



***Sweeping the courtyard* by Michael Harlow. Lyttleton: Cold Hub Press (2014). RRP: \$39.95. Pb, 174pp. ISBN: 9780473274207. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Michael Harlow has published five collections of poems with Auckland University Press. He has

been editor of the Caxton Press poetry series and poetry editor of New Zealand's main literary journal, *Landfall*. The contents of this volume, *Sweeping the courtyard*, are from seven of Harlow's collections of poetry: *Edges*, *Nothing but Switzerland and Lemonade*, *Today is the Piano's Birthday*, *Vlaminck's Tie*, *Giotto's Elephant*, *Cassandra's Daughter* and *The Tram Conductor's Blue Cap*.

The first impact made by the poems, like the cover, is the formality and the ritual quality of the language. The emphasis is on language. Sometimes it is barely restrained, allowed to carry a life of its own, 'What do the tanks, know' in "The nannies are coming!" In "Minoan sonnet," one is delighted by 'we bear these sheaves / of song, the laurel, and the / love learned at your hand.'

The next section, from *Nothing but Switzerland and Lemonade*, contains a series of prose poems: "The Parson's sermon" being one of my favourites:

One holy Sunday afternoon in Lent the Parson took his Sermon for a walk, just outside the gates to paradise, the light falling through the bodies of trees; and he tapped his walking-stick upon the ground and he went sailing around the town, *ma jolie*, around the town.

In the prose poem "Inside the questioning that has not yet been asked," a seemingly ordinary event – students awaiting their master – is suddenly overturned by something unusual happening behind the appearance of normality, as the students are said to be "balanced on eggs of immaculate conception. They have heart. They listen. Suddenly, inside the question that has not been asked, they raise a shout." This suggests an unseen and partially accepted surreal world, alien to our experience.

The consistent use of metaphors and images linking parts, the language flooding in, sometimes sitting comfortably and brilliantly within the poem (though sometimes making the reader feel it's a bit difficult to comprehend) and the quality of surrealism which seems to be most engaging and with the most potential meet in the section's title prose poem, "Today is the piano's birthday":

The piano is being dreamed. The children are the stories. They are listening . . . to mother wake on the lawn and touch the space around her to father close the office door . . .

And today is the piano's birthday.

"Devotion to the small" contains the most telling and direct lines in this section, much more powerful than the surface of language. This is the poem in full:

It is how
climbing an
even air-
less stairway
one sleeve catches
a dry stalk
of thorn how
the first nail
its bead of
tight waits in
shadow for
the moon on
the snails back
to appear

The joining of an inner and an outer existence is shown in the title poem of "Vlaminck's tie" –

Vlaminck's tie survives.
It is made of wood & painted yellow;
it has purple polka-dot moons
that once were sighted floating around
the town, walking Vlaminck in every
direction.

In the soulful poem about seeing a wax-figure brother ("Dressed to kill" / a valediction"), we see the figure: 'impeccably dressed; cosmetics too pretty // to credit the body that walked / you round your last bent years ...'. Similar thought appears in "Missing the mark," where the juggler juggling space falls and 'we feel / for the earth under us, / blow ghost-rings / into the air, perfect / accomplices.'



The poems from “Giotto’s Elephant” include traditional poems, prose poems and those set out in columns. In “Necromantics’ interlude,” there is a sense of the mystery in ordinariness which enlivens the poem. The clever images – ‘Mantilla of cascading scarves / a friction of colours,’ introduces us to the fortune teller. A series of images flit across the surface: ‘She reads in the open field / Of my hand’; ‘feathers / of incense curl through a funnel / Of light’; “Running the tip of her tongue / Along the inside of my wrist’ – take second place to something more profound: ‘We may be convincing, one heart – / Stopping prediction from now.’

In “Cassandra’s daughter” (the title poem of the next section), the poet writes about a five-year old (Cassy for short). This is a poem which has been combed for everything which might be considered poetic. The language is simple, but amplified in the staccato and a-rhythmical tone. Harlow’s music is atonal: there’s the voice of the child in the fragmentary dialogue. “Learning the language” is highly narrative; it’s impelled to tell its story with economy and observational precision:

A long queue since morning
outside the white walls
of the clinic for survival.
The daymoon hanging in the sky,
waiting for the night show to begin.

In “Cremation Blues,” the poet observes: ‘You were always good at shaking hands / with goodbye; and now you’ve done it.’ The poem explains the importance of family members at a funeral, even the late-arriving ex-wife ‘small pips / of breath teasing her veil.’ This combination of humour and wistful seriousness recurs as poem after poem tells the hard truths with a wry sense of humour.

One of the strengths of this collection lies in its attention to detail. Sometimes, it is just a moment, as in “Lovers’ Quarrel” (from “The Tram Conductor’s Blue Cap”):

I could hear, a leaf-fall of thought, one
of those moments when little is said
and always it’s meant to mean more.
And you know words don’t do well

in loneliness

The details of the feeling of loneliness after a quarrel is crucial to the tone of the tale. Other poems gather momentum by composing interesting details

together, one after another. Consider “Canticle,” with its delightful picture of the ‘young boy and his sister / on their skipping way to school’ – the poem ends:

They do no less than risk delight: despite
every dark thing there is in the world,
there will always be music. And they
wonder: what is the name of this song?

The collection, however, is not all love and fond memories. “The waywardness of words” is an economical poem about Kafka, who was “for years inside a torment / of sentences writing to Felice, / looking for the story of what love / dares us to be.” Incidental shocks, in narrative, crop up as in “Heavy traffic in the dark” with

... solo black hearse humming
quietly to itself. And that pale
green bird, flying from headstone
to headstone in search of a cage.

Throughout *Sweeping the courtyard*, Harlow brings a raconteur’s impulse, with wide-ranging humanistic voracity, tempered by attention to love and detail. There is much to admire in the individual poems in this ample, beautifully produced collection.

The ability of Harlow, the clever storyteller, is to draw us into plots we think have nothing to do with us, and then we discover that his is a poetry steeped in common memories, shared ideas and settings.