faces in the Street" (70) he is quite outspoken about the volume's context: The poet had "died at 45," and at 50 he was "re-born". In "Spirit", he refers to love as "that old bastard" who is "coming in now full sail". A whole section of the volume is called "Padna 18" and that is the address of Teja's father's house in Istria, about 20 km from Piran, Slovenia's Adriatic jewel. Teja is a translator, which is frequently mentioned, and her profession provides a bridge between the two continents Australia and Europe.

Some of the poems are nakedly sensual. Here are just four lines from the poem "Starlight": In the dark we are / eating each other, /tearing, smelling, entering / with fingers, memory, desire (...)"'. The juxtaposition of concrete and abstract nouns works particularly well in this passage and ends in the metonymic "our tongues taste starlight." A poem in the same section intriguingly titled "Postmodernism and the Prime Minister" alludes to Teja's role of 'Muse' for the poet:

After making love
we sit on the balcony in the dark,
and pretty soon
an idea for a poem has come, and then another (...) (22)

The 'Muse' provides inspiration, which justifies all those erotic action-snatches that pop up in this volume time and again, for instance in the title poem "The Balcony":

The flying foxes are screeching in the trees outside the window,
they are angry and jealous and want us to stop.
We have been making love
for almost 18 hours, they say,
and they are afraid for their reputation. (18)

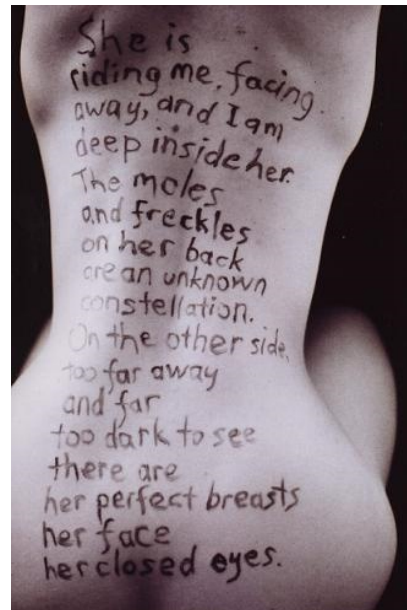
Or here, in "Grace":

A door opens,
the room is flooded with light.
A man
spills his seed on his lover's belly,
wipes it away,
kisses the place where it fell.

A beautiful example of an erotic poem that "tells it slant", to use Emily Dickinson's phrase, is "Cat." In most European languages including Slovene "Cat" is a female epithet, comparable to "bird." This cat is a thinly disguised Teja again, licking the persona's fingers "with a rasping tongue", and then, "as if she were a cat, turns / her back towards me / ready." Mhm, say no more. The feline image returns in the second section when the persona sees himself kept captive by a love-hungry "panther" who has gutted his body and is

now wittily gnawing his “bone” (“The Ibez”, 50). But the frankest depiction of practical love comes in part 3 of the title poem “The Balcony”:

She is
riding me, facing
away, and I am
deep inside her.
The moles
and freckles
on her back
are an unknown constellation.
On the other side
(...)
there are
her perfect breasts,
her face,
her closed eyes.



Is all that intimacy legitimate? Erotic poetry is not a favourite with academic critics these days, female critics in particular – they smell “exploitation” at every corner. But when I googled ‘Teja Pribac’, I was in for a surprise. Not only does one of her websites offer a wedding photo, it offers a close-up Teja’s naked body, facing away from the camera, with parts of “The Balcony” superimposed on her back. So the visitor to the website is, in fact, offered an illustration of that love-making scene. This is daring enough, but click on the next image and you get two shots of (presumably) David’s hairy legs and genitals, and another shot of erotically entwined legs.

This is not to detract from the general high quality of Brooks’ poetry. I was particularly struck by the deft handling of the ‘translation’ trope, applied here to a speaker who finds himself attracted by and transported to a Central European language and culture. When he observes his beloved out on the balcony translating poetry, she

is carrying words
from one language to the other, bribing
the border guards, arguing with the grammarians,
pulling the wool
over the eyes of the lexicographers.

Lines as artful as these are pure joy. The subject is given further treatment in a poem aptly titled "Language" in which the two lovers "talk all night / peeling back the layers"; when morning comes, she "put[s] it all on again / the language / the past / the mind's clothes as well as the body's". Clearly, it takes great intimacy to "peel back" the layers of two life stories and two cultures, and without them there is nakedness and vulnerability. But mostly the tone is that of confessional poetry, which genre David Brooks handles with immense skill and care. After so much affection and passion expressed in his verse, one begins to wonder what happened to the former wife; is she out of sight and out of mind? Not at all. The speaker re-visits her ("for the first time in ages", 24) and in another painful recollection admits to a great failure when denying her assistance at a time of physical need ("Blood" 86). There are one or two narrative poems as well, poems presenting snapshots of a particular time and space, sometimes with historical people, but always turning back to the speaker, such as that whimsical poem "Lovers in Wentworth Park", which tells us of something we only remember from the movie *Woodstock*, a couple making love in full view of the public. The poem hints at the mixed feelings of passers-by at a sight that is both comforting and outrageous: "we all try to act as if they were not there / while giving them the widest berth." The final line makes a natural admission: "as we walk back / I am raging for you". But even at the most intense moments of love, thoughts of death creep in, which is also natural. And this brings me to a final observation: Teja coming from Slovenia, it is to be expected that those awful, atrocious wars of the 1990s make themselves felt in the poet's awareness. "Vukovar" is the title of one such poem, the place where the Croatian PM Franjo Tudjman provoked the Serbian army into a fully-fledged Civil War which he actually wanted and in which tens of thousands died. But history, as well as US military backing, was on the side of Croatia, and Slovenia too. Nonetheless, we still scratch our heads wanting explanations for those years of inexplicable bestiality. God certainly does not provide any, as "Pater Noster" (parts of it translated from a song by the French poet Jacques Prevert) demonstrates: "Our Father / who art in heaven / stay there / and we'll stay down here / in the mess you have left for us." But then this "mess" is made to

appear tolerable by the love which so warmly pulses through this unique volume. *Buy it!*