



Conversation
by *Owl-Light* by
Alexandra Fraser.
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Roberts Aotearoa
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Reviewed by **Mary
Cresswell.**

Alexandra Fraser
has chosen owl-light
– twilight, the zone

between night and day – as the theme of her first poetry collection.¹ The poems as a whole are a conversation overheard, a speaker examining both the certainties and the uncertainties of her life. She begins:

Dusk
the romance of it
we wait for hours
till the day is on the turn
the soft lift of mist
brings a gentle shroud
and what we are to embark on
is smoothed over

(“Dusk”)

and soon realises:

the solidity of kauri
hundreds of hears old
confronts you
with your fragile mortality

birdsong does not
suppress the silence

(“In the beginning”)

But at the end she muses:

I am a tourist here
and cannot find the inquiries counter
besides
I do not speak the language.

(“Journey’s end”)

Fraser’s comment about language is significant. She returned to poetry after a career in science, and her language shows this in various ways. In the first of the book’s three sections, she uses the language of her zoology lab to talk about the beginning of an affair.

Smell is the dominant way
dogfish sense their world
we sense ours by kissing

it facilitates mate selection
five cranial nerves in the human
are involved in a kiss

(“The cranial nerves of the dogfish”)

At this point, the terminology seems to substitute for the language of love, which is even more new and unfamiliar than zoology, but when the affair is full-blown and successful, science disappears and the terms are all comfortable and familiar words of love. The poem “Dusk” quoted above talks about “that long moment/ of shared breath/ the tangle of lips arms legs/ that forbidden shore”. In “Remembering Elsie”, “Our bodies entwined/ we had slept a little”. Soon, though, the relationship is in difficulties:

what formula can we use
and how to we calculate
love
when the distance
between us
is large?

(“Love light”)

and the language of science again protects us from the language of emotion.

The second section deals with the world of family, and the poet has no trouble finding the words to describe these years. She ends with a briskly and painfully straightforward description of the death of her son, the reality of it and the details:

[Death] sets single-mindedly
about his task
extracting skilfully and ruthlessly
the last skerrick
of life from
each cell

(“Death astonishes us”)

This wording is in keeping with the last section, in which scientific terminology doesn’t stand out as a rhetorical device. Rather, the words are all incorporated into the one conversation. She unselfconsciously remarks that

At twilight the shadow spreads
crepuscular creatures venture
from tree-hole burrow scrape
noses seeking wings hushed

Elytra rub legs scuttle
a late goose honks homeward
land loses heat
the wind direction changes

(“Turning point”)



This is indeed a conversation, not a science lesson. The so-called technical words are an integral part of the sentiment and add another level to the writing; they aren't just helping us avoid a difficult new topic (like love or zoology).

The typography for the cover² represents the variety contained in conversation by owl-light. And it is definitely one conversation: sometimes direct, sometimes gentle, but throughout a conversation between the poet and her own history, a conversation which she is permitting us to overhear.

- 1 Fraser is a Waikato-born Auckland poet who has returned to poetry after a career teaching science. Some of the poems in this collection have appeared in *takahē* 67.
 - 2 Cover typography by Phillip Guthrie of Black Fox Press.
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