

Studio Moon

JOHN TRANTER is the leading Australian poet of his generation. He spent his youth on a farm on the South-east coast of Australia, attended country schools, and took his BA in English and Psychology. He has worked mainly in publishing, and also in radio production for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and has travelled widely, reading his work at over fifty venues in the United States, Britain, Europe and Australia. He has received several senior fellowships and other grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and has been a visiting scholar at various institutions, from Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University to writer-in-residence at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and at Cambridge University. He has lived at various times in Melbourne, London, Singapore, Brisbane and San Francisco, and now lives in Sydney where he is a company director.

Sixteen collections of his verse have been published previously, including *Late Night Radio* (Polygon, Edinburgh, 1998), *Different Hands*, a group of seven fiction pieces (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 1998), *The Floor of Heaven*, a book-length sequence of four interlinked verse narratives (Arc Publications, UK, 2001), and *Heart Print* (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2001).

His work appears in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and has been published in magazines in the USA, Britain, Europe and Australia over the last forty years. He edited (with Philip Mead) the *Bloodaxe Book of Modern Australian Poetry*. He is the publisher and editor of the much talked about literary quarterly *Jacket*, at jacketmagazine.com, whose thousands of pages have received more than a third of a million visits from readers around the world.

Studio Moon contains contains some material from previous volumes as well as new work: sixteen poems from *At The Florida*, eight poems from *Borrowed Voices*, and twenty-eight previously uncollected poems.

Also by John Tranter:

Poetry

Parallax

Red Movie

The Blast Area

The Alphabet Murders

Crying in Early Infancy: 100 Sonnets

Dazed in the Ladies Lounge

Selected Poems (1982)

Under Berlin

The Floor of Heaven

At The Florida

Gasoline Kisses

Late Night Radio

Blackout

Ultra

Heart Print

Borrowed Voices

Fiction

Different Hands

Anthologies and compilations

The New Australian Poetry

The Tin Wash Dish

The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Australian Poetry (co-editor)

Martin Johnston – Selected Poems and Prose

Studio Moon

JOHN TRANTER



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After Hölderlin

a version of Hölderlin's 'When I Was a Boy'

*When I was a young man, a drink
often rescued me from the factory floor
or the office routine. I dreamed
in the mottled shade in many a beer garden
among a kindness of bees and breezes,
my lunch hour lengthening.*

*As the flowers plucked and set in the little bottle
on the table still seem to hanker for the sun,
nodding in the slightest draft, so I
longed for a library loose with rare volumes
or a movie theatre's satisfying gloom
where a little moon followed the usherette
up and down the blue carpeted stairs.*

*You characters caught up in your emotions
on the screen, how I wish you could know
how much I loved you; how I longed
to comfort the distraught heroine
or share a beer with the lonely hero.*

*I knew your anxieties, trapped
in a story that wouldn't let you live;
I felt for you when you were thrown from the car
again and again; when the pilot
thought he was lost and alone,
I was speaking the language of the stars
above his tiny plane,*

*murmuring in the sleepy garden, growing up
among the complicated stories.
These dreams were my teachers
and I learned the language of love
among the light and shadow
in the arms of the gods.*

Studio Moon

Five Modern Myths

The Guarani Indians of Paraguay
like to keep a small cork loose in their dishwashers,
to 'introduce a spirit of lightness and unpredictability
into what is otherwise a repetitive activity,
and one tedious and unpleasant to contemplate
by the gods of the forest.'

In Kota Rendang, a small fishing village
on the East Coast of Malaysia, the wood carvers
refrain from spitting in front of the local cinema,
in case 'Clint Eastwood should become angry,
and blunt the edges of our blades.'

Until recently the fishermen of Muckle Roe,
in Scotland, used to scrub their decks with toothpaste
on the night of the Summer Solstice,
in order to placate the fish-goddess Fiona,
she 'of the gleaming teeth'.

The Mongolians of Ulaanbaatar have a great respect
for dwarfs, who are trained to recite poetry
in a sing-song voice in front of the television news
which is allowed to run silently in the background.
'A short rhyme contains the news', is their motto;
using 'contains' in the sense of 'constrains', or
'keeps within the bounds of propriety'.

The stockbrokers of Lakeville, Connecticut,
take care not to be seen mowing their lawns
on the thirteenth of the month, in case
a water spirit, the 'White Witch of Lakeville',
should afflict them with cirrhosis of the liver.

After Laforgue

suggested by Laforgue's 'Solo de lune', and other poems

I light a cigarette under the moon
and fling myself onto the grass, inhaling, inhaling:
trees without flowers, flowers without nectar,
nectar without alcohol: I wish you were here
beside me, I'd talk until you were dizzy.

What was wrong with me, in my previous life?
Ardent, steely, mercurial – angry again.
I was in a fit of love, but I couldn't admit it,
and as for you: bellicose, unreachable,
as self-contained as a wardrobe with its vanity mirror
on the shut side of the door . . . you
with your expensive little knapsack
and your plans for your singular future . . .
up there the stars are as plentiful as all the possible
games of chess, according to the scholarly apparatus,
according to the guard with his cap, lamp and whistle.

Married to my obligations I swim in the harbour,
and if I'm too fussy for happiness to visit
let me bathe in my luck – good or bad –
my wretched luck, if that's all that's on offer.
One day, far into the future, I'll come to my senses:
cruising down the main street of a small town
where the moon, jealous of the abundant lighting,
draws the selvage of a cloud across her brow.

Now I speak in letters of Greek Fire
the better to spark your indifference, to
draw down your scorn – I mean admiration,
O princess of fisticuffs: intricate patterns of vowels,
spells that sparkle and promise to outlast metal –
speak to you, in your boots, in your jacket, in the
steel car you drive through the shell of your future.

Chinese Poem, after Mark Ford

Christmas, Grandad came down from the mountains,
and we had to go fishing, on the ornamental lake.
The ornery mental lake, that's what I call it.
'Do I have to, Pop? It's just
animal death!' Fishing,
fishing, till everything is killed.

'How's the love-life?' Grandad asked.
My father was having trouble, some affair
that was going wrong. He shook his head.
'That's your karma,' Grandad opined,
'and moving house, that makes it worse.'
The waves rocked the boat, and it began to rain.
Grandad pulled on a pullover covered with marbled
patterns to resemble the surface of the water.

'Do you smoke dope? Never mind,' he said,
and popped a pill. 'Ahhh . . . that's better. Here's the trick:
you kill fish by not caring. But an old man
can only speak for himself.'

Brussels

a version of Rimbaud's 'Brussels'

The eagle who kills with lightning
idles in a palace smothered by flowers.
Of course he is never seen. The sky above is
pale green and Saharan blue, shreds and patches of it
peeping between the dark leaves . . .

it must be the Cote d'Azur, it must be fast cars,
idle young men inflamed by gasoline!
And when the exhaust note has faded, why,
calm returns, the last century returns, my
abandoned world returns, the world I have lost,

the life I threw away, the Juliet I neglected –
can any of that be recovered? Blue devils
topple from gliders into a pattern: parachutes,
idols, descending . . . history is this delicious day
over and done – old orchards: forgotten fruit.

Now the waterfront, patrolled by helicopters,
where monkeys dance, guitars pluck at the air,
children in red makeup clutch at your sleeve,
and, looking down from a secluded window
a beautiful woman dazed by magazines . . .

renting an exclusive suite done out
like a library, books bound in buckram, so she can
doze on a divan, nothing more useful: nothing
more ravishing than her vulnerable sleep – let us
creep and whisper! Below, a cul-de-sac choked with

expensive shops towards whose glow and glitter
her soul inclines, whose chandeliers illuminate
her heaven, whose throngs act out a million dramas
curt, cruel, and concentrated, just for her: I dwell on it –
be jealous! – and adore it in silence.

Address to the Reader

*a response to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's poem
'Address to the Reader, from Pevensey Sluice'*

In the art of sinking into a landscape
or falling through the sky, a light touch
moves you to sympathy, or a deeper knowledge
of a heroine's little faults.
Now the Riddle of the Sands
argues with its history,
fiddles with a likely clue and abandons it.
In the stone passageway, a pointer:
chalk marks indicate a track, a working man
dawdles and leans on a shovel
reading a notice about submerged structures
that may yet transform this deliquescent scene
into an emotional instruction manual – that is,
the meaning layer is read into it or varnished
onto it, a melancholy murmur
heard even in France in winter: a longing
for interpretation. Follow those emblematic persons
through their countryside, turning into your townscape
built of crooked curves and negative camber;
for to be true to your dreams you must –
here blotted words – recover
a young person's knack known as
departure through the mirror of sleep.

The Seasons

SPRING

Jack carefully lowered the needle onto the surface of the spinning vinyl. From somewhere out back came the sound: the Miles Davis quartet playing 'Autumn Leaves'. It was ages before the track got going – some drum doodle – then it took off like a rocket. But they were dead now, Jack reckoned. Susie had borrowed a red and white check jacket that suited the period, late forties. Jack had brought a rubber turkey, Dinky had invested in a hollow pumpkin with a candle inside. They went through the motions, mouthing the great playwright's words, while a bushel of copper-toned foliage cascaded over their shoulders and whirled around their feet. Maybe if they wished hard enough, Jack thought to himself, maybe they would find themselves seated around a little table out the front of the Café de Flore in – say – September 1953, drinking black coffee and green Chartreuse, laughing and arguing about whether Susie should have flirted with that writer at the publisher's party the night before. *Of course she should!* Then the audience went quiet, and the lights dimmed. Ah, how lovely! How rare the bubbles of air, wobbling up to the blue ceiling!

*A baby sparrow
falls to the footpath outside
'Dirty Girls Revue'.*