

WOODSMOKE

by Todd Turner

Black Pepper

\$22.95 pb, 56 pp, 9781876044862

Todd Turner's first collection, *Woodsmoke*, evolves intriguingly. It starts in the 'anti-pastoral' mode founded by Philip Hodgins. Here the poet, long since relocated to the city, looks back with tellingly evocative detail but a divided sensibility on the life he (it's normally a 'he') has now abandoned.

Turner's early poem, 'Heading West to Koorawatha', is a good example. It finishes: 'It is almost dark, and the last of the light / falls onto the canola fields, and onto the hillsides / full of Paterson's Curse. // I pull over and watch the sun sink / into a stretch of grass.' Paterson's Curse neatly embodies the poet's ambivalence: it is visually beautiful but poisonous to livestock. Significantly, Turner's action in pulling over to look at it foreshadows the metaphysical dimension that develops towards the end of the collection.

The key continuity in this shift is Turner's steady concern with verbal perfection. This at times can slow a poem's impetus, and it is not for nothing that Turner, in a later poem, 'Apprentice', celebrates the would-be craftsman's hands as being 'wedlocked in the grip of some dogged / perfection, jiggled epiphanies, theorems // in the crux of being stubbornly made'.

In many of *Woodsmoke's* later poems Turner is noting and/or recreating moments of what even secular readers will be happy to call 'grace'. His short poem of that title reveals what interests him most, and the closing lines seem to reach out to embrace the book as a whole: 'Something about how the river rose, and / about the stillness of the birds on the banks / in the rain / and about the way the air made it possible / to forgive - / and be forgiven.'

Geoff Page

KIN

by Anne Elvey

Five Islands Press

\$25 pb, 71 pp, 9780734048974

Kin, Anne Elvey's first full collection of poetry, brings together a wide range of poems full of light and the acuity of close attention. These poems focus on a world of inter-relationships where tree and water, creature and human, air and breathing, coexist – suggestive of an underlying philosophy of humility and acceptance. This is a world which envisions at least the potential of balance and a non-hierarchical sharing, where self and other, the natural world, and the devices and desires of the human might recognise each other.

In the delicate depths that characterise Elvey's poetic canvas, the precision of her language evokes the suggestive richness of liminal spaces – of beaches, river banks, the moment when a bird launches into flight, or when a last breath leaves a body.

Drawing on a tradition of focused looking, particularly a studying of the natural world, Elvey's poetry takes its place among lyrical practitioners such as Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Mary Oliver, Robert Adamson, and Mark Tredinnick. To see the world, paying reverent attention to its specificities, its manifest difference to the house of the self, is also, Elvey suggests, to find a kind of ecstatic awareness, a gateway to the extra-natural that can only be found through profound contemplation of the natural. She notes, 'A soul quivers / in the palm of your / voice ... A soul / pauses to witness / a magpie ... the soul is a prayer / may a great / white egret / lance your skies.'

From all this witnessing of the world comes the creating impulse of the poem; insistent and determined, everyday and extraordinary, Elvey brings us poetry as 'a thing that shapes itself / to a tongue, as elusive / as the blowfly / that got in yesterday / buzzes now, and will not / be chased out'.

Rose Lucas

LEAVES OF GLASS

by David Prater

Puncher & Wattmann

\$25 pb, 77 pp, 9781922186454

Between 1889 and 1892, young Australian poet Bernard O'Dowd corresponded with the ageing Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Glass*, David Prater's second collection, vividly imagines this long-distance relationship. This is not, however, a historical novel in verse. It refracts the correspondence through a perpetually shifting series of voices and forms, from heavily ironic, mock-traditional ones ('Treading: An Air') to the language of personal columns. There is even a translation of Whitman's 'O Captain! My Captain!' into the language of LOLcats, that is, rewriting the poem as though by a cat ('Gowayz Ob Lol: "O Kitteh! Meh Kitteh!"). Despite having some sharp literary and cultural observations to make, there is nothing precious or stuffy about this book. To take one sample of this mixing of times and voices, 'Swagman Ted', a prose-poem/letter from O'Dowd to Whitman, begins: 'Revered Master, Perhaps it was "Banjo" Paterson's curse – we'll never know; as someone once observed, news reaches us slowly over here, is constantly being delayed (or censored?) in the mail.'

After the amusing conflation of Banjo Paterson and the poisonous weed Paterson's Curse, the echo of Bruce Beaver's *Letters to Live Poets* (I), is wryly funny. It is apt, too, that this particular letter, addressed to the recently deceased Frank O'Hara, is the one evoked here: some decades later, an Australian poet will once again address a more established American. It also feeds on from the mock lament for Adam Lindsay Gordon, dead on a beach in the previous poem, to the death of O'Hara. The narrative that follows is earnest, deadpan, and bizarre.

Leaves of Glass gives an intriguing, sometimes enigmatic picture of an uneven relationship. Though some of what is now contemporary in it will soon seem as historic as Whitman and O'Dowd themselves, it is a book that plays some deft games with time and voice, and will repay rereading.

Graeme Miles