

Launch of *Anecdotal Evidence* by Gayelene Carbis
Collected Works, 22 June 2017

According to my reckoning, Gayelene and I first met just a month short of 15 years ago, in the Auditorium of the Glen Eira Town Hall. It was 23 May 2002, and we had arrived to attend the Presentation Evening for that year's Glen Eira Literary Awards. We had both been shortlisted: Gaylene in the Short Stage Play Award for her piece *Crossing the Bridge*, and I in the My Brother Jack Short Story Award for my story 'The Man who Tried to Erase his Shadow'. Neither of us won, but we were seated at the same table and a new friendship became our mutual consolation prize.

Well, tonight we are all winners here, and the prize is Gayelene's long-awaited first collection of poetry, *Anecdotal Evidence*. It's a book in three sections, but a book of many parts: a particularly personal, indeed intimate book, by turns playful, poignant, hilarious, nostalgic, brisk, effusive, wry, fragile, intricate, sexy, ironic, scathing, loving – and occasionally all of these at once. The language is deceptively free-flowing and conversational, propelled by a lively intelligence and a distinctive, sometimes barbed wit, but allied with a discipline of craft and a toughness of psychological insight that can be easily missed while we enjoy the ride. Because while it *is* an enjoyable book to read, some of it must not have been easy to write. There is complexity and ambiguity, and both joy and pain, in the emotions the author works through and the memories she recounts, alongside a compelling and compelled exhilaration in the recounting. The relationship with family, especially parents, and later with a particular partner, is a leitmotif throughout these poems and animates the whole collection.

First impressions are telling. The opening section, titled 'Graven Images', foregrounds childhood reminiscences of family and school. Here are the first two stanzas of 'Apollo Bay':

Apollo Bay. Summer. Family.
Cassettes in the car. My music. My father
driving. My mother critical of something,
anything. My brother complaining about

the music. My mother's mother a barrier
between me and my brother in the back seat.
My mother impatient with her. My father
happy to have her and always nice to her. [13]

On the other hand, these several lines from 'Scrambled':

my old primary, girls from college squashed into
one small classroom, dwarfing desks: we are all
writing novels: [16]

And from 'Home', with its rhythmic torrent of memory like an incantation:

I am in my mother's house / I am in my old bedroom
in my mother's house / I am in my mother's kitchen / I am in
my mother's bed / I am sleeping in my old bedroom / in my
mother's house / I am shouting in my mother's kitchen / [31]

The past in its various permutations, embracing family and romance, is a constant familiar throughout the book. Gayelene's early years are the uncompromising focus of many of the poems. In 'Dust', a discursive meditation on mother, God, sin and Mrs Sinclair 'from school', she notes almost with surprise: 'How funny that we only ever saw / our own, childish transgressions, and never theirs.' [25] In 'Blue', she observes: '... it's strange yet / predictable how I go straight to the past and my parents and / my childhood' [40]. Note, when you read it, how this poem, so much about music and love, starts off with frequent punctuational slashes (like bar-lines), gradually thins them out, and finally ditches them altogether in the last eight or nine lines to rush breathless (the pure melody taking over) towards its ultimate point. Contrast this tonality with that of a short, sad and beautiful lyric like 'The Child I Never Had' [55].

Gayelene employs a broad choice of technical and formal approaches, and a range of stanzaic structures – from pared-back couplets and triplets to long, high-density blocks – and differing styles of punctuation, or none. Her use of rhetorical repetition and stream-of-consciousness is well served by those oblique forward slashes, which perforate several of the poems – syntactical markers that impel the lines onward while imposing breaks that are too micro-momentary to permit a breath. See, for example, 'Good Girl' [26], where Gayelene really lets the colourful language fly!

At times, the use of jagged line-lengths and enjambments achieves the fluent spontaneity of the conversation it mimics – as in the case of Gayelene's phonecall to her younger sister in 'Not My Daughter' [41], or in a very differently orchestrated piece such as 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' [49], which documents a series of exchanges with the poet's mother where italics mark out the dialogue to smooth and humorous effect.

Humour, in fact, is poured into many shapes in this collection. Almost needless to say, it is oftentimes self-deprecating. For instance, the apparent mispronunciation of a certain renowned

17th-century Samuel's surname spelt P-e-p-y-s [21] sets up a pointed exchange with Gayelene's father, though we end up no wiser as to who was right: is it *Peppies*, or *Peps*, or (as I was taught at school to believe) *Peeps*? Another type of humour – amusing for the reader if not for the author when a child – is at the core of 'A Cow Could Open a Car Door, If It Wanted To' [56].

Nobody in the family merry-go-round escapes the business edge of Gayelene's pen – or the resonant strokes of her keyboard. Listen to part III of 'House of Bricks':

Everyone and everything is forgiven.
My mother forgives my father for the house
we never had, my brother forgives me
for feminism in the house we did have, I forgive
my father for the house that's falling down.
No one expects anyone to fix it.
No one forgives anyone. [24]

Even body-image issues provide a terrain for playfulness, albeit at variance with the more common contemporary variety, when 'Audrey Hepburn and I Consider Our Assets' [18]. There is also 'The Good Breast' [28], and later, as a kind of counterpoise, 'The Bad Breast' [46] – the former a dizzying tragi-hilarious travelogue through family, growth and becoming; the latter a curious double-portrait centred, surprisingly, on food.

It shouldn't be necessary to mention, of course, that the humour and sparkling wit overlie and can even mask the genuine human *drama* (and melodrama) being depicted. And incidentally, neither should the collection's uncompromising honesty tempt us to characterize Gayelene's poetry as 'confessional'; its verve and its distinctive voicings make for a decidedly outgoing and, if you like, interactive poetic.

We've moved a fair way ahead, so let me backtrack a little. The first section closed with a dreamlike, slightly surreal poem, 'Early Morning' [32]. Its placement, together with the sense of mystery it evokes, seemed to foreshadow a modulation into a key at once related and remote. The eponymous second section of the book, 'Anecdotal Evidence', will usher us into that strange and perhaps even more perilous domain.

One of my several favourites here is the second poem, 'The Logic of Spoons', with its perfect tone, its ambivalence, affection, exasperation: 'The dish-rack divides us. We are separated like the little grooves / where you place the plates.' [38] In a sense, affection and exasperation represent two of the leading notes that heighten the pitch of these poems.

Mother makes periodic comebacks, as mothers will. The poem ‘My Mother’s Moon’ offers a remarkable, almost surreal meditation on the poet’s ambivalent relationship with her mum, with the moon as both muse and custodian. ‘It watches me like a Halloween pumpkin. Its eyes and mouth move.’ And then the almost shocking conclusion:

I am made of stone.
The moon with its cut-out eyes
And mouth is a mask.
I put it on and head home. [42]

Significantly, the title-poem [43] follows, a 53½-line non-sentence with no punctuation, which works brilliantly as a kaleidoscopic rant, an outburst, a childlike outpouring where *everything* pours out, and then some. The very next poem, ‘Begin’ [45], is of similar style and impetus but erotically different in setting and mood. Its headlong rush, but with a clear and often bittersweet trajectory, is a mode of diction and delivery that we find with variations right across this collection. For contrast we have the delightful two-part sequence ‘Patriarchate’, a kind of intermezzo and somewhat surprising for what we learn. Here’s a quote from the start of part II:

We went.
The priest told us not to do it anymore.
We said we wouldn’t.
We did. [53]

Meanwhile, almost behind our backs, a certain (or perhaps uncertain) lover has entered the equation and looms ever larger as the book’s second half progresses. ‘Scenes from Lorne’ [51] is one of a whole number of poems that explore what Gayelene has permitted me to designate as ‘The Lyndon Factor’ (and I don’t mean LBJ). Accordingly, the middle section finishes with a fugal prelude and preview to the third section, ‘Finding a Nice Man’ (echoing, as it happens, the ‘nice’ in ‘Apollo Bay’ and in two other poems as well). In this poem the word ‘nice’ is deployed, according to my count, 44 times over 66 lines! Here are a few lines that introduce the word only twice:

... shall I stay away from poets and
psychologists and especially priests?
shall I be with an engineer-sort-of person?
shall I quash my impatience every time
he explains how the water system works?
shall I be with a nice man then, but how will it be
being with the nice man? ... [57]

This final section is burdened with the more elaborate title, ‘The Weight of Words in Our Hands Like Water’ – reflecting, presumably, the rather complicated intimate relationship with a man headlined in one poem as ‘The Magician’ [64]. Many of the poems that follow don’t pull any punches, or pull them even less than the earlier ones. The first poem, though, ‘On Inadvertently Sending You Poems’ [61], finds Gayelene in William Carlos Williams mode – a delicious six-liner eminently fitting for our post-truth age. Soon after that, we are given the unforgettable performance piece ‘This Is What Happened’ [66], which has featured in several of Gayelene’s theatre works. At this point, however, I’d like to read a few lines from ‘The Kalimna’, a poem that blends wistfulness, resignation and nostalgia:

Here I am in the Kalimna and this is my first time here:
these hours are ours. This is the way you begin to build
a life together—the places you travel, the places you leave.
The ground we gain and the ground we lose. [70]

It’s characteristic, this give-and-take, this ambiguity, this magnetic chequerboard relationship with its acute angles and obtuse angles and endlessly eccentric circles. A geometrical, dialectical dance between *immersion* and *distance* (for which see the poem ‘Uncharted Waters [77]).

Right near the end of the book, the moon makes a return in ‘Thought-fire’, which begins:

Here is the edge
Of my burning page.
There is the maze
I lost my pen in. [81]

And the volume concludes, appropriately enough, with ‘Making a Bird’. I would like to quote this poem’s closing lines:

then he flies away—
well, he’s a bird—there’s no defeat
or regret, no need to cling to or keep
even the shiny things—
I go back inside—back to work—
writing about people—their problems—
the flit of wings in the room—
pages covered with feathers. [85]

Let feathers fly, I say! And hearty congratulations to Gayelene, and to Five Islands Press. This is a fine debut collection and I commend it to you. I trust that the evidence I’ve presented, anecdotal or otherwise, will persuade you to give these poems a judicious hearing, and that I can now, with relative impunity, declare the book legally launched.