Poker Face

*Solar Perplexus*, Dean Young (79pp, $22, Copper Canyon)

‘I’m used to not getting the joke, / maybe even being the joke’ says Dean Young in ‘Dance Event’, and it’s true, the narrator of Young’s poems has always been a comedic anti-hero, the butt of mishap and misunderstanding as he gave voice to sprawling, misshapen poems which ended up somewhere completely different to where they start.

When I first came across Dean Young’s poetry I was in Manhattan. I bought *Skid* after a quick skim-read, and remember sitting in a hotel room later, reading aloud to Neil (who used to design Stride book covers), both of us in stitches. This was a new kind of surrealism to me, one that looked outwards not inwards into dreams and the subconscious, a poetry that worked by association along with linguistic and semantic manoeuvring, delighting in the unexpected. It was clever but also totally readable, the least po-faced experimental poetry I’d read for a long time.

Metaphors, similes and allusions only work if they make some kind of sense, if the reader can make the parts of an idea or image cohere to some point. Young still delights in pushing the boundaries of this. In ‘Refinery Fire’ the poem ends with the line ‘The snow takes its face from a moth.’ In literal terms, snow doesn’t have a face, and – science fiction films apart – you can’t ‘take’ a face from anyone or anything, and yet we understand the allusion to touch and blurred image, the ideas of softness and powder here; the phrase shouldn’t work but it does.

‘All poetry is a form of hope’, declares Young at the beginning of ‘Small Craft Talk Warning’, and to me part of that hope is that the instability of Young’s poetry will help us make sense of the world. His last book, *Shock by Shock*, had a more serious undercurrent of mortality, because Young had undergone major heart surgery since the book before, and there are echoes of that seriousness here: references to the dead, particularly his poet friend Tomaž Šalumun, death and mortality, and an occasional yet noticeable note of despair:

 The blood may be fake
 but the bleeding’s not.
 ( ‘Small Craft Talk Warning’)

 I thought I could distinguish sunshine
 from the flames of hell and withstand
 the fucked-up beauty of this world
 and not that I’m sure there is one the next.
 (‘The Science of Thunder’)

These new poems are noticeably less expansive in tone, less prone to such huge imagistic or thematic diversions and meanders as previously. They are visually thinner and sometimes turn into staccato lists, with phrases piled up individually rather than linked into elongated sentences. This makes for a punchier and speedier read, if one less prone to beguilement and linguistic seduction. One poem ends by declaring ‘Of course it hurts’, and it’s that hurt and a sense of bewilderment and cynicism that now sits alongside the wonder and ability to see anew which Young has always possessed. Young’s poetry has always kept a straight face, however funny it was, but now it seems that straight face is for real. This is a wiser, more refined and yet no less entertaining poet at the peak of his poetic power, even if he declares that ‘There’s so much I can’t explain / if someone would just give me the chance’. I recommend that you give Young a chance to not explain through his vivid, witty, continually surprising and original poetry.

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