*Cut Up*, Richard Skinner (Vanguard Editions)  
*Dream Into Play*, Richard Skinner (Poetry Salzburg)  
  
It's easy to forget how much fun poetry can be, how fluid and malleable language is as a medium. Caught up in university life, the mechanics of teaching, timetables and academic research it can be hard to find space to play, even as I constantly urge students to trust the process and enjoy finding out what language can do.  
  
Richard Skinner's two books are a kick up the backside for me, hugely enjoyable gatherings of collaged and other processual poems. I received *Cut Up* first, which uses a wide range of song lyrics which have been mixed-up with others and rearranged into new forms. Some read as a kind of conversation, others as a metatextual commentary on themselves, some are melancholic or impassioned, a few political; many are laugh-out-loud funny.  
  
When my first years and I discuss the history and use of collage and cut-up, I often stress how they should think about what they are using rather than treat it as a chance procedure, and that I expect the end result to be more than X + Y, that is that something new (let's call it Z) should be produced, rather than the source material being obvious. Skinner's poems in *Cut Up* prove me wrong, taking the opposite approach: each proudly declares their sources and anyone who knows the songs involved will recognise which lines are from which. In fact, they are the written equivalents of the video song mashups popular a few years back, where listeners/readers can marvel at the odd combinations and the unexpected musical and textual results.  
  
I actually prefer the second book I got, *Dream Into Play*, which includes collaged poems alongside list poems, puns, prose poems, texts constructed using Oulipean processes and other verbal dexterity. The final poem, 'Life in a Onetime' is apparently the author's own favourite poem, a subtle hijacking of a Talking Heads song, which circles the same scene again and again, using images of water imagery and of being lost, until it's elegaic conclusion, the narrator adrift and alone:  
  
 This isn't the same ocean  
 flowing as a beautiful highway  
 that comes into this house  
 behind me where there is  
 the wheel of a lifetime  
 that is ever flowing  
 I let the dissolving days go  
 You ask me where I am  
 What to hold on to  
  
Elsewhere there are ekphrastic poems in response to art by Leonara Carrington and *The Deerhunter*, 'two poems after Andrea Gibellini' (the 'after' is not expanded upon), a version of 'Caedmon's Hymn', imagistic short lyrical poems, and a couple of brilliant list poems based on Milan Kundera book titles, where said titles slowly mutate into more and more ridiculous versions of themselves. So 'The Book of Laughing and Forgetting' is immediately changed to 'The Bore of Layering and Format', and travels through variations such as 'The Bubble of Line and Friction' and 'The Bump of Lithium and Frost' before arriving at its final line, where we are offered 'The Bypass of Lolly and Fund'. 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being' is subjected to similar lexical abuse and is just as funny.  
  
Although it may appear I am simply engaging with these texts as comical asides, I am not. They may foreground intervention and reversioning, but the results bear rereading and encourage their own critical and theoretical response. In 'A Patch of Birds', a brief pastoral poem, we are told the birds 'sing / *This is not* / *the real world*', but apart from the Magritte-inspired debate about whether it is the world or simply words on a page describing the world, I want to say it is real, for we make and experience the world through language, make experience, observation and thought in words. Skinner is adept at encouraging us to see and think anew.  
  
Rupert Loydell  
  
(645) words