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## Judith Crispin, 'The Myrrh-Bearers' in The Australian

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## Poetry reviews: Caldwell, Langford, Pieloor, Crispin

Aidan Coleman reviews four poetry books in The Australian March 5, 2016

(Excerpt)

Taken from an Andre Gide novel, the title of the opening poem *La Porte Etroite* in Judith Crispin's *The Myrrh-Bearers...* sets the tone for a book haunted by longing and death.

Carrion, which is a recurring motif, provides the closing image for *Dinner Party at Ness*: "I bend down to stare into the glazed eye / of a shark, air-drowned and crippled, / Already dogs have savaged half its side. // This transformation, / this dissolve of bone, breath and gesture — / this is the last music I will write."

This strange and beautiful final sentence is apt for a book true to the lyric moment — one in which faith grapples with doubt, often at the expense of the former. This tension is seen in these poignantly simple lines from *The Myrrh-Bearers*, on the death of the poet's uncle: "I and the myrrh-bearers / who recited Our Father, who art ... / but could not finish, / who faltered and stood voiceless / in the awkwardness of prayer, / my Aunt's fingers unlacing from his — / a small letting go."

The poems addressing the terminal illness of a close friend — sometimes through apostrophe — cover the months before and the weeks after death. The cancer is subtly personified: "Outside a figure waits on the gravel path / and nothing will keep him out; / not your locked door, / not the slashes of your suitcase. // Disguised as birds / he flies darkly at the glass" (from *Liver Cancer*). Biblical quotations are scattered throughout and many more allusions are inventively woven into the text, as in the poem *Woodstock* about Crispin's father, a Pentecostal preacher: "Our father, leaning in the hall, / unwound stories of missionaries ... and how faith kept the bullets from their flesh, / and how faith planted tiny mustard seeds / in the marrow of their spines / that decade by decade, grew into flowering offshoots / of the one sacred plant."

Crispin is a conservatorium-trained composer who has completed postdoctoral work in Paris and Berlin. This goes some way to explaining the beautifully paced music of her lines, and the prominence of wintry German landscapes. The way the classic and contemporary intersect with the transcendent in these sharp and elegant poems invites a reader to return to them often, and with profit.

*Aidan Coleman is a poet and critic.*

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