

## Alive to the moment

*Knuckle*, Tim Cumming (92pp, Pitt Street Poetry, Australia)

Tim Cumming's early poetry was gritty and urban, *hard* even, but over time his work has become more lyrical and gentle, though just as observant and urgent. The 'End Note' suggests that '*Knuckle* explores a poetry of simultaneous action', where 'lines and ideas and images and progression build and expand around one point' and goes on to mention 'story and portraiture', 'narrative and character development' as well as 'poems without a single image or metaphor' and 'sensationalism: the poem not only recreates but is the actual experience'.

Although I normally dislike poets writing about their work within a book (as opposed to interviews or articles) these are quite perceptive authorial statements which helped answer my questions about why I found these poems so engrossing. 'Chiro', for example, begins with the narrator entering the first café in town at 'the busiest time of day'. He describes the 'hundreds of men in one room', listing one or two details ('small feet', 'bad teeth'), before there is a dry moment of self-realization:

I suddenly knew where  
I was and why.

That's all you get though, there's no explanation or visionary experience. The poem moves on to depict the arrival of a man 'selling sandals and women's shoes' and how '[h]e doesn't linger long' because '[h]e doesn't look like / he believes he has a chance.'

It is left to the reader to do something with this, to recreate the scene and enter it, to work out why the moment seems both so specific and important, yet also so momentary and unimportant. There are many poems like these throughout the book, which is organised in six sections, each a cluster of related poems, each poem a scene or event, with occasional images, metaphors or links to other events, sometimes the odd pronouncement or comment. Some are about travel and arrival, others about listening or seeing; all are personal and quietly detached, uninvolved yet passionately so.

'The Shake' goes some way to providing one possible interpretation of what is presented here:

Because what's been started  
won't stop happening even though  
you never noticed these things  
happening at all, set them  
aside as alternative facts,  
and you feeling totally relaxed  
like apple blossom draped over a wall.

it begins, going on to comment that

Sooner or later the fruit is going  
to fall like it or not, and then what?

Life goes on, is moving on; the poet or narrator can do nothing except notice and record, document and capture. Later, there are photographs that are blurred and lost, and a darkness that cannot be shaken off, 'like apples from a tree'. The past, in all its shapes and forms, be it apples, photographs or mood is lost:

We couldn't get them back and eventually  
we had trouble even remembering them.

This is powerful, disingenuous poetry, that for the moment counters the inevitable loss of experience by putting it on to the page for posterity. Cummings writes as he goes, but also writes back in the city he inhabits, talking to himself at the conclusion of the final poem in the book, 'The City Inside':

You sit  
down to put into words your reckoning.

This reckoning is reasoned, assured, individual and perceptive. Whether in Budapest, London or on 'Other Planets', Cumming's poems are alive to the moment and what constitutes them. This is perceptive and assured writing from and about the real world we all aspire to live in.

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