



***Us, then* by Vincent O'Sullivan.**  
**Wellington: VUP (2013). RRP: \$28. Pb, 111 pp. ISBN: 9780864738929.**  
**Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Vincent O'Sullivan is one of New Zealand's leading writers, author of biography, plays, short stories, poems and vocal music texts. He is

joint editor of the five-volume *Letters of Katherine Mansfield* and the two-volume collected *Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*. O'Sullivan recently became New Zealand Poet Laureate. A good place to begin a review of such a well-known poet is with *Us, then*, a very readable collection that discloses a good deal about the writer's capacity to express feeling by implication rather than assertion.

In this latest collection we meet a poet who comes at us with, as it were, a flourish of trumpets. The very first poem, with its opening lines, at one stroke, transmogrifies what we thought we knew about snake-wranglers:

Snake-wranglers in Texas hunt the Alamo  
 for a rattler so huge and mythic  
 it is called 'The Duke'.

*Us, then* creates the world anew, rich in colour and texture, pulsing with vitality, the poet's adjectives and phrases achieve a seemingly simple effect. The music of his verse too is varied: although the fullness of tone has its moments of repose, sinking sometimes into grave cadences and, at all times accommodating the speaking voice and its inflexions. O'Sullivan writes from an intelligent, forthright place where he searches for whatever truths – fictional as much as factual truths – as he can find.

This collection which is divided into three parts ranges through domesticity, nature and tributes to his friends to the horrors of the 20th century. *Us, then* is an accomplished, finely wrought gem of a book. It contains poems that pull you into them gently and quickly, as in *Speech Day*, a short poem that is written with confidence and balance. I quote the entire poem:

There is more in the eye than meets it,  
 as we've always known. Ask the boy  
 aligning the intended goal, the girl  
 whose lop-sided bow makes her  
 yes, perfection! Such fantasy, enfants,  
 in what lies ahead: a knife and fork  
 to carve the stars.

and then as you proceed through the book you come across subjects such as Barry Cleavin's aquatints, Rasputin, Zeus, the Christchurch earthquake and the lengthy poem in which he successfully encapsulates the importance of Lyttleton in Curnow's biography and its resonances in his poetry, "Uninvited tribute: eight uneasy pieces", with its wonderful short poems, such as 7:

The cliff face bleeds, the wound is personal.  
 The slaughtering wrist aches with expertise.

Myth slips its scarlet needles to the harbour's vein.  
 The business of breath catches at vacated space.

How a late stroll to the west shoulders sharking  
 dark.  
 How the whole damned empyrean makes its move!

Ancestors, a boy "unpacking language", Stevens, poets, myths and tributes, are all part of the poet's observations, and he concludes the poem with a personal observation:

as if Self  
 spelled out in increasing type  
 hadn't pressed you as surrogate Adam,  
 the one world launched to a tongue's fathom,  
 on cue each calling  
 necessary once named.

O'Sullivan is at his best in a number of poems like this. He can deal with emotions at some depth without striking any false notes; he can enter the life-experience of another individual, as in "News from out the Heads", or a famous person whose background is very different from his own.

The second section opens with the poem "Screensaver" - a rare occasion where he gives a more direct intimation of his own feelings. In this poem the poet is examining a photo of himself - a grandfather holding a year-old child. From this gentle poem, O'Sullivan takes us to the death camps and to Bonhoeffer, executed in 1945. This is not easy poetry but O'Sullivan does it with lightness of touch, an assurance that is quite astounding. O'Sullivan has researched his material well, and any information he



has included has been well absorbed so that it arrives in the poem as an essential thing. This makes his work insightful as well as emotionally astute. The section ends with a poem in 17 rhymed verses which range in subject from “It was another day similar to this”, through paintings, writers, philosophy, war, lovers to India and fear. The poem ends:

‘When I’m really in love,’ she says, ‘I’m like some scene in Hitchcock, only nicer birds and no knives!’ ‘You won’t like the knives,’ he tells her, ‘once the birds hear that!’

Most of the time we learn of O’Sullivan himself only by inference from what he writes about the friends, poets and family that are part of his life, as in the hint of grief at the loss of a friend, as in “Still”:

And today when I’ve heard  
a man as dear as any is due to be  
dead within months, the amber light  
as they say already slowing the traffic,  
the clap-board, assuming another image,  
snaps down, ‘Final Take’ . . .

In “Ciao!” he writes of “the undertaker”, who “hands round a basket of flowers / as we drop something we haven’t grown / or even picked ourselves on an old / mate as still as he’ll ever be”. This touch is unusual from O’Sullivan, and we could wish that he would be self-revealing more often. But this is not his style.

The final section considers the sea, a doting mother, Wittgenstein, philosophy, and much more. I loved “The mirror is mounting one of its wicked stories” (“Madame takes a third ouzo”, p. 88) and “There’s a one-legged starling, crikey, hardly holds the wire!” (“Random as”, p. 91) and above all, this need to tell stories (“Just a moment, do you mind?” p. 96) – without the need for any explanation.

Sometimes he lets his imagination wander, and the result might be a magical poem like “St Clair, September”:

The sea, this last day of spring – what  
ever message it carries beached as  
distant whiteness, the diminishing South,  
its slipped plateaux, its fractured  
bergs, sluicing to tell us something  
we are learning, just, to hear.

O’Sullivan’s imagination serves him well in the longer poem “As the boy, the man”. His sensitivity to

the experiences of others, worked on imaginatively, has given us a memorable poem in rhyming couplets. It begins with a warning many of us may have heard from our mothers about always having clean underwear, a clean hanky and polished shoes – ‘just in case you get run-over by a bus!’

Clean cuffs, as always insisted his doting mother,  
the essential courtesy you pay the other

person you speak with, instructor, or indeed obey.  
dirty shoes, on the contrary, presage a dirty day.

The poems in part three successfully meld the philosophical and realistic that engages the reader. “Fine distinctions” is probably the best example of this theme:

There is a certain tedium in fine distinctions,  
in Wittgenstein, to take a handy instance, considering  
the choice of dimensions for an imagined bridge.

Another theme is that of religion. In “Not included in the footnotes”, O’Sullivan, a Catholic, shelters from the rain in Knox’s church in Dunedin, where he reads a passage from the Bible:

Dunedin – grey as thinking grey on the greying day,

Grateful to stone-jawed Reverend Stuart on his plinth  
at the side of the church, my assuming his brow  
in itself enough to harden local granite.  
And to read, for the first time, that ripping yarn,

the *Book of Joshua* until the rain’s eased off  
like fingers that insist then decide to relent.

*Us, then* does not cower in the face of difficulty and pain: it is deeply hopeful, and O’Sullivan’s wit and humour seep into every page. In the final poem, “It is the wind he hoped for . . .”, he ends the poem,

The stacked logs in the old-fashioned  
grate, the fierce irises take  
along the resined pine, the walls  
flame hot orange. ‘In the cup  
of the wind,’ he says, ‘what can’t  
we expect?’ the house shakes like dice.

The poems give us a good deal to ponder and reflect on, and the collection repays the time spent reading and rereading it. There is considerable variety, enough to appeal to different tastes. O’Sullivan’s particular insight, wit and manner of expression are accessible to all his readers.