Kevin Brophy reviews the thin bridge by Andy Jackson


Kevin Brophy*

My mother asked me this week, would you rather be a footballer or a poet? Why must there be a choice, I asked. There is, she said, and the evidence is there's very few who have been both.

Where would you rather be, at Collected Works Bookshop on Melbourne's busy Swanston Street with ten or twenty poetry aficionados, or at the MCG with twenty or thirty thousand football followers? It doesn't matter, really, because wherever you are, you could have a copy of The Thin Bridge in your hand or bag, a book that will talk to you wherever you are, about how we are all, strangely, alive with "that earthly life, that miracle of being, that poetry conserves and celebrates", as Denise Levertov (The Poet in the World, 115) has noted.

In 1865, Henry James wrote a preface to a new book of poetry by Walt Whitman, and his opening sentence went, “It has been a melancholy task to read this book; and it is a still more melancholy one to write about it” (Selected Literary Criticism, i). My task in talking about Andy Jackson's new book is not a melancholy one, and unlike Mr James, I am convinced that what I have been reading is poetry. It is poetry that does
conserve and celebrate this earthly life intensely, insistently, and beautifully. If a city has enough poets in it, egging each other on, trying to outdo each other, then inevitably that city will give rise to the occasional brilliant poet, and occasional poem that has wings.

Andy Jackson is one who has risen, it seems to me, out of a city where half the population has chosen football and the other half has chosen poetry. Andy Jackson is special. He has proven this with his first collection, and now by winning against fierce competition the privilege of being published in this exquisitely produced Whitmore Press series.

So, I am not approaching this task with melancholy, and I won’t be making the kinds of comments Mr James made, such as “the frequent capitals are the only marks of verse in Mr Whitman’s writing”, but I am approaching this task of talking about Andy Jackson’s book with trepidation.

You might think that I am approaching the task of talking about this book with prevarication as well, and you would be right about that too. Let’s prevaricate a little further. Denise Levertov wrote that she “can carry burdens from forest to sea as sagaciously as the elephant”. Her elephant is the elephant of long treks, endurance and wisdom. We know that there are many kinds of elephants, and one of these is the elephant in the room. Let me read to you from a thin bridge about that elephant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There isn’t much room left for us.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When we need to eat or collect</td>
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<tr>
<td>the mail, we inch sideways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>along the wall, two-dimensional ...</td>
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<tr>
<td>I thought I heard sobbing last night,</td>
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<tr>
<td>sensed your hand stroking the globe</td>
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<tr>
<td>of his belly. It’s not a dream</td>
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<tr>
<td>when I wake to feel his hot breath,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his trunk hovering over my body. He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nudges my chest and head, reverently</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Andy Jackson has a way of not only conjuring for us that elephant, with its monstrous comedy, but he tames it, he uncovers its curious existence both within and outside us. We are relieved, and we are strangely alive at the end, though the elephant has not left the room. The poem is a little longer than his usual one-page limit in this book. The elephant might not leave the room but it does expand across two pages in this tiny book, so short of pages.

The lines of free verse have the classic rhythms of English poetry, slipping between the iambic and the anapestic, across 4 or 5 beats per line, a line length long enough to have the dramatic or subtle stop along the way. I love the line and a half that goes, “little grunts escape our mouths/involuntary confessions” – for the way it turns the tables on us, giving us humans the animal sounds, but then suggesting that these are after all the stuff of poetry, the true confession that truly celebrate and conserves this earthly life.

All this of course is to avoid talking about the elephant. But after all, what would we be if we didn’t have an elephant in every room where we gather? We would not be the social, duplicitous, fearful, clinging and grunting creatures that we are.

The elephant might be the one Andy writes of so eloquently in those poems of his previous book, “Quasimodo”, “Among the Regulars” and “Mirrors”, his account of his first meeting with the MARFAN association of Victoria. But there are many elephants, all of them always jostling us, and that’s our comic tragedy Andy Jackson has been so acute about writing about.

Poetry raises the most pressing questions, often at a slant, or slyly, or even unwittingly. We know, as we have come to dominate the planet, all seven and more billion of us, that there is a growing sense of the imminent loss of ecosystems that gave rise to us. We are suddenly curious about that divide between ourselves and the animal world. Students are writing theses about it, novelists are turning out novels about it, philosophers won’t stop talking about it, and poets write poems like “A Language I didn’t Know”, where the poet sits by a waterfall and encounters a bird:
... clearly he has seen me and knows
my intent, standing now right before me,

having flown across a gulf of rock, air
and species. The silk of his black breast,

his eyes rivets of rust-red, wings
suddenly arms folded to barely conceal

something obscure we have in common.

He makes a sound like a stone

being dropped into a small, deep pool.

I try to make the same sound, feel

absurdly human, but straight away he walks

forward, like I've said yes to a question

(24–25)

The poem is a series of thin bridges in longish couplets on the page, and each line-ending hovers over a gap, as though the poem wants to tip us out of ourselves repeatedly. It is a clever and real poem. And it touches upon the melancholy knowledge of the insouciance with which we dismiss species after species from the planet and from our conversation.

There is one more poem I want to talk about, and that is the poem reflecting upon his experience of being sculpted, or of witnessing someone produce a sculpture of himself. I will leave you to find this poem in the book yourself. It is also, of course, a witnessing of anything that is sculpted as a self-portrait. Each poem we encounter is a form of self-portrait of the poet, we know that, and we look for the way poems
do that. This poem plays delicately with the problem of consciousness and naturalness, just as the previous one did, and just as the one before that did. The poem is both melancholy and celebratory, both wholly in charge of its formal presentation of itself, and helpless too in allowing that light might fall from any direction and any source upon us. Again, the poem arrives on the page as couplets, a favoured form for Andy Jackson, and just when it might have been a sonnet, it offers one more single line, as if it just won’t be told what shape to take, but has its own mind.

This is a handsome book, and each poem in it is wholly itself. I commend it to you and I commend it to its life as book. Welcome to it.

*This review is a revised version of Kevin Brophy's speech for the launch of Andy Jackson's *the thin bridge*.

See further the recent article:


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Author/s: BROPHY, KJ

Title: Kevin Brophy reviews 'The Thin Bridge' by Andy Jackson

Date: 2015-01-30

Citation: BROPHY, KJ, Kevin Brophy reviews 'The Thin Bridge' by Andy Jackson, Plumwood Mountain: An Australian Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics, 2015, volume 2 number 1, 2

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/45141