



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

Gig Ryan

Launch Speech for Bonny Cassidy's *Chatelaine*

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In Bonny Cassidy's second book, *Certain Fathoms*, her style had polished its early uniqueness and facility: subtle, spare, at times almost cryptic, but also weirdly down to earth.

Bonny's new book *Chatelaine* is as refreshing as New Zealand electing their third woman PM today – though discount the first (Jenny Shipley, 1997–1999), a National! Of course 'chatelaine' itself not only means keeper of the keys, but specifically refers to the keychain, which Ancient Roman women wore like a Swiss Army Knife of Implements – that included ear-cleaners, absolutely essential for dating, or wax tablet *Tinderos*, then apparently!

Here too we find sheilas, sluts, and the Australian plural 'youse' – in fact there is much in Bonny's book that points away from so-called post-colonialism, that is, the assumption that the centre is elsewhere, which no one except those in Post-Colonial Studies departments paid to adhere to recent commandments, actually thinks. I often think of many academics as like the condottierri – contracted leaders recruited to defend the Italian City States states in the middle ages and renaissance period.

Bonny concentrates on her own peculiar central landscapes – yet the un-Australian villages and castles, as well as pointing out the inappropriately foreign memes of many fairytales, and the Australian experience of travel which, to we who come from the New World, often simply feels as if we're entering a vast cobwebbed picture book – can also be seen as metaphors for towns, and small cities that dot – or obliterate – our coastline (that is, the unpristine bits left between legislated coal mines, ghostly frills of dead coral cleverly co-ordinating with the driftwood pile-up of dead refugees). Perhaps, as one poem has it, 'this is the country of shuttup listen and observe'.

Bonny's poems often describe literally liminal states, as well as psychologically liminal states – on a threshold between dream and reality: kids strolling on a beach, memories of childhood and parents, the constant leaking into our brains of former moments.

Walk the castle wall
on the shallow bay out
beyond the fringe of nation
(‘Research’)



or in a family occasion:

In the background clouds
ate each other

my mother demonstrating
meals of beach and air, pouring, pouring. ('Dunes')

or this picture of adolescence, 'Half virgin':

Ants pour out and in.
A teensy voice, a child in a well
whose horse has stalked off.
And who, caught there
in her funnel of notions
sews up sentences...

as well as actual dreams as in 'Dreamboat' – 'In a dream my brother / i mean sister died / and i delayed grief, offering it to others / first. It was politeness / and eventually I turned see-through'. Many poems enact transformations, often in an Ovidian metamorphosis; in Ovid the weeping Niobe, for example, is turned into a crag, sealed in her tears, that is, the person becomes their action (or as the existentialists say 'existence precedes essence'); and so in Bonny's poems, often physical activity – walking / swimming / sex – transforms the characters into bird / fish / animal counterparts. Hands seem to suddenly be beaks, claws, touch becomes pecking, etc., a little like in some Robert Adamson poems, but in Adamson the staring observer connects and then becomes what's observed (which, interestingly, is what happens in real Physics: it's impossible to observe molecules and atoms without them reacting to their being observed). There's a kind of magical realism in this strangely Cartesian dualism of body and mind that these poems incarnate. Also, as in Theocritus's *Idylls*, that is, the beginnings of classical pastoral poetry, where supposedly un-lettered shepherds compete in finely wrought lyrical song – so in Bonny's moments of naive memories, brainless physicality, chopped couplings of adjective/nouns ('horsey waves' I love), the poet has a contrastingly sophisticated stranglehold on style.

There are also many haunted moments – the strangely inexplicable or Ashbery-ian 'It', presumably a state of mind, in 'Lighten Up' – 'Animals avoided its transparency, staring at the vacant arches // now its eyes have been fucked out, as the villagers say, / and the offshore wind pumps through them, into my hair.', and the portentous foreboding in poems such as 'Hunt' in which the last lines force us to rethink the poem. But there's also a lot of satire and social commentary such as in 'Ex-territorial' where a woman fails (that is, succeeds) to be what's expected:

No longer a woman I am, at last, dalek.
Without a skull inside, my gaudy relic



would be revolting...

'Cathexxxxis' that depicts a constricting marriage (is there another?), and ends:

The shot buffalo jumps up.
...Over her shoulder the husband ponders
his next wife emerging from the harbour
and all those legs going walkabout in the city.
They hover like this beside Elizabeth Bay

where she put down her knife.

or in 'The red studio' that begins 'Father was a potted fern', (thus fated to never be on a VCE exam paper) and continues:

Sap trembled from my armpits
We reposed in panoramic undergrowth
clutching our mild expectations.

No word, no line break, is accidental of course. The rhythmic semi-pantoum of the title poem 'Chatelaine', that echoes the densely mesmerisingly fatal style of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' ends 'I am polishing my hoard, digging.' This book is a wonderful hoard of subtlety that becomes more densely layered with each re-reading, rich in imagination and sometimes wounding directness.

'Madam'

"Fancies strike me in the
overflow like men
who all look the same

come over and disappear:
ravines suspended across a bridge.
That bird walks downstairs, an oyster

eating another. I spits up poems. Please
torch these thoughts like cash, help me finish the vase
then shatter it.

Gig Ryan has published six collections of poetry, including *Pure and Applied*, which won the 1999 Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry, and *Heroic Money*, which was shortlisted for the 2002 NSW Premier's Prize for Poetry. The recipient of writers' fellowships and residencies from the Australia Council, she is a distinguished poetry critic, and poetry editor of the *Age* newspaper.