

Philip Salom

Philip Salom Launches Judith Crispin

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What's immediately significant about Judith Crispin's poems is how strange they are. They bring into focus a world which is vital, lit, emotionally open and compassionate, but one which is also other-worldly, subject to laws and visions and visitations which are not those of conventional dailiness. This world of *The Myrrh Bearers* is animistic, shadowy, elegiac, and is certainly not routine and logical. Despite many who believe otherwise, our world isn't routine and logical either. If it were so, would we bother getting up in the morning?

We return to places that don't exist,
the mystery that leaves footprints in the yard
and strips branches from avenues if lindens.
Each morning the scratch marks seem more bestial.

.....

When you sleep, the wolf wakes inside your skin.
He says: I am the war,
the one who conceals in your hair
woods and rivers of a forgotten place.

'Thus Spake the Wolf'

For all our different moods and takes on it, poetry is a kind of linguistic synaesthesia which can lead to a psychic one. One property or mode of being ... morphing into another ... and back out again, from the ordinary, to the strange, approaching a new form. It is obvious this poem is based on the earth, the senses, and the life-force, and through the poem's psychic current. Day and night seem to co-exist in these lines, and with unexpected frequency throughout the collection – where both daylight *and* night occur within the one poem, not as common as it sounds, another kind of subliminal continuity. Shift, change, shape-change.

Our world is mysterious. We do not understand our world, we live it. We use forms to examine it. Poetry is one such form, and poetry exists in a scatter of forms which order, disorder, re-arrange, animate, enact, feel and intuit our experienced world at one crucial remove: the language of the poem, which is always its own truth, a meta-order of knowing. Crispin's poems occupy a personal-and-landscape groundedness but don't quite equate with black and white dailiness; they grow and increase, with images and intrusions that are subtle and Other; such events are taken for granted in the poems and they are best understood, like our world, and like all of the world's poems, by living them, by being sensually and psychically aware:

I am Freyja of the ice fields,
following a narwhal's tusk
through diamond-threaded air –
for he has retracted speech into his jawbone.
And if in sleep, he grazes my naked hip
he will not wake me.
In all the rooms of our house,
snow is falling.

'Freyja'

For all its defamiliarisation, this remains poetry of presence. Such a poem, like many of these poems, releases what I feel as a kind of *radiance*, and this atmospheric quality is everywhere in *The Myrrh Bearers*. It is the play of lived energy across meanings and ideas and even, in 'Hyperborea' of multiples and mythic recursions: these are generated in a poem which is a narrative palimpsest on a book by Rene Daumal, a book itself called *Mount Analogue*, an allegory of multiple kinds of self, and ways of finding the invisible truths which must begin in the visible world. Quite a few layers there.

There is something esoteric in all this. The poetry hints at and takes into itself as essential material the otherworldly, the mythical and the slippages and suggestions of wider (invisible) consciousness. The result of this is not only initial radiance, but afterglow – a poetry

of light and being and that great paradox – a poetry where multiples undo the singular, and the self, and scatter these into a more diverse wholeness.

The way the brain knows is hugely diverse and in poetry even pattern formation / perception, such as experienced in rhyme, rhythm, refrain, repetition, creates strong affect without the affected (the reader) necessarily knowing what it is they know ... or feel – radiance is a non-emotional feeling, it is the invisible layering of visible light, a visual echo. I don't *see* radiance, I accumulate it among the words. It arises in me. From words which encompass presence, significance, even transcendence – in Judith Crispin's work, it is also a lived receptiveness, and by extension her empathy. This state carries further and deeply into remembrance, and elegy, especially in several poems dedicated to or referencing her friend Marilyn Meier in the late stages of her dying:

You smiled for me, for the camera, as though it cost nothing
and I pressed the shutter too early, caught you mid-turn:
an event-horizon of motion and nonmotion coexisting
at the limits of available light.

This photograph reassures me you were real,
you were seen by me, left fastened in the present,
while you were moving backwards, away from me in time.
It straddles two universes: in one you are alive
and in the other, you are not.

'Light Pictures'

This is gentle and exact, full of respect. Of loss. Even of anxiety. So I am not suggesting all these poems travel away from the quotidian, the human, the felt, not at all. The creativity and presence referred to earlier are where life is happening and where it may be apprehended, possibly understood. But in death, too, and therefore grief. And *Light Pictures* cross-references with the homage and prayerful poem *Wolf Hunt*, of a ritual of waiting and calling to the recently dead friend. And yet the imagery of light in *Light Pictures* is cosmic, and more other-lit than worldly.

Running as a real tension to this light and wholeness and even connectedness is a very subtle sense of alone-ness and transience. Many of the poems are set in Europe. The alone-ness then, is universal and carries us in common wherever we are.

Before the thousand-eyed cathedral,
a homeless man sinks to his knees
wreathed by gliding breasts of pigeons.
He is singing almost without sound
Panis Angelicus.

Light fails and the birds,
air lifting through their feathers like breath,
in vain use their silence to reach him.

'In Krakow'

But one gift of a life is what endures, mysteriously, like a song hangs, momentarily, but somewhere far longer, in the air, in the memory and, of course, in the construct of the poem. These are small rituals, as poetry is a ritual, a finding by making. The poem is a stated, though unstable representation, of both the momentary and the enduring, of sensations which live more than once. They live in us. Poetry lends its cadences and yearnings to ritual. Poetry is reincarnation. It is dream. These poems read like changed lives, and dreams, and are vivid, complex lives and dreams at that. They have narratives, people, animals ... Poems where the mute laws of cause and effect, and the insistence of logic are not a science experiment.

So, the I of these poems is the agency the poem needs as its seeing eye, and ear, the speaking and verbal authority of the poem, not assertively confessional, self-displaying, self-mythologising. None of that. This poet is ontological – Crispin writes of her being in the world. She questions that. She is a poet who writes with a vital enthusiasm – even a vitalism – of larger consciousness, and yet does so in a style notable for its elegance, and for a quiet and sustained power which is subtle, mature and – in poetry terms – reveals great poise. Here is the poet literally poised, in out of body experience, imagining her own death:

... your voice reciting books of the dead,
your voice wading through seaweed and foam
unravelling everything.

At the moment of death

I am hanging pendulous as fruit
 over a white metal bed,
 watching my body dressed by mourners.
 And you are arranging stuffed animals
 and flowers on a trolley.

I am setting you face to face

You do not see the spider of my nudity
 in the angle between ceiling and wall.

'Love Poem'

Note that wit: macabre in the contrast of the body being dressed contiguous with the stuffed toys, and precariously comic in the nudity / spider metaphor. There is a lot of subtle humour rebounding in these poems.

Crispin is also a photographer. Unlike photography the poetic image may seem exact but unlike photography we don't see the written image with the eye but as a direct hit in the brain. Even when the image is figurative, a metaphor or simile, for which there is no physical equivalent. It is a relation, it opens the semiotics of the literal and exposes multiples, relations, possibles, speculations. The mind can do this, can imagine the multiples suggested which have no image. This is kind of freaky when you think about it. Imagery is also wonderfully unstable in the mind, it can change and morph, and this is something poetry uses as a fluidity of meaning. *It* reads us. Poetry's power of suggestion is its basic core strength.

This is the great tease – process, form, craft at one end ... and at the other, suggestion, speculation, playing on the real to create imagined and subliminal responses. Crispin's poetry makes an eloquent case for a poetry of knowing that isn't knowing in any testable sense – testable against 'reality' in rational, empirical measure. Nothing is being asserted here, nothing forced upon us; instead, the poems are an acknowledgement of a very inclusive consciousness. The poems are as much about the earth and land-force as they are about 'humanity' and the spirit.

Although her poetry *is* full of other-ness and it seems apt to call it so, her work is not Uncanny – which includes implications of dread – and perhaps not even Other – which must also call into focus the unacknowledged negativities, fears, perceived evils. *The Myrrh Bearers* poems are repeatedly rich with intense positives, sometimes difficult positions, but raw and real. Because, in the worlds of these very fine and stimulating poems, strangeness is treated as normal. It is not imagined as a conceptual writing, and nor is it fantastical; it is a truth-seeking strangeness – founded in language particular to just that.

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About Philip Salom

Philip Salom's poetry collection, *Alterworld*, published in 2015 by Puncher & Wattmann, is a trilogy of *Sky Poems*, *The Well Mouth*, *Alterworld*. He has published fourteen collections of poetry and three novels, the latest of which, *Waiting*, was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards.

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