

The Wave That Leaves You Dry

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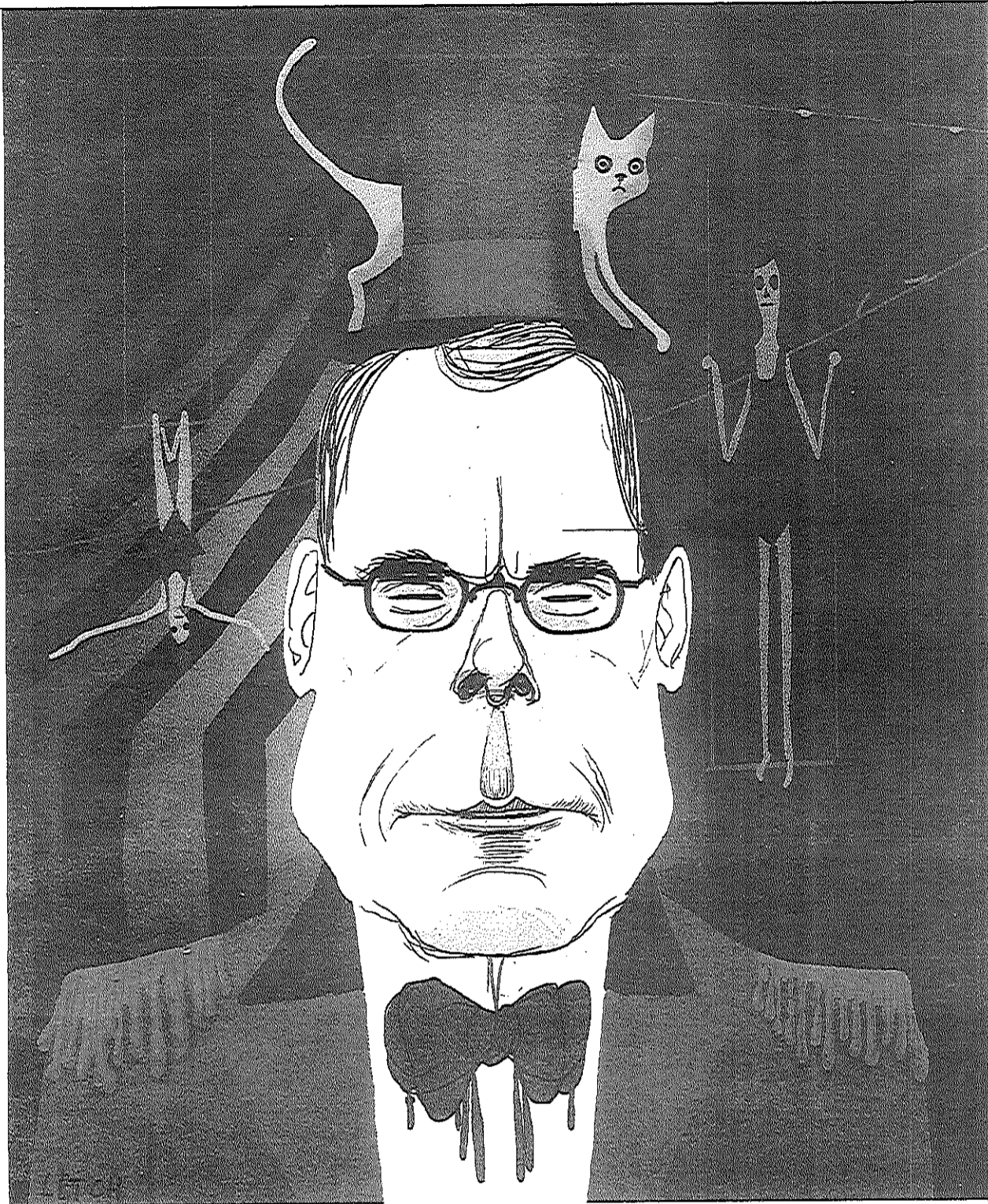
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The wave that leaves you damp

Review by Anthony Lawrence

Love poetry is hard to write and difficult to write well. Paradoxically, it often requires the poet to take an almost peripheral stance.

Addressing someone directly in a love poem is fine if you're in control of your language and haven't already made hard decisions about how subject matter will be defined. Too often, a love poem can fall apart under the weight of sentimentality and cliché. The words "heart", "soul", "love", and countless others can bring a love poem to its knees. A bad love poem announces itself early and there's nowhere to hide.

Australian Love Poems 2013 contains some very fine poems. Sadly, they are the exception here and there are a number of compelling reasons for this. When Inkerman & Blunt called for submissions, the turnaround time was extremely tight. Submissions opened on March 1 and closed on April 26. Fifty-seven days. Sounds generous until we remember the publisher was not accepting previously published poems. A number of wonderful (some recently published) love poems missed out on a potentially wide readership. Many of the poems feel rushed and nowhere near the potential sum of their lyrical parts.

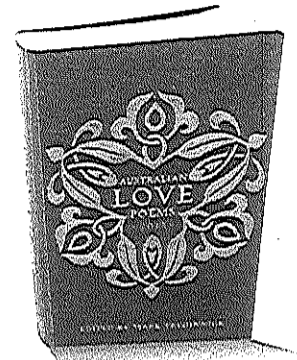
Love poems can be, as Tredinnick says in his introduction, various in their celebrations and ruminations on relationships, in their intimacy and detachment, their elegiac or life-affirming assessments. Yet the introduction itself sets an unfortunate precedent. Apart from being too long and repetitive, some of Tredinnick's phrases are awkward and sentimental. "One doesn't enter love as one enters a convent, or a bath," for example. This anthology contains 200 poems. It should have been closer to 100.

Those that demand serious attention and repeated readings are *Untitled* by Kevin Brophy, Graham Kershaw's *A Priori*; Rebecca Higgin's *Port Headland*; Anna Kerdyk Nicholson's *Driving to You*; Lisa Jacobson's *The Way We Do in Sex*; Richard Tipping's *How Not to Masturbate*; Michelle Cahill's *Recruit*; Judith Beveridge's *Dreaming of Yohasodhara in the Rain*; Petra White's *On Time* and Cate Kennedy's *Ode to Lust*. Brophy's poem is empowered by lyrical understatement and a hesitancy that seems the perfect vehicle for a poem that hints at first love and birth:

I loved her voice
before I saw her mouth,
I found her with a better plan
than I deserved.
and
Each life's invented once for
this.

I loved her future self
before I knew her.
The DNA from a number of James Wright's poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* can be found in Brophy's poem.

Kershaw's *A Priori* is a more muscular, narrative poem that defines a day's physical unfolding with an attendant emotional urgency leading to a meeting: Walking, the soft balsa clatter of doves and finches...



Poetry

AUSTRALIAN
LOVE POEMS 2013

Edited by
Mark Tredinnick

Inkerman & Blunt,
316pp, \$26.99

Over Broadway, mint-white pigeons rise from the Masonic Hall loft...

Above the old colleges, flags of silver eucalyptus swell and dip, burdened with tiny suns.

Kennedy's *Ode to Lust* is a fast-paced, brilliant romp through seven quatrains, each line clipped into place with eight syllables:

This is the wave that leaves you damp,
the rip that knocks your legs away,
the letter posted with no stamp,
the tongue with just one thing to say.

It's as though she's summoned the spirit of Wendy Cope to get down and dirty; it's clever, inventive, lots of fun, and needs to be read aloud.

These poems are successful because their makers understood that when writing poetry, love poetry especially, subject matter should be harnessed into the service of language. Regrettably, it seems the majority of the poems collected

*The words heart, soul,
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poem to its knees.*

here are linear, subject-driven, predictable and one-dimensional. Here are some examples of lines overburdened by sentimental language and cliché, or which use complacent, obvious imagery and rhyme:

When we kissed / we were just two people / with naked hearts / and trembling fingers / clinging to a moment / we did not want to end.

We rolled over each other like we were on fire / and the world was our oyster. / Fishy and soot-stained, / your teeth as bright as pearls...

yet I, who would hold her, / know her like a great white bird / settling in my mind, nesting, preening, between the warm pages of our hearts.

We lay bare beneath a blanket of leaves, / hearts warm with the weft of their weaves.

(Wear them always / pristine clean, said well-intentioned mother: / and fear the bus that runs unclean girls down.)

I wish Tredinnick had accepted more poetry that not only reflects a wide-range of forms, but poems that change and challenge rather than reinforce stereotypical ways of considering amatory or devotional love.

human beings, whether they're fiends or struggling souls. King is not a staggering stylist but sentence by sentence, conversation by conversation his technical gifts are equal to this great big razzle-dazzler of enchantments.

Yes, we say, give us Azzie the cat who purrs her way to the portal of death, give us the compassionate psychopomp, and the girl at the edge of puberty who can take it up to the fiend fatale in her top hat.

Then, not all of a sudden, but unmistakably, it starts to fall away. Bit by bit, and all over the place, we

cease to be swept up. King, for all the genuine majesty of his gifts, seems to be doodling with his characters. He allows the minor ones to blur out of focus and the major ones to make meals of themselves, regardless of the plot.

It's like being lost in the labyrinth of self-consciousness and delusion of a great song-writing rock star who creates a Ring-style opera. It's not as simple as a lack of technical equipment but that the conception itself becomes a bit colossal and delusional, a populist's dream of all-encompassing art.

So, no, *Dr Sleep* doesn't "work" in the sense that it has serious claims on any reader's attention, but its messy magic will rub up against you like a cat.

At the finish, when I thought I'd had it with King's muck and mush and soap opera with spectral slime trails, he came up with an ending that was full of feeling and which, against the odds, was genuinely moving. He's not Kubrick, he's certainly not Dickens and he's not the reincarnation of Edgar Allen Poe's *Raven*. But he is something.

from flu to wanderlust

an evening with a manual on how to rule the world and avoid being superseded than with a good novel". This doesn't dissuade our authors from suggesting one (Ismail Kadare's *The Successor*, if any dictators are reading).

Elderkin and Berthoud treat the grittier side of life too, shifting tone from tongue-in-cheek to sensible aunt when they offer books for "selling your soul" (*Doctor Faustus*) and broken dreams, breaking up and "death, fear of".

But it's not all cancer and heartbreak. The authors delight in the very English problems of "tea, unable to find a cup of", "egg on your tie", and that old chestnut, "determinedly chasing after a woman even when she's a nun".

You can't fault them, then, for breadth of focus.

Elderkin and Berthoud handle their varied subject matter deftly. *The Novel Cure* remains serious without taking itself too seriously, gives advice without preaching, and advocates, with warmth and humour, the importance of literature as a therapeutic medium. They show an enviable breadth of reading; so much so that their condensed reviews of 2000 years of literature make the book as good for picking out your next read as for finding a cure for "stiff upper lip, having a" or "vegetarianism".

A note of caution, however, if reading *The Novel Cure* on public transport: it will make you laugh. Very loudly.

