

John Mateer: The West. Australian Poems 1989-2009.
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John Mateer (*1971), who is considered to be one of the leading Australian poets of his generation, left South Africa and came to Australia in 1989 where he has lived both in Melbourne and Perth. The volume under review is his sixth published in Australia. It offers a selection of texts from his previous five Australian collections published during those last twenty years, among them *Barefoot Speech* (2000), *Loanwords* (2002) and *The Ancient Capital of Images* (2005) as well as a number of new poems.

The texts are grouped by affinity rather than order of publication. In the absence of any references the reader unfamiliar with Mateer's earlier work is thus unable to trace and assess the writer's development. The volume nevertheless affords a welcome opportunity to gauge and appreciate the range and achievement of a poet who, in Martin Harrison's words in his introductory essay, "belongs in this larger world tradition of poetry written in and from displacement and exile" (p. 12). At the same time the fact that Mateer won the 2001 Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry and was awarded the Centenary Medal for his contribution to Australian literature shows that he has also been able to "speak towards the centre of Australian culture" (Harrison, p. 11).

Indeed, as the title and subtitle suggest, the selection is also somewhat one-sided, omitting Mateer's work inspired by his world-wide travelling. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the author did his reputation a service by including a number of slight, if not banal, poems on his sexual experiences as a young man. Mateer's more mature work is pervaded by the powerful presence of the complex self of the author. His voice, which is rarely just neutral, dominates or intervenes on many occasions, takes sides or offers stringent or ironical comments. An exemplary instance of such self-positioning occurs in "Masks":

Assailed by "the natives", those plants
cultivated as evidence of wealth prior to Invasion,
by their luminescence, their harsh insistence as of a persistent after-
image,
a spotfire crackling in a retinal forest, accosted by the relics of
botanical glory,
I see above me on the slope, my back to the Swan River and the
Brewery Site
down there, Africa far to the west, that I am a comrade of these
exiles,
these Gondwanaland trees that seem, transplanted in their orange
gravel,
like giant beer bottles presenting us with shrivelled desiccated flowers
(144).

Similar emphasis on the presence of the speaker and the immediacy of his speaking occurs throughout the volume, e.g. "Now I'm down there beside the expansive glare, / looking at a trough of green water" (The Brewery Site, 88), or: "I sit cross-legged just outside the ring whispering a dharani" (One of the Earthrings at Sudbury, 111), or: "I'm walking down the colony's main street" (The Statue of Mokare, 129).

The effect of such present-tense "writing to the moment" (to use the 18th-century novelist Samuel Richardson's famous phrase) is to render the poet's experience more intense immediate and thus to enlist the reader's empathy. However, it is not blind identification that the texts seek to achieve but a reflective and also distanced response. Thus the invitation to empathize is countered by two stylistic devices that operate on the typographical level and suggest the opposite: numerous texts contain dashes or ellipses, many even end on such a "blank" and thus leave the reader to speculate, to fill in the gap. Like all poetic devices it can misfire if strained, as in: "The parody / of my saying __. She says, "It seems so ..."(29). Such withholding of information can be irritating, as in the last line of "Exile": "And I said nothing. I thought: __." (30). The other prominent feature is the use of italics which give the texts an extra dimension, whether it is interior discourse, unedited or unspoken thought, silent self-questioning, or additional "other" voices, alternative perspectives.

Reinforcing these effects Mateer's poetic language surprises us with striking, exuberant, often elusive, even stilted imagery that sometimes skirts the absurd: "death, mute death, heavy in my scrotum / like a jewel," (29). A suntanned beauty on a beach "is poised, like Chaos in a bonsai" (120). More often, though, the images are highly expressive and illuminating: After a bushfire the hardened cone of a banksia "can undo its silence / and open into one black yoni whose whole body is / dry parted lips naturally spitting out seeds" (67); fissured basalt rocks on the southern coast are "a whale's vertebrae abandoned" (78). The poet watches a drug addict,

Bent-necked, with teeth clenching
the strap to squeeze
her hard arm, bring a vein
to fruition for
one slow injection. (40)

He sees "suburbs spreading / like the fat of age around emotion's / gut" (42), or catches sight of "the flung ventriloquist's arc of the Harbour Bridge" (140). Many texts give evidence of Mateer's acute and critical but also sympathetic observation of his chosen country of residence. There is a sense of non-belonging, of being a comrade of exiles, in many of these texts, as the first section, "Exile", seems to suggest. The section "Among the Australians" equally marks the speaker as a stranger: "This broad emptiness / I felt as a Greek in Alexandria" (42). In a dream he is a black cockatoo "uneasily considering if I had the right perch" (80). "Invisible Cities" conveys more powerfully than most other texts this haunting sense of non-belonging that the speaker shares with the Italian immigrant to whom the poem is dedicated as it circles insistently around the question of what "being here" means and feels like. In "The Local" he views Perth, "this exchangeable city" (49), in terms of animal life:

in these suburbs there're huge seditious roaches
immigrant and native birds,
possums and even, like me, foxes
– expert survivalists cosmopolitan as you like –
who hide in the parkland and limestone
caves on the foreshore (126).

While the poems about encounters with Australians of all kinds in the section "Among the Australians" are for the most part anecdotal, the section "The Nature" testifies to the author's ability to respond with alertness and subtlety to the features of Australian landscapes. In particular it is the constant awareness of a pre-history to colonization in those landscapes that gives these poems their special reverberation. At the beach of Mullaloo with its "limestone teeth" he sees "those stone outbreaks as the rough scales / of the thorny devil-lizard on whose back we're lifted" (65). A similarly submerged presence surfaces in the pine forest planted by white colonizers ("dark regimented trunks and a stifling silence") and then burnt down in a bushfire: "After thirty years, / like a nation after decades of martial law, / bodies unclenching, eyes opening, native seeds are sprouting" ("At Gnangara", 66). While this can be read as a reference to South Africa it is equally pertinent as a sign of hidden indigenous past, of which Mateer sees many instances. It is figured memorably in "The Scar-Tree of Wanneroo":

This oldman-tree might elsewhere have been a hallowed thing,
garlanded, smoked-in with incense, imminent,
a series of photos of blue, cloudless sky. But here
this jarrah, fragmenting heart isn't one of many milestones
measuring out an historic silence, an empty hurt.
In mind, this almost forgotten memory, this in-grown wounding,
is not the last in a country of countless scar-trees (71).

The shorter section "Mokare's Ear" is entirely devoted to indigenous topics and issues. The poems "To Mudrooroo" and "To Jack Davis" are largely anecdotal, whereas "The Brewery Site" offers an extended and sensitive meditation about being on an ancient indigenous site on the Swan river appropriated by European settlers. It ends with the beautifully subdued but evocative lines: "(Around someone on the riverbank / vanquished, translucent paperbarks gather like the grieving)" (90). "Talking with Yagan's Head" refers to the indigenous Nyoongar leader killed by whites in 1833 whose head was for a long time stored in England and finally returned to its people in 1997. The poem "In the Presence", a cycle of fifteen very short "songs" to Yagan himself, intensifies this reappraisal of a

leading Aboriginal figure. The opening line, "Even if I stab a bloody gumtree you will not speak" (97), announces its main concern: The silenced voice is a dominant theme throughout this text, e.g.: "The ghosts of the spoken are this huge tree / on which every leaf is a silenced language" (97). Yet the writer is not trying to "give a voice" to this long-dead hero, on the contrary: "you, to whom these words are sung, are a silence" (103). The powerful conclusion amounts to an undisguised political statement:

Though the past is as anxious as native vegetation in the suburbs
and as intoxicating as a carton of petrol held under a child's nose,
you, your mythical head synonymous with space,
your abandoned body identical to time,
are the blackhole of words for which the Prime Minister
may apologise with these poems (104).

A comrade of exiles, whether the displaced, disempowered indigenous peoples, Vietnamese refugees or brutalized convicts, the author with sympathetic imagination and sharp perception manages to give striking verbal expression to such predicaments and his own sensitive and considered response to them. The texts in this selection are of unequal weightiness and quality but they are also pleasantly free of fashionable rhetoric and sophisticated smartness. The reader who is willing to ponder them attentively will be amply rewarded.