



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

Peter Kirkpatrick launches *brush* by joanne burns

When Giramondo asked me to launch joanne's latest collection, I felt an immediate and very real frisson of excitement. Here was a brush with fame! Joanne is one of this country's finest poets, and I've immensely enjoyed reading her work over the years. For me, as I expect for many of us, the reading of poetry is an experience of the senses – especially that of sound – before, and even after, it's an activity of the mind and of thought. Or perhaps that's just me. Working at a university makes me suspicious of intellectuals.

But what I mean is that – like many if not most of us here – I like to feel a poem's textures and music before trying to form any more reasoned insights, let alone any conclusions about its meaning. In that way the reading of poetry – like the consumption of any art – simply offers a more intense way of being in the world. But it's my role today to launch this book, so it's not enough for me merely to brush up against it, like a cat against an ankle. I can't brush off the expectation of having to make a coherent public statement about it, or brush aside its considerable virtues, however broad brush my comments will be.

God knows that, as a teaching academic, I spend enough time wondering what kinds of reasonable things to say about a particular poem or poet, when my first impulse is often to just to point and say, Whacko-the-chook, isn't that entirely fucking lovely! – and so collect my salary and leave for the pub. With that particular critical methodology in mind, then, here is 'sibylance' – spelt s-i-b-y-l-a-n-c-e – the first poem in the sequence 'road', which appropriately joins the beginning and end of joanne's book: 'sibylance':

sun sings through the dust of the window
and the silver sink what a birdshine, lime
rind glows through the jam jar, epiphany
way above the trench of garbage bins down
below, you could be fishing on any old river
right now this could be one of your last finer split
second moments, meet me on the golden green;
there is movement in the grimy courtyard someone
shifting apartments dumping decor, a framed photo
of marilyn maybe madonna maybe not, more likely
a poster of a georgia o'keefe bloom, jaded floral art
a little crinkled where a vodkatini or an orgasm hit the wall:
moma moma where art thou; past the front door packs
of paris hilton wannabes looking likely in sunfrocks
skim along the streets towards skinny lattes, all eyes
preying for someone to snap them inside a slow
myth at the crossroads

This isn't a lecture, I hope (old habits die hard), but I'd draw your attention to the way the poem moves through three zones: the kitchen, with its shiny sink and lime marmalade; then down to the garbage bins and the detritus of the courtyard in which someone moving flats has left a damaged framed print, maybe of a female star, maybe of a Georgia O'Keefe flower painting; and then into the outside world in which 'paris hilton wannabes... skim along the streets towards skinny lattes'. The references are all emphatically female, but not uncritically so. The jump from the singing domestic space with its 'birdshine' to ersatz Paris Hiltons seems enormous, but is it? The poem in a way descends from a bright, even epiphanic kitchen, to images of the commodification of women artists (Monroe, Madonna, O'Keefe): a process that leaves the wannabe models 'preying [p-r-e-y-i-n-g] for someone to snap them inside a slow/myth at the crossroads'. Modern myth is now the mass media which creates and, through mechanical reproduction, endlessly reconsecrates corporate versions of the ideal woman as goddesses of fashion. 'Moma moma where art thou', indeed. (And surely there are moments when we all want our MoMA.)

I said that the 'road' sequence linked the beginning and the end of brush, and I think it's possible to read this book somewhat against the grain of its conspicuous, surreal anti-linearity as something of a livre composé. We begin with the sequence 'bluff', a terrific series of satirical riffs on the discourses of capitalism, and in particular those of the stock market, and end with 'wooing the owl (or the great sleep forward)'. Loosely speaking, then, we journey from a patriarchal world along a sibylline road towards the realm of night and sleep, long associated with the moon and thus the female principle, and here too with the owl: the owl of Minerva, perhaps, symbol of wisdom, though one that has still to be wooed and won over. I dare say writing poetry can sometimes feel like herding owls.

But I'll leave you to form your own connective tissues between the individual sequences as you read them. Before I say more about the poems, let me draw your attention to the terrific cover illustration, a 1946 watercolour by Joy Hester. It's like Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly has become the evil robot he always wanted to be, turned into the face of Luna Park, and now eats women alive. As an example of multi-layered imagery that turns on a dime, as the Americans say, it's not unlike what happens in *brush*.

What strikes me most forcefully about joanne's work, in this volume as in her earlier collections, is its witty discontinuities, its surreal inventiveness, and its satirical mashups of other discourses: qualities that I would principally characterise as playful – and I don't necessarily mean 'playful' in a lighthearted sense, for one can play quite seriously. Ask any hardcore computer gamer. Irony and satire are both playful modes, in the sense that they play upon their objects. The word – and I'm not the first to make this observation regarding joanne's craft – is ludic, from the Latin to play. Indeed, the word ludicrous didn't originally come into the language as meaning absurd or preposterous, but rather, as the OED has it, 'Pertaining to play or sport; sportive; intended in jest, jocular, derisive'. Thus Doctor Johnson wrote of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, by way of high praise, that 'it was universally allowed to be the most attractive of all ludicrous compositions'. In its original sense, then, I might tentatively suggest that joanne is possibly the most ludicrous poet in Australia. Here's an example of what I mean, from the title poem 'bluff' in the book's first sequence. This is 'fancy':

bankers danced the zumba junta
in the constitutional ballroom just
a bit of festive fancy dress like a
tv mockumentary on a bitter winter's
night the pink batt cocktails kept them
warm enough; some escorted current
spouses others escorted escorts there was
a mix up when pecuniary interests were
introduced to love investments, just by chance;

certain guests rang promptly for their drivers, others
rang up potential losses; there was a moment when
the floorboards shifted like a listing, like a tower of
mini pizzas whose anchovies shone like bullets; then
the dollar suddenly shot up reaching the peak of the
continental drapes

'Bankers danced the zumba junta/in the constitutional ballroom' suggests the links between capitalism and political power, particularly in the South American context. Notice the copulative assonances in the first line; 'zumba junta' is in fact an internal near-rhyme. 'The constitutional ballroom' sounds like it could be a function centre in Canberra. Well might the anchovies on the mini pizzas shine 'like bullets'. Well might the drink de jour be 'pink batt cocktails', maybe served with asbestos canapés, courtesy of Mr Fluffy. But money and power also mean money and sex: 'some escorted current/spouses others escorted escorts there was/a mix up when pecuniary interests were/introduced to love investments'. This is a kind of chiasmus: we may want to say 'pecuniary investments and love interests', but joanne splendidly swaps the adjectives. Then there's the clever punning of 'certain guests rang promptly for their drivers, others/rang up potential losses': a rhetorical device called antanaclasis. I could go on (unless plied with alcohol I generally do). But the point is that the continual play on words here is perfectly serious while also remaining perfectly playful.

If I can use an old-fashioned term before going on to update it, what's happening in joanne's word-play here is a kind of poetic vaudeville, or what Henry Jenkins in a different context calls a 'vaudeville aesthetic'. Vaudeville: that form of entertainment that now goes under the name 'variety' and which is based on rapid sequences of acts that offer constant sensation and surprise. Variety may have moved to the club circuit, but it was once a potent mode of popular entertainment that challenged straight theatre, with its emphasis on verisimilitude and the subordination of all elements of a production to its dramatic unity. To that extent you might say that joanne is the poetic antidote to David Williamson. But once upon a time variety offered a powerful model for the modernist avant-garde. Thus in 1913 the Italian futurist Filippo Marinetti could write of 'The Variety Theatre' as generating 'the Futurist marvellous', whose elements include:

(a) powerful caricatures; (b) abysses of the ridiculous; (c) delicious, impalpable ironies; (d) all-embracing, definitive symbols; (e) cascades of uncontrollable hilarity; (f) profound analogies between humanity, the animal, vegetable and mechanical worlds; (g) flashes of revealing cynicism; (h) plots full of wit, repartee, and conundrums that aerate the intelligence; (i) the whole gamut of laughter and smiles, to flay the nerves...

Etcetera. I reckon that's a pretty fair description of what takes place in joanne's poetry.

But don't get me wrong. For all that Federal Parliament might suggest otherwise, I know that vaudeville is dead. Searching for a funkier term to describe the aesthetic mode of joanne's verse, might I suggest channel surfing or, better still, zapping? The famous lack of capital letters in joanne's poetry certainly implies that each element has a kind of equivalence in the linguistic structure. No word looks over the shoulders of another, you might say. But even zapping isn't quite the right term, because it's not as if you're moving moment to moment from a news broadcast to a sitcom to an animal documentary as you might when channel surfing on TV. Joanne's poems don't normally jump entirely out of their channels every couple of lines; each poem stays within its special groove. Rather, what she achieves is a kind of crosstalk or co-channel interference in which one 'signal' is, as it were, superimposed on another. We live in an overcrowded media spectrum and, in a complex, layered way, joanne's work echoes the ludic, ironic and, at times, serendipitous collisions in communication that occur within it. In that way she becomes our poet of the multi-media vernacular.

Which brings me to my final point. As joanne writes, 'falling is a kind of vernacular'. That's the

last line of the poem called 'easy' from 'in the mood', the second sequence of brush: 'falling is a kind of vernacular'. The vernacular is what we do artlessly, what we speak without having to think about our words. All of us fall into language as children and, speaking for myself at least, I continue to fall around within it, stumbling over it, and getting it twisted around my tongue. But Joanne refers to literal falling, those brushes with death: tripping over and losing your glasses; a child running into a wall during play; and, poignantly, a boy who has fallen from 'the top of a city tower', who had earlier impressed the speaker by asking her the meaning of that word 'vernacular'. Everybody falls, has physically fallen: we do it without thinking. It's as everyday, as vernacular as sleeping and eating, but never rehearsed, never regulated like those activities. Instead it's surprising, shocking, dangerous. For that reason just about everybody does falling very badly. But not the practitioner of vaudeville. Not Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton or Roy Rene. They knew how to fall so that they didn't get hurt; they made it into an art form; they made it playful. They brushed themselves off and prepared themselves for the next sensation.

Joanne burns is a poet who shows us how to fall craftily and elegantly with words – to surprise, to shock, to take risks, and to play – and her work zaps the sensational vernacular world we all inhabit as crosstalking, late modern citizens of language.

This speech was delivered at the launch on 11 November 2014 at Gleebooks, Sydney.

Peter Kirkpatrick teaches Australian Literature at the University of Sydney. His research interests are in Australian literary and cultural history, and poetry and poetics.