

DRUG POEMS

by Michael Dransfield (Sun Books) and

THE INSPECTOR OF TIDES

by Michael Dransfield (University of Queensland Press)

Australian poetry in the last few years has been on the whole, pretty depressing. The Old Masters — Hope, McAuley, Campbell, who have held their positions for the entire lifetimes of the younger poets — have been, admittedly, at least [as] impressive as ever.

But the drab purgatorial throng jostling one another greyly on the lower reaches seem only to get greyer with the years; most of the anthologies verge on the unreadable; and the much-mooted renaissance among the young — all those readings, all those workshops, all those little magazines and broadsheets — has dismally failed to materialise. An efflorescence there may be, but of sponges.

It is against this murky and sluggish background that one has to consider Michael Dransfield if one is to account for the immediate sense of excitement much of his verse provokes. To quote the outstandingly fatuous blurb to *Drug Poems*, “His lines have the run and sound of true poetry, his images come from the vision and shock of true poetic imagination”. Quite so: anyone can see that This is Poetry.

To put it like that is, of course, markedly unfair to Dransfield, who does indeed have a remarkable lyrical gift; my point is that most other young poets tend to run to a fairly tortuous intellectualism, even in the midst of their most harshly or gracefully physical poetry, which makes their work a good deal less straightforwardly accessible than Dransfield's.

He evokes continually the sense of recognition, of *lyrical* rightness, through the small, precise *aperçus* like: “my hand makes / black marks on white // the sparrow / pink marks on grey” and “reflections in an eye / or the morning / a snail on a stone rainbow”. It is these bright imagistic flashes which strike home, like facets of cut glass turned under lamplight, at a first reading.

In an interview last year Dransfield said that his poems “just happen in his head and he writes them down”; to which one could add that they then just happen in the reader’s head, and he retains them.

All of this is a rather circuitous way of trying to work out, largely for myself, just why these two books of his seem so disappointing now, two months after I read them on publication. I was then straightforwardly and unabashedly enthusiastic, and said so: I find now that nearly all the poems have become much thinner, lacking in substance and, despite their obvious visual qualities, oddly abstract.

Lyrical poetry tends, of course, to be generalising poetry at any time; but Dransfield’s preoccupation with *seeing* sets up a tension between the object as such and the object as means which is never satisfactorily resolved, and is not fruitful for the poetry as a whole.

I feel that to Dransfield at present poetry comes a little too easily. Thus, a good deal of *Drug Poems* (which is markedly inferior to *The Inspector of Tides* as a collection) consists of fairly glib jottings, self-indulgent and with rather too much self-consciously ironic bravado. On the other hand, the book contains “Island” and “Bums’ Rush”, both of which would be outstanding anywhere, and “That Which We Call a Rose” (reprinted from Dransfield’s first collection *Streets of the Long Voyage*), a deeply moving indictment which has rightly become something of a minor classic already:

*I dremt of next week perhaps then we would eat again sleep in a house again
perhaps we would wake to find humanity where at present
freedom is obsolete and honour a heresy. Innocently
I dremt that madness passes like a dream*

And *The Inspector of Tides*, particularly, is full of lyrics which, if they seem slighter than they did on first reading are still beautifully crafted artifacts — clear, bright, and, above all, what has become rare, singing.

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