

Griffith University

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Writing in/on Australia: history, ecology, poetry

Biographical note:

Stuart Cooke is Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Griffith University. Stuart Cooke's first collection of poetry, *Edge Music*, was published in 2011 (IP). He has also published a chapbook, *Corrosions* (Vagabond 2010) and a translation of Juan Garrido Salgado's *Eleven Poems, September 1973* (Picaro Press 2007). His critical work, *Speaking the Earth's Languages: a theory for trans-Pacific Indigenous Poetics*, is forthcoming from Rodopi. Email: stuart.cooke@griffith.edu.au

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Worn

Only loneliness of desk the ellipsis of word,
recalling memories the hand behind dealing out
each one, if only my limbs if only my tongue... trembling
what duckling wouldn't and what grown man
hardening, wouldn't run there that first one
that early peace, a taste of sugar like... entropy, chaotic
and brittle and never a sense you can, always
the possibility of looking back to see... nothing,

our worn mountains the Australian
breath, the lonely descent from weather
from moon, wolverine mindscapes some
faint dingo dream, none of it mine just time

bursting... scraps of laughter a bit of sex the rest
rented, the sun retreating I'd re-enact each moment
if it would make... the split timber of my mistakes
forever, wherever forgotten.

sueltame rocky coast smelter

sueltame hermana media hermana nada
mas que an acquaintance un accident historic
agujero negro never negro never a home
place never the broken home platitudes with it
only the sucios make you sweat second
hand I came to understand la ley
de la land la la la la la la mama
tierra? la la la la la no home in Bodalla
can't stand Temuco too cold in Hobart Puerto
Montt push it push it I never understood
la ley 'cause I couldn't stand the swelter
the molten breast milk swelter
pechugas de piedra sucking on salt water
inky heart saltos *huyéndose* how many times *has*
art rhymed with corazón the reason I'm fleeing
is the buzz of an interstitial buzzing salty
smelters is when I dive into the ocean
cuando escucho las fantasmas
sumergiéndose otra vez en las aguas
it surrounds me like your land surrounds you.

Part B

1) Vision

Purnululu wandering

“Australia we sobbed through the paperbarks’ songs
to birds and gentle animals
and to the soft-stepping people of its river-banks”

– from ‘Silva’, by Robert Adamson

In your rivers of sand, these
frozen oceans of salt,
silicate-crust
of earth, my heels break
crust with each step; I crush
sticks, dried
leaves hidden
beneath

I sink, and
wade

through sandstone, pink
riverbed

outside
the wind throws fresh the loose
the grains
of sand across spinifex, stinging hiss
and wattle cry; some bird I won’t
should see. But
can’t.

Fire memories
shimmer; dormant
tongue
in your rumours of ants, rock
red

apricot
termites mound
cooked flesh. Fires
lick
past. Withered
spinifex; limp puffing
ash.

And dust
y black shoes.
Rivers

of sand, heaped
tracks, tracks, dung
of crushed rocks

– your
things, brilliant
things.

Out with Franz

after Philip Hodgins

Franz was Dutch once
but after spending a lot of time here in Broome
the old fella decided to give him the _____ law.

He took us up
through some of the country, pointing out
plants and places of interest. We sped
at one-thirty along a dusty red road
gloved by burnt scrub to burst out
onto the coast: stupid, sheer blue everywhere.

Franz told us to walk down the beach a bit,
About a 'k, he said. He'd drive on
and meet us where the red cliffs turned
into sand dunes.

After two 'ks at least, the white sand burning
your eyes out,
we saw the red rock beside us start to sink
into the ground and the big dunes rise up
with a few tufts of this and that on top.
There was a little beach.

Some of us undressed and wandered into the water.
I turned to see Franz's relief striding down
the crest of a dune. It can be hard to think of this sort of thing
as paradisiacal: you can worry a lot about fresh water,
or how long it will be until you can get back to shade.
You think of what they say about skin cancer, too (the sun's
always there, beating down).
I joined the others in the ocean. Franz lay down on the sand,
took off his sandals and put them under his head.
For a whitefella he didn't seem to burn much.

I swam out for a bit then caught a small wave in.
All that heat and stress I'd felt earlier
had been washed off.
I pointed to the blood red
of the cliffs; Franz said they were a big quarry once
where the people got paint and good rock.
When everyone was out of the water we followed him
through a valley between the dunes.
Around our feet were scattered thousands
of pieces of chipped sparkling shells
and thin teeth of stone. It was here,
he told us, over thirty of the tribe had been shot
by paranoid explorers. Over the other side of that dune

was the burial ground.

You couldn't camp there; this was a better place to sleep.

Stop! he cried, his hands out.

At his feet: two eggs like small marbles
resting on a simple patio of broken white shell.

It was the oyster catcher's nest.

Then, further on, circles of grey ash in the sand.

During lunch, back behind the dunes, someone asked him
why the massacre wasn't mentioned

on the tourist information board. They don't want

to give the young people any more reason

to be angry, he said.

Harbour line

In my eye's corner: her feet coupled on the grass, beside –
harbour.

A day weighted with clouds,
with weaker light, the water is a wrinkled,
ferric skin and impermeable
as the sky's faintly stained milk.

Thick lines are cramped between water and sky:
impending

green pasture, which water covers
before foliage breaks out of water
to explode amongst apartment blocks,
mossy, flaming and untenable
while

the skyscrapers remain veiled
in a thin, chalky fabric.

A strip of Sydney;
she stirs. Her line returns
to beyond the beginning of my vision.
I turn to say, _____.

2) Performance

Song of the possible

(He might sit on a limb of their honeycomb light
while fishing a lapping tide's throat...)

He might fish from a jetty the size of a thumb
mandarin and faded mountain smeared across waves' slick backs

*the long, slick waves rolling in
long, lonely snakes rolling one after the other*

*lonely snakes rolling in to shore
lonely snakes rolling over pavements*

*their inky lines over pavements
the snakes' inky lines on parchment...*

He might slither off to the moon on one of those inky lines
he might be hooked by a line from the moon's dark hand

*while the curious serpents wind into the city
the sandy-brown coal serpents*

*they're flying over the skeleton coral
flying over the skeleton trees, the rusting hulls*

*flying at night time, hiding from the sun
their pale clay tracks...*

He sees them come from the water pans
from above, he sees them come screaming from the salt flats

*their husky diesel mouths
their diesel mouths gathering at the bottleshop*

*forming queues at the bottleshop, they are singing
they start shaking and soon they are fizzing*

*fizzing in queues, their grating gas calls
calling and singing with husky diesel mouths...*

He might find plastic jewels or beads
he might find words for the night's precious treasures

*branches of ellipsis crack into honeycomb
and the dance boils in the moon's flare*

*the dancing spirit skins, their lines striking
while his line shoots off into the depths, then snaps*

*so many of his lines shoot off, snapping
always this tearing, grating, snapping...*

He might find venom in a bottle on the sand

he won't find an object that will grant him their consent

*the dead at the bottleshops keep calling
rising and falling, lifting and dropping*

*they will line the pavements with stories
they are lining parchments with venomous songs and stories*

*but he keeps fishing, shooting into the depths
his rusty old hook in a rising tide...*

He might be fishing until the white honey teeth arrive
when at last they arrive, racing like snakes from far off

*finally they start dancing to the songs
they start dancing and pounding at the doors*

*he jumps to his feet before the tide of sounds
stumbling on their fierce, salty songs*

*they're pounding cliffs with waves and granite skulls
with their aching limbs and their tall spears of gum.*

throat sucking song from a waterhole's nugget density.
Say pen, flood, cumulus, humid melody
and lightning time.

Now they're pointing
they're pointing the shadow fingers the new
flesh limbs pointing east
with the momentum
 of geology
 if the whole world
might melt into it
melt into horizon's crinkling epidermis
so that the whole world might re-emerge
in tongues bursting like pandanus:
the aching past sinking into a bleeding spring
bubbling up
seething the ochre plain mirage.

Valparaíso and tourist

Before the broken edges of an old city's coast,
before the waves breaking on the wharves,
a city lost in the fog tumbling in from the ocean,
in snakes of fog sliding down from the mountains,
I'm tumbling through skins to my origins.

I am tumbling and my skin's shade is changing,
I am of the television virus, my skin is brightening,
I am from the land of ether, of foamed milk,
I am the loved one, only ever the one, the one loved for being one,
I am the one writing with all my weight.

I've left a trail of footsteps across the stars,
I've scratched away footsteps one by one,
each step burnt a field, a mask, a sleepy carbon mass,
I'm a mask with eyes of furious sulphur,
I'm a moon in search of a planet in search of a moon.

If I was in love it was with a woman becoming a man,
if I was loved it was by a world becoming a woman,
I was never loved by the grumpy old goanna,
I was never held in the wings of the circling goshawk,
if it was love it was grumpy ions going senile in the galactic mirage.

I *have* been loved, but only on occasion,
and I am loved, but only by staggered occasions,
staggering past old buildings, I imagine decayed teeth,
I screw them hollow for my filthy heap,
the fact is none would love me if they could see inside.

As a living thing I am growing outwards, spreading,
as a living I am fattening, spreading outwards, phoning,
as a dead heart growing,
as a dead heart sprawling over tarmac
while the black skins of the bitumen places sizzle underneath.

For my living I am ripping off their rhythms,
I am ripping off skins, buying the hearts of places,
I'm spreading cancer thick like a famous yeast,
this strange old city tumbling down in granules,
cancer is dancing in the halls of my metal cells.

So come to me on a lonely night when I least expect it,
come to me on the one night I most deserve it,
come to me, roll to me over the hakea and the singing she-oak,
look for me, come to me, hold me and own me,
we'll meet by the edge of this crumbling city's dreams.

For left alone I ferment into lonely flora,
left alone I become the stench of an alcoholic plague,
I reach out and devour the seeds of places,
I gain weight and lose it immediately in their throats,
my stinking ferment causes them atrocious choking spasms.

Come to me in the night furthest from my origins,
we'll walk down the most sinuous, gaseous streets,
I'll take your hand and your music and I'll suck on your bleeding tongue,
for I am the gum plague, I'm riddling the earth with gums,
and I'm crushing your gases in the star burning furthest from reach.

Research background

I am interested in how Australian poetry is defined by its relationship to the Australian continent, and in what I propose are fundamental characteristics of Australian poetry: perceptive difficulties; the close relationship between the poem and its *performance* in particular places.

Research significance

The poems in Part A engage with a sense of dislocation implicit to contemporary Australian existence: the vast distances between places with which I'm familiar produce similarly fragmented series of intelligible and unintelligible syntax. Part B contains two parts. The poems in 'Vision' are aligned by the speaker's inability to see or understand completely the region in which the poem takes place. This produces a series of poetic 'blind spots'. Finally, 'Performance' is a selection of work that attempts to synthesise some elements of Australia's greatest poetry traditions – those of Aboriginal nations – with particular strains of non-Aboriginal Australian poetry (eg. Rodriguez 1990; Anderson 1995). I've appropriated syntactical patterns common in translations of Aboriginal poetry (eg. Strehlow 1971). In doing so, I've been self-reflexively critical of what is effectively a colonial appropriation of Aboriginal cultural forms.

Research contribution

These poems attempt to show that the writing and performance of Australian poetry in English is strained by multiple pathways of dislocation, displacement and dissent.

Works cited

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