



*In/let* by Jo Thorpe.  
Wellington: Steele  
Roberts (2011). RRP  
\$19.99. Pb, 64pp.  
ISBN:  
9781877577185.  
Reviewed by Mary  
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Quicker critics than I – Bill Manhire, Cy Mathews, Mary McCallum, for starters – have admired the light and motion of Jo Thorpe’s poetry. So, instead, let’s look offstage, into the mechanics of the shadows and stillness which surround the performance and which Thorpe has handled equally effectively. Without these, the dance itself can lose its edge.

*Giya Kancheli, it’s hard to follow you;  
your talk of wanting silence, yet you, a composer.  
So I’m going over different kinds of silence  
in my head – muteness, omission, oblivion, death.  
Then the plain one, quietude.*  
 (“The silence of the dream”)

Many of these poems remind us that we need to be safe from distraction to see the dance in its wholeness. But this isn’t easily done.

*Choose the site carefully. Find one that will hold you  
in-side nuance. Create your own mise-en-scène,  
you before the watching tribe huddled in the dark,  
breath the parent rhythm. Enter the Now,  
shade the many nows, then dissolve the separations.*

We are conscious of the boundary between ourselves and the offstage shadows.

*Watch how it grins and glares at you, that blur  
at the edge of field, blur on the edge of shape... .*  
 (“How to dance your own body’s legend”)

The backstage world of Thorpe’s poems is huge and richly inhabited. Like the poet, like the butoh dancers, we may stand in the only light, but in the darkness are echoes of many others’ footsteps:

Spinoza, Nietzsche, Ammons, Gizzi, Michaels, Mahler, Dante, Demeter and Duffy... many more. But the perimeter can be dangerous. The wonderful “Not/holding” begins with “*On winter mornings the hills above Ngawi crouch in black,/ flat on top. When it rains, they come down in chunks*”. Negotiating the badlands that surround us, “*We stare to the very edges of our eyes where/all sorts of booming begins...*” At the end of the poem, the hills rise in black.

Boundaries are seductive, and we always know they are there:

*I want to cast back to the sandspit at noon,  
how I stood on its bright neck, tide muscling in,  
its heedless pulse finding every scooped-out  
glyph and groove, each dry-channelled grainy  
place...  
into ‘blue and a blue and a breath.’ (“In/let”)*

An inlet is an intrusion into the coastline; the solidus in the title *In/let* is an intrusion into the word itself – another reminder of how the land, like the dance, can be disturbed, a reminder that change can come in from the stillness (and most likely will).

*I’m out there, treading the edge  
as it’s re-shaped – as we’ve been,  
by Sirens, the poet’s dome, lucent days like this  
that take the watching heart and throw it open.*  
 (“In/let”)

When the watching heart is thrown open, light floods in from the shadows and the song can begin:

*It’s here I look up  
and see what surely blessing feels like –  
this sky that over the rim of hills is pure gold*  
 (“Remain in light”)

Along with exuberance and liveliness, the collection shows us shadow and silence, without which the music and light of the dance can disappear ... and we see a most excellent balance between the two.