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Books by Lachlan Brown, Alison Croggon, Gayelene Carbis and Oscar Schwartz

It begins with her birth in South Africa in 1962, a period in Cornwall, and then her arrival in Australia, aged seven. “Australia was practical and taught me swimming”. Having been told by “a boy with sunshocked hair” that you “dive in the deep end and you can’t go wrong”, the future poet jumps, “so heavy with faith I had to be rescued”.

In the fourth part of *Quickening* the poet becomes a mother herself and gives a vivid sense of it, sometimes through her relatively rare use of metre and rhyme: “neither maid nor matchless / neither still nor blest / I woke with knowledge in my womb / and fear within my breast // the day was five hours old / when Joshua wriggled out / to see what all the dim reports / of noise were all about. // he is a knot of needs / my ends are all astray / and the hours are short and fat / with Joshua in my day”.

A comparable musicality (it’s no accident Croggon is also a librettist) is to be found through all her work, which is mainly written in highly metaphorical free verse. She is certainly one of the Australian masters of this form. As the book develops, however, some readers may tire a little of this abundance.

Croggon’s deservedly famous early poem *The Elwood Organic Fruit and Vegetable Shop*, included here, is also highly metaphoric but its tone is ironic and playful, qualities that Croggon is inclined to abjure later in the book. Its opening line is a good note to finish on: “I will go walking in Elwood with my mind as smooth as a marrow ...”

Free verse in Australia has rarely come better than Croggon’s.

Anecdotal Evidence (Five Islands Press, 85pp, \$25.95), the first collection by Gayelene Carbis, better known as a playwright, has also been some time in the making. It’s almost riskily autobiographical, seeming to come down quite hard not only on herself but also on her family and exes.

Admittedly, in a clever six-line twist on William Carlos Williams’s classic *This is Just to Say*, Carbis does allow herself some wriggle room. “This is just to say // I have taken the truth / and twisted it // Forgive me // it was so malleable / and so enticing.” Whether she’s “forgiven” or not must be for others to say.

Carbis’s collection is arranged in three chronological sections dealing with childhood, adolescence and maturity, and finally the complexity of relationships enjoyed or endured, and then ended.

Her childhood seems to have been overshadowed by the author’s determination to be a “Good Girl” and by her parents’ acrimonious break-up. The aftermath of the latter event reads convincingly, especially in poems such as *Father is in Insurance and Out Most Nights* and *House of Bricks*.

In the latter, the poet recalls how, whenever she asked her father an important question, he would simply say: “Leave

it with me.” She then goes on to remember “and we (did). All of us, still waiting / while my mother’s eyes grow old”.

As this sample suggests, Carbis’s use of language is generally basic, even at times faux naïf — which in many poems, such as *Graven Images* and *Good Girl*, can be very effective in establishing and maintaining the situation of the child narrator. In other poems, such as *The Magician* and *This is What Happened*, the technique can be similarly persuasive in the mouth of a much older speaker in very different circumstances.

It’s worth noting in passing, however, that Carbis’s work is not always plain and direct. Occasionally, as in the short poem *Fire*, she attempts, or allows herself, something more metaphoric: “I stood like a statue / in a big empty house. // Solitary, still: I ignite. // The house burns. // These words are my ashes.” It’s an additional strategy in a book that holds closely and authentically to the frustrating complexity of life as we live it, especially within families and relationships.

Oscar Schwartz’s *The Honeymoon Stage* (Giramondo, 96pp, \$24) comes complete with a separate “author’s note” from the publisher. In it the poet shows considerable insight into his own work by describing it as offering “a new language that is often slight, funny, casual, light, emotive, but also explores the tensions between the ecstasy and anxiety of connection”.

The “connections” Schwartz talks of are mainly found via the internet. He reminds us that in this book the pronouns “me”, “you” and “us” “do not necessarily belong exclusively to me and my life”. This has the effect of freeing the poems from their moorings, as it were, and giving them a zany, even surreal touch.

Ironically perhaps, the poems in the three sections separately titled Us, You and Me do not vary as much as the pronouns might imply. To an extent all three are internet constructs and share the anonymity to be found there.

Schwartz’s poems are often written in lines that stand apart from one another but which have a cumulative narrative effect. The most extreme form of this approach is in the poem, *please skip to the last line of this poem and read from the bottom up*. As promised, the poem can indeed be read both ways and make considerable sense.

Another example is the nine-page poem *should i watch game of thrones?* which is both funny and insightful about the roles that television series can play in our lives and our relationships.

The prosaic tone employed by Schwartz can be heard in just one sentence from the poem mentioned above: “will i write a think piece in which I contend that game of thrones is somehow a reflection of some broader aesthetic issue?” This does seem a long way from poetry as we normally understand it, but its cumulative effect over nine pages is indisputably real.

Lachlan Brown’s second collection, *Lunar Inheritance* (Giramondo, 96pp, \$24), is a livre compose examining, with intriguing and detailed ambivalence, the Chinese side of his Anglo-Australian/Chinese heritage. This is done partly through re-examining his childhood memories in Australia as part of the Chinese diaspora and via a recent trip to Guangzhou, Kaiping, Shanghai and Beijing, observing the “economic miracle” close up.

The book comprises a dozen sections of eight eight-line poems, with occasional interruptions by a few scattered, fairly mordant sonnets. The octave is a clever length for both tourist poems and childhood memories. Brown doesn’t make it clear how fluent his Chinese is or which dialect he speaks, but it’s obvious he knows enough to reach much deeper than another Australian tourist might.

What Brown sees is disturbing but not only a matter of negatives. There are occasional references to an earlier time in China which Brown is also careful not to idealise. The advent of international mall culture, however, hardly seems to be a blessing. The poem *fifth circle or a day in another person’s person*, is just one example of many: “Ring roads Beijing the company with / thirty office staff call called Ricky Wong. / The system names its vehicles auspiciously, / the fleet kept up to date by e-calendar / reminders chirping at key moments, say, / 4am when the sky just forgets its pollution / or tolerates a microsleep between jobs. / Two breaths before the long shift begins.”

Hardly less disturbing, but in a different way, are the experiences of the poet’s grandparents and parents, all of whom, in one way or another, had to deal with what we used to call “culture shock”. The opening of the book’s final poem is just one of many poignant examples: “Grandmother, when you sing ‘Jesus loves me’ in Cantonese / I don’t think I should write any more. We take you out / for dinner and you lean on your frame next to Liverpool Road, / where the path’s gentle gradient tips the breath from your lips.”