

Searching for Ichabods: Kent MacCarter's *California Sweet*

Launch speech, The Alderman, 15 May 2018, by Bella Li

Kent MacCarter's third full-length collection, *California Sweet*, opens with two epigraphs. The first is from Ed Dorn's cult 'pop epic' *Gunslinger*, which trails a ragtag crew of characters, who may or may not be stand-ins for philosophical ideas, through the prototypical desert landscape of an American Wild West. This paratext, which seeps between the seams of Kent's text, and infuses into its bones, sets the scene and prepares us for the collection of pop epics to come. We open, cinematically, in the desert landscape of Death Valley, Nevada—as Wild West a location as they come—with a poem titled 'Sundown over Badwater Basin, California':

The Russians insisted on feeding me. They
demurred, electing for leftovers and their apologies
eighty-sixed and hung velour as drapes or stars
in an Irkutsk porno house
qualified inside my world
a feast... (13)

We open, at the lowest point on the North American continent, on the outskirts (or right in the middle of) the Cold War, with Gorbachev and an unnamed character/actor/speaker, that 'w[eaves] scissors around a patch/of mooning cheekbones', that 'genuflect[s] a passing limousine of shadow'—and are immediately thrown into the thick of a scrum, not only in relation to subject matter, but also to form.

The book is a hybrid, splicing Kent's glycogen-fueled written work with the equally high-octane artwork of Jackie Ryan, whose comic book *Burger Force* won an Aurealis Award. These images have been planted carefully into the bed of text, and while there are echoes and concurrences, particularly on the level of energetic frequencies, the relationship between forms is never allowed to operate at a simple ratio of 1:1—Ryan's illustrations and assemblages both reference the words (you'll notice that burgers crop up at various pit stops along the way), and also jet off freely into their own strange skies. Within the medium of text there is also generic play: *California Sweet* comes at us in poetry, prose, prose poetry—and all the grey matter between—and continues a practice that began in Kent's 2014's collection *Sputnik's Cousin*. There, with regards to prose, we had the dark, and brilliantly morbid, 'Fat Chance' and 'Pork Town'. Four years later, in *California Sweet*, we have 'A Note on Going Superfast'—a thought piece, an essay, whatever you'd like to call it, that in the concise space of a few pages draws together a ride called 'The Caterpillar'—a 'contraption [of] eight connected dodgem-car-like-vehicles on a circular track' (47), which had the purported ability to go 'super-fast'—with the act of writing, of wrangling language.

A resident of, by turns, Montana, New Mexico, Minnesota, Melbourne and, now, Castlemaine, Kent is a true citizen of both everywhere and nowhere, and place—its beauties and its terrors—is a central component of his work. In *California Sweet*, the State of California takes centre stage, particularly in the first two sections, 'Glycogen' and 'California Suite', but in the course of the book we are taken to numerous other locales—Massachusetts, Jamaica Bay, Vienna, Hokkaido, Rockhampton, to name a few. In 'A Note on Going Superfast', Kent begins in the Valley Fair amusement park, in Shakopee, Minnesota, in the late 1980s, and ends, thousands of kilometres and three decades later, in 'Springtime 2015 in Castlemaine, Victoria...where this was written, years now ago, near an unkempt lemon tree and an African daisy being had by breeze' (49). It is a mark of the methodical nature with which he has constructed this collection, with its strongly

braided tissues of connection, that this finale immediately recalls a visual and sonic echo, one that can be traced back to the last line of ‘Are you Ready to Go Superfast?’ (by title, at least, a companion piece), which ends with: ‘victoria you re a daisy if you do’ (15).

Several such echoes sound through *California Sweet*, but I’d like to speak about my favourite: Ichabod Storm Trouper. Ichabod, who may or may not refer to Ichabod Crane, the protagonist in Washington Irving’s *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), first appears in ‘Descendant of the Donner Party’, as ‘ichabod nobody storm trouper s’ (the ‘s’ being removed from ‘trouper’ so that it’s unclear, at this stage, whether these are plural storm troupers or a single storm trouper with the banal distinguishing moniker ‘s’; 23). He next fleetingly pops up, though only by implication perhaps, in the midst of a band of ‘Stormtroopers’ (32) in the great semi-epic, ‘Constanze Weber Steps off Amtrak’s Super Chief Passenger Train in Los Angeles... ..and Fears She Has Disembarked at the Wrong Station’ (which takes the wife of Mozart as its subject). We hear about ‘Ichabod’s pears’ in ‘A Lime Rickey by Jamaica Bay’ (93), we are told ‘ichabod hunted’ in ‘Leaving Marlborough, Massachusetts’ (94), and asked ‘Ichabod *hom?*’ in ‘Preeclampsia for Meatlovers’ (91).

I began to see Ichabod as a kind of Wally, from childhood memories of *Where’s Wally*. I looked for him everywhere, was delighted when he surfaced—a small figure among the bustling cast that Kent has assembled in this volume. When he started to occupy more of the foreground in ‘Cryptocurrency’, the third section of the book—ordering an Air Force One Cheeseburger for \$11.50 in ‘Alumni, Parents, Widow/ers’ (71); perhaps, who knows, appearing in one of Jackie Ryan’s artworks; and finally getting a poem all to himself in ‘Ichabod Storm Trouper’ (95)—I felt like cheering. Books, by the fact of placing covers around a set of pages, announce themselves as entire works, and as readers, whether consciously or not, we are all searching for Ichabods—those points of continuity that give a book its ‘bookness’, those threads that bind any collection together into a satisfying whole.

And so, stalking through this collection is not only the ghost of Dorn’s Gunslinger, and many more besides, but also Ichabod Storm Trouper—a figure that unites two others seemingly separated by chasms of time and space. On the one hand, a character, notable for his particularly drawn physiognomy, from one of the founding fathers of Anglo-American literature, in the days when myths about witchcraft and hauntings held ground in the colonial American imagination. On the other, the faceless nobody of a Star Wars foot soldier, an extra or a bit-player who is simultaneously both singular and en-masse, the carrier of another form of American myth projected, via the Hollywood blockbuster, onto the starry canopy of the future. Ichabod, it turns out, is a more complex composite than he first seemed: not a Stormtrooper, after all, but a Storm *Trouper*—one eminently well-versed in the art of donning masks and disguises. And if we think again of the epigraph that opens *California Sweet*, we remember that the Wild West in Dorn’s epic turns out to be less a West of sand and cacti and blazing high noons, and more one of elaborate fabrication, of subterfuge and sleight of hand.

Back in ‘A Note to Going Superfast’, which we can take as memoir or as pure fabrication, or something else altogether, we have this statement: ‘I create now in front of a kindred dashboard to the ride’s operator, asserting my own specious claims’ (49). Kent’s work performs not only the feat of fabricating speed, of going from fast to superfast by a writer’s sleight of hand, but also of reconfiguring the manner in which we take the measurements of moving objects to begin with. In large and small acts of disassembly—of both temporality and spatiality, and through sequencing in particular—the poems extrapolate themselves from their fixed positions on the printed page, and invite you to shuttle back and forth between them, to look both with them and beyond them to their sources, to history, to the future, to what surrounds you in the present (and to see that these divisions, as in the individual poems themselves, do not hold).

And herein lies the thrill and the pleasure of reading poetry such as this. In *California Sweet*, we take the ride, we hurtle through the air and rattle along the tracks, and when we look down at the ground, we see the ride operator at his dashboard, and know we are in good hands. To answer the last of the trio of questions our operator asks, in the rarefied air of a past that has been made present again:

Do you want to go ... faster?

Yeah!

Do you want to go ... *really* fast?

Hell yeah!

Do you want to go *superfast*? (48)

Yes, yes we do.