



***Fallen Grace* by MaryJane Thomson. Wellington: HeadworX/The Night Press (2014). RRP: \$20. Pb, 32pp. 9780473281526. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Fallen Grace is the debut collection of poems by Wellington writer, artist and photographer,

MaryJane Thomson. The book comprises a sequence of 24 poems, one per page, with cover design and photo by the poet.

MaryJane Thomson's *Fallen Grace* is a somewhat perplexing collection if one is looking for semantic connections between signifier and signified. Take for example the second stanza of the opening poem, "It can never be today":

Simmering melody, like fuelled melancholy,
smoking haze in the distance,
it's not the naked tree, it's the distance.

Or the first stanza of "Converging":

Diverging the course of certainty,
looking through the corners of adversity,
sending it away before it comes to decay.
To decay a perfect day, so free from the filled void,
you can't see, you can feel.

I hasten to add that I am not one of those readers who approach a poem from a particular mind-set, determining at all costs that I am going to be baffled. As a poet and critic, I recognise that some verse tends towards semantic opacity while other poetry leans towards clarity. For the most part Thomson's verse tends towards the former, which means that rather than attempting interpretation, one needs to look at the texture of the lexical elements and its phonological attributes. *Fallen Grace* is closer to confessional poetry, in the style of Sylvia Plath, than it is to musical or narrative poetry. A case in point is the first verse of "To wear a common colour", with its stark clarity of images:

Face at the trial,
late to the scene of the crime,
not guilty found guilty
For being insane

In "Never be broken," the poet provides what seems to me to be the key to her poetry. She begins by saying: "Is there anything more to say, / when there's so much to feel." She goes on to say: "Your heart will not be penetrated, / you think it will never be broken."

Though Thomson's poems often deal with such impossible abstractions as fate, survival, regret or responsibility, in the place, in the person, her voice is the voice of one writing out of solitude. These poems are, for the most part, powerful and provoking, layered and anguished. They are infused with sparks of language and surprises at the turn of a page, the turn of a line. In "To fall," she writes:

Destruction without consciousness,
innate quality to ruin that which is good.

To fall, fall, fall.
This life you don't rise,
last life you fall,
now don't you be talkin' hell.

She says, in the middle of "Free up", it is 'Time to pretend this is no derangement, / this is no quick fix. Just do and do, / till your body tells your mind is has no clue. / The very thoughts that stick like glue, turn you a kind of blue.' The poems are an attempt to talk about private matters and to say that if she's going to live in this world, she has to pay attention to her own physical and spiritual needs through her courage at facing what life offers. As she searches for signs of balance in "Pondering belief," she writes:

Conflicting the mind, out of balance,
searching for signs again, in a rare feather, yellow,
black and silver.
So small you miss it as it flips from side to side.

In the longer poem, "One strike," she moves to the torture in Abu Ghraib and the revolting images posted on YouTube:

Millions watch on You Tube, post a like.
Modern reality, this is your uncensored America,
as they would say, "lookin' good,"
as they take a cell phone pic and push you back in
to your closet,
like that's where you belong.

There are many quotable lines and memorable poems in the collection. It is a book to be read again and again. She takes us through pain both literal and psychological. So many of her poems have spare language and lyric intensity. I can't help but be reminded in her poem "Nerve at work," where she reflects on where is the balance in life: 'Fade in,



fade out, new day, / wake up thought going astray,
already not yet 06.30.' In "Forever" she writes:
'Calm the nerve of the thought, / looking for answers
split in response as the mind goes into repose.' We
realize her epiphany when it comes, as it is presented
so powerfully in "Hustle," the final poem in the
collection:

Getting tired, respite is nearing,
curtain shedding light, meeting not yet night,
eyes shut, inner self spoken awakening the sense
that this is all pretence.

The poems in this book are surprising, multi-
layered and have luminous moments and profound
insights and an originality of thought and feeling.
