

***Listening to the Mopokes Go* by Lucy Todd**

Launch speech by Cassandra Atherton

The Alderman, Lygon Street, Brunswick East

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I am honoured to have been asked to launch the latest offering from Whitmore Press – it's a wonderful, exciting and edgy press that produces really beautiful publications. And Lucy Todd's *Listening to the Mopokes Go* is an indelible example of everything that is right with Whitmore Press publications: it is stark, fresh poetry that gives the reader a voyeuristic glimpse into the future of Australian poetry. I'm delighted that this book nabbed the much sought-after Whitmore Press Poetry Prize because good poetry haunts you and the last few nights when I close my eyes, Lucy Todd's bruised colours and spliced images subversively lit up the insides of my eyelids.

Now, I am not saying that they are always the easiest images to visualise before you go to bed – that is, if you want a peaceful sleep. I kept seeing twisted images of a mother 'sharpening her knives in front of the news' and a male's 'thin wrists curved around the handle of an axe'. In fact, I can't even look at flower beds in the same way after reading this book – they take on a sinister form in Lucy's poetry where, like in 'The violet bed', they hide epi-pens and, in 'Contamination', flower beds 'bleed out their family history in rubbish and bone'. But that is a bit of a

misrepresentation – out of context they are sinister,
contextualised they are often broken snapshots into mortality.

Indeed, reading Lucy Todd's poetry is like watching a
cinematograph project tiny fragments of film on a crisp white
space. And Lucy is incredibly aware of these projections on the
page and the space around the words. I love her idiosyncratic
mid-line spaces, like caesurae or even, for their all-consuming
nature, large diastemata. Sometimes they are used to emphasise
a number of things in a description of place; for example, in
'Dreadnoughts':

Bitumen red dirt blue stone

A tissue of panic

Guilty postures scalloped shoulders hang dog heads

Waiting at crossings looking sideways.

And then, they become breathing spaces in 'Thirst', where Lucy
gives us the space to swat the flies, feed our thirst and take long
breaths:

I held the poem in my mind as I walked

along the red dust road swatting flies

I fed my thirst with its rhythm rolling over

like the stones of quartz and gold beneath me
taking long breaths as if each rest
was a white page

You have to really see this on the page to get its full effect. But these spaces, perhaps more importantly, act as mini thresholds. Narrators step in and out of them – inside and outside them, through doorways in ‘Sleep walking’, into ‘black waters’, into ‘the still heat of summer’, onto ‘the roof of my father’s house’ and in and out of memories.

In creating images, Lucy tends to adopt the poetry technique of the Imagists, but she is not confined to the Imagists’ poetics. Images are spliced together in a way that makes Lucy a kind of poet-auteur or poet-cinematographer. You get a fleeting almost Lynchian moment (I mean David Lynch, rather than Anthony Lynch, although an Anthony Lynchian moment would be equally as good, I imagine) and then it is gone and has given way to another image.

For me, this fracturing is the fracturing of identity. There are so many hard ‘I’s in this collection. Many poems begin with ‘I’, many lines and stanzas begin with ‘I’ pointing to her continuous process of self-creation; undercutting the monolithic ‘I’ in the way it is used. Raymond Barglow has identified the division of self which ‘doubles as psychoanalytic internal objects that

organise and mobilise unconscious fantasies and fears in new ways.' These fantasies and fears find voice in Lucy's exploration of disjuncture, fragmentation and the tension between disharmony and unity. In this way, like the Ern Malley poems, there are 'hints of meaning' at every juncture in Lucy's poetry. 'Black Waters' explores the Malley-esque 'black swan of trespass on alien waters' with its arresting opening line: 'I will swim out into black waters' and the diverse images that ensue – especially the doll cadaver.

As a means of expression, the visceral quality of Lucy's poems directly signifies the existential agonies of the poetry. And I am fascinated by the fact that she manages to explore this in such minimalistic poems. All but one of the poems fit on one page. Most are only eight or nine lines long, demonstrating her poise and restraint as a poet.

This is a collection of violence and vitality. Poems are charged with the colour of bruises – purples and blues and yellows. 'Fragments' has 'the blue chipped sink' and 'purple dye and silk'; 'When he rushes it' has 'skin blooming an odd yellow....on a bad day even purple.' There are 'bluebottles', 'a blue hand', 'jacaranda tree', 'yellow light', 'moon' and a 'blue stone bridge'. Clay is referenced five times, pointing to creation. And chests, as a cavity for breathing and life, are referenced in 'Flooding', which illuminates 'your pigeon chest'; in 'As if they were shells', which opens with 'his chest was like a clean white card'; and in the

brilliant 'Gone away', which has 'the girth of an old father gone away for winter'.

This works superbly with the referencing of bones and brokenness, culminating in the compelling 'Mopoke', which begins, 'her mother said / she choked on a fish bone / sitting on the porch ... she always knew it was the small bones you needed to look out for.' It's great advice.

Anyway, I won't read it as I'm hoping Lucy might read this title poem for us.

When you read Lucy Todd's *Listening to the Mopokes Go* watch out for the small bones. In a society that is concerned with 'Big Things', Lucy directs us to the significance 'Small Things'.

With that, I hope you will all buy a book and get Lucy to sign it for you.

Lucy Todd's *Listening to the Mopokes Go* is now officially launched!