



Kingdom Animalia: The Escapades of Linnaeus by Janis Freegard, Auckland: Auckland University Press (2011) 82 pp. RRP NZ \$24.99. pb. ISBN: 978-1-86940-473-4. Reviewed by Patricia

Prime

Freegard combines passions for science and writing by celebrating the 304th birthday of Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) on 23rd May. Linnaeus was a “Swedish naturalist [who] believed it was his mission in life to catalogue everything on the planet: animals, plants, minerals – even a few mythological creatures.” The collection is divided according to Linnaeus’ categories: Mammalia, Aves, Amphibia, Pisces, Insects and Vermes. Notes at the back of the book explain some of the references.

The title sets the tone and is followed by a mock-serious entry on Linnaeus that we soon understand is meant to be taken in fun. Linnaeus’ world is a peg on which Freegard hangs her various interests. In her opening poem, “Descent”, our ancestors are:

*in the glowering dusk, by the waterhole
gathered the people, the people*

*out of the mud and the slime and brine
crawled the people, the people*

Kingdom Animalia is the clearing of dead wood to allow for new growth. But what new world does Freegard offer? The poems offer an essentially zany world. In “On Reflection,” a woman seeks herself “in mirrors / but found she was looking / into wolf eyes // behind her / warming her / - the breath of a bear.” In “Study” “A rabbit and a donkey fall from the sky” and in “Les Freres” “my brother has two heads / and both are bald.” The world is fragmented and fragmenting as a valid poetic voice carries the reader forward to new discoveries.

The subjects may be incandescent but Freegard’s descriptive imagery is often concrete. In the poem “Ode to a Kuri,” for example, Linnaeus admires an old dog at the Te Papa Open Day:

*I saw you today, Kuri,
in your Tory Street basement hide-out
bottom shelf
still encased in glass
but now obscured
by a pangolin.*

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“Aves” opens with “The Skeleton Ending”:
“news of death arrived by bird: / a box of bones / scratching through the sunset / for lottery numbers.” The poem “Magpie” begins “it was the kind we knew would peck out our pupils if we looked at it” and ends “never look a magpie in its knife-like eye.” These powerful melodramatic images reinforce the writing: “of all the colours to be / you had to choose Antarctic white,” she says in “Sheathbill.” In “Reading the Entrails with Magritte” she asks:

*What am I to make, for example,
of this dead bird on the footpath?”*

*Only a chick and squashed beyond
identification. Nothing but*

*an open beak and a few poor feathers.
Is this the loss of hope?*

“Amphibia” takes us with Linnaeus on to Samiland, where we encounter, among others, an axolotl, a lizard, the wide-mouthed frogmander and frogs. In the prose poem “The Minister speaks,” the Minister announces that:

*after much deliberation on the Royal
Commissioner’s findings we have concluded that
the best way forward for protecting our iconic
national endangered species is by entering into
partnerships with successful, multi-national
businesses*

In “Gator” Linnaeus says he has seen them “in the gardens of New / York, for instance, or cantering down the / highway at 27 kilometres per hour, / sharpening their teeth”; While “Global warning” tells us “the frogs are croaking.”

In “Pisces”, there are anglerfish, sharks, carp, snapper, dogfish and more. “Shaft” states that “today the lagoon by the rowing club / is host to lounging eagle rays” – we can imagine the lagoon, the shallows, the girl’s white, whist shirt and the loss of sunglasses. In “A Life Blighted by Pythons,” Freegard shows a real sense of exploration. The images tumble in abundance that delights: “all can think about / is how my hovercraft is full of eels.” In “Fishing for Gold,” “a man bearing snakes / is charming the crowd,” while “On Old Olympus’ Towering Top A Finn And German Viewed A Hop,” captures our strange fascination with the persona, while in a zoo lab, “I’d find a thin, white nerve, only after I’d sliced through it.”

“Insecta” opens with the poem “Hermit” in which “we try on lives like hermit crabs.” Freegard’s

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is a restless poetry, expressing contemporary angst within a context of travel, or analyzing the stopping-places, trying to see clearly, and identifying with the flora and fauna. Yet there is also a need to try and anchor the poems to the modern world. In “Berlin,” for example:

*There among the delicatessen chocolates:
foil-wrapped, bug-eyed ladybirds, smug and
grinning –*

“Cake Shop” shows us the rodent “cavorting in the crumbs / the chocolate patina of a carapace . . . // my antennae twitch / I feel another clutch coming on”; while in “the Woman and the Moon,” the woman is “dancing in the shadow of the moon / under dark trees strong with party lights; a band // played waltzes, I can still feel the warmth of your hand / on the small of my back.” These mostly short poems are a part of the darkening and disintegrating landscape, in flux and peopled by animals, insects and people, themselves in flux, often disappearing over the edge.

“Vermees” takes us to the sea. In the first poem in this section, “Anemone,” the anemone describes itself:

*my fine tentacles
that ring my slit mouth
stretch out into brine
and grab for larvae
my own restaurant*

In “The Woman Who Swims with the Jellyfish” notes:

*they are upright, sideways
upside down
they palpitate
upwards and past her*

The final poem in the collection is “Giant,” which begins as a prose poem:

*I got chatting to a Powelliphanta snail at the
bus-stop
a few weeks ago – a nicer work-eating
hermaphrodite
you couldn’t hope to meet. Sorry to hear about
that mine.*

and ends in a poem:

*S/he shrugged and said
(with a sigh
waving tentacle eyes
from a glabrous shell):
they tried, you know, they tried
at least some people tried
at the very, very least
you have to try.*

Here, perhaps, is Freegard’s message. Each one of us has to care for our planet and creatures with whom we share our world. The work is personal and reader-friendly. The poems have a muscular elegance and a clean economy of line, though there is sometimes a sense of trying to squeeze too much knowledge or experience into the work.