

Launch of *The Bread Horse* and *For the Record* by Ross Donlan, March 2021

Well, you are in for a treat. This evening we launch two books by Ross Donlan that together offer an extraordinary survey of his work. Ross has such a broad palate that you will find in their pages many different forms – free form, ghazals, ekphrastic, villanelles and a Shakespearean sonnet – as well as a vast array of subjects. You will find here: landscape, portrait, and sociological poems; rueful, wry and provocative poems; shadowy, dark and hard-hitting poems; notes of whimsy, flights of fancy; miniscule moments of happens-chance and profound movements of the soul (in fact the two are often mixed together), of course there is death and most pleasingly of all, hot sex.

That being said Ross has only given me ten minutes to speak about both books which is ludicrously inadequate.

So I'm going to give a short preface to each book then a general overview of the work itself.

I'll start with this little gem called *The Bread Horse* published by Flying Island Books, a lovely production, a pocket-sized poetry book that gives the reader a taste of what Ross does. The poems in here have been selected from two of Ross's major anthologies *The Blue Dressing Gown* and *Lucidity*.

And I'm just going to do a big boast here for those of you who aren't in the know – the poem *The Blue Dressing Gown* won the Much Wenlock Poetry Prize judged by Carol Anne Duffy (and for those of you who don't know that's also a big deal) and the collection was produced for radio by Mike Ladd for Poetica on the ABC's RN.

Other poems in this collection come from the anthology *Lucidity*, the title of which came from a quote by Kerry Goldsworthy in the Sydney Morning Herald. The quote, which you can read in full on the back of this book, reads "when it comes to poetry, quality and reader accessibility don't go together as often as they might ... but the appeal of Ross Donlon's poems lies in the combination of technical skill with unusual lucidity". Beautifully put thank-you Kerry.

This second book is *For the Record* published by Recent Work Press. This book is a survey of Ross's career to date, from the first three poems he had published in *The Bulletin* as a 'poet with promise'

in the late 60s – to new work, some of which hasn't been seen before. The story behind the title goes, that Ross, in his usual assuming way, couldn't take the idea of a serious record of his work *seriously*, so the book is called *For the Record* but he has turned the whole idea into an extended pun. The structure of this book is a riff on the image of an LP. It begins with those Bulletin poems under the subtitle Rarities, then there's a Prelude, Classics from the past, Bootlegs are the recent poems, Out Takes are the poems so wacky that usually don't make the final cut and we end with a Bonus Track. You'll note that each poem has a track time, which Ross assures me is the approximate speaking time of the poem.

As I reflected on these poems for this talk, two images stayed with me.

The first comes from *The Body Corporate* in *For the Record*, a poem commissioned for the art installation *This House, My Body* by Rachel Wenona Guy and Leonie Van Eyk. In the poem Ross is musing on the dwelling/the body in which he lives, and the 'agreement' entered into between the original owner of the dwelling and himself as tenant. It is a whimsical poem that explores the materiality of the body, the shifting nature of that materiality and the vulnerabilities that accompany it. Yet it was an incidental reference that caught my attention. It was the image of a lighthouse, the dwelling/body the poet says he would have preferred as his lodgings, a lighthouse "topped with a view of the past, present and future".

When I read that I thought that's it, this metaphor captures something of the sense of scope, perspective and time – the distance – I sense in the work.

(So I disagree with you Ross. I think you do inhabit this dwelling.)

The image I have is of the poet

atop a lighthouse, as the lighthouse,

turning slowly

turning 360 degrees

stopping occasionally to jot down what he sees.

The metaphor is inadequate because a lighthouse only sends its beam out at night and my lighthouse is looking and watching, over day and night, over years both lived and historical, and over many different landscapes.

It is as though the poet has the ability to look from a long way off

this gives him not only perspective
but the grace to look in an unhurried way at what appears before him
which he turns this way and that
casting a quizzical eye over its curves, bumps and idiosyncrasies
then gently prizes it open

(*action*)

putting it back together sometimes tenderly
sometimes with an almighty whack
but mostly, with a characteristic twinkle in his eye.

There are so many examples of this distance in the collections but a few that come to mind are the historically influenced *If Further Evidence Were Needed*; the wryly detached *Titanic*, the poet gazing over time, geography and the unknown in *Bill 1946*, and the finely drawn perspective of *My Ship*.

The poet is indeed a lighthouse with a view of future, past and present.

Future as Ross often dedicates his book to his grandchildren

Past – most notably through the poems inspired by his childhood in working class Sydney in the 50s
and Present?

This leads me to my second image.

The second image is from *Man and Moisturiser*. This is a deceptively simple poem seemingly about the poet putting moisturizer on his face because his skin is dry, but also is beautiful example of how the poet entwines a daily occurrence with a wander through the landscape of his soul.

The second image then, is the man in front of the mirror, and it is way up close. Because this too is how I understand Ross's work: close. Close – in detail; in sensory and sensual evocations; and the poet's lucid insights into human frailty. Close too, almost as actions between the poet and his audience – to tease, to pat, to care for, to slap, to attend.

To illustrate this closeness – detail, lucidity, frailty – I’m going to read the 2nd and 3rd stanzas of the poem.

This closeness is present in the collections in many ways, not just two feet away from the mirror.

I see it most exquisitely in the poems from *The Blue Dressing Gown*, in which you feel the poet leaning into the absence left behind by the father he never knew, who died in a San Francisco Hotel a few years after he was born.

Closeness in the love poems, the lover’s warm breath almost brushing your cheek as you read.

There is closeness to in the portraits of relatives, friends and haphazard people that move through the poet’s life: the gobsmacking sensuality of *Manly Boys* and the unexpected person revealed through *Portrait of a Refugee*.

Then there closely observed, incisive reckonings in poems like *Midsummer Night* and *The Boy and the Suitcase*.

There are musing on a single image as in *Feather* or the musical *Horses*.

And closeness too, as in presence. Poems like *Old Rakes* and *In Praise of Washing* that describe the is-ness of an object, or flow of a simple moment of being.

There is so much more I could say – I had a whole list of cracking lines to pull out – but I will finish with this. Against his mentor Judith Rodregiz’s better judgement, Ross aspires to be, and is, a popular poet. We are lucky to have him. I wonder if it’s something to do with his working-class roots that his poems are intelligent, unpretentious and for the people? Whatever the reason I’m sure that if so many modern Australian weren’t distracted by Netflix they’d be head down in one of these books. I’d like to thank Ross for the mentoring he has given me over the past few years, and for nurturing and nourishing the poetry scene in Castlemaine, in Australia and beyond. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to sit with these two books over the past couple of months – and to launch *The Bread Horse* and *For the Record*.