

IVAN HEAD

The Rock in the Poet's Bag

Sacredly Profane

by Kevin Densley

Ginninderra Press, 2020, 68 pages, \$20

Chasing Marie Antoinette All Over Paris

by Adrienne Eberhard

Black Pepper, 2020, 98 pages, \$24

The Strangest Place: New and Collected Poems

by Stephen Edgar

Black Pepper, 2020, 284 pages, \$29

Real Poems and Still Telling What is Told

by Jeffrey Burghauser

Argus Huber Press, 2019 and 2020, 82 and 91 pages, about \$15 each

This review concludes with two books by the North American poet Jeffrey Burghauser. The *terroir* of English-language use changes and the occasional Hebrew term enters. Patient exploration yields treasure to the reader. His poems are energetic, deeply focused and intense. He is a master of highly structured, traditional forms of poetry and he seems to inhabit the verse in a way that makes rhyme seem effortless. It is the result of hard work and mastery of languages. He is at home in religious tradition and is illuminating on Hebrew and Christian matters. His work made me take a few excursions into the dictionary to feel that I had grasped his sense: this being not a problem with the poems, but with my unfamiliarity with occasional Hebrew terms or with nuance.

Real Poems begins with twenty-four sonnets. Triolets, quatrains and couplets add to formal masteries. The couplets depict Burghauser as a wisdom teacher, one who delivers the incisive and provocative remark—with a dash of enigma. The longer poems are no less dense and no less infused and often have a precisely explored musicality of metre.

Christ is mentioned three times in the eleven couplets offered and there is an echo of the wisdom teacher if not the mystic in them. The reduction of poetic insight to two brief lines is good for this reader. What do we make of this (once we have explored the meaning of *yidn*)? “Only *yidn* cannot go / To a YES whose place they know.” Or perhaps this? “To a Jewish intellectual strain / Christ supplied the bottom line.” Burghauser is intensely self-observant as well as being deeply observant of his settings. I rather like “The Devil”, the penultimate, five-line poem in *Real Poems*:

The devil I know is
The phenomenon squinting at me
From the shaving mirror; the
Devil I don't, me observed
From any other vantage point.

I have not conveyed a taste of the poet unless I mention the longer, freer-form verse. The forms may not be as free as they seem. Long-cycle structures are everywhere. I greatly liked the apparent dialogue-verbatim of a three-page poem whose translated title is “Master of Repentance or Return”. It is a poem about leaving Jerusalem to return home to North America: “Once I knew that my experiment in applied Zionism was screwed.” The poet has souvenired a rock from the plaza by the Western Wall, the foundations of the Temple that the Romans destroyed in the first century. A security guard at the station finds the rock in the poet’s bag, and a form of crazy-wisdom dialogue begins. It includes these lines:

There would be to me a specialness
If I brought a piece with me
Of the pure, Holy City.

The guard asks: “Do you plan to throw the rock? ... Will you throw it at the driver’s head?” A subsequent spiral (still rhymed) in the interrogation reads, “Why don’t before you leave / Take a rock from Tel Aviv?” I leave the reader to the concluding lines in what becomes a form of acerbic, ironic, insightful, satirical humour.

Still Telling What is Told was published a year after *Real Poems* and is evidence of the production of a powerful body of work. The title is taken from the last five words of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 76. The author tells the reader this on his title page and it is helpful for us to detour and find and read that sonnet. Shakespeare’s sonnet is in praise of tradition and traditional form and style. He seems to be saying that the real subjects never change. He asserts that his poem is “barren of new pride”, “far from variation”, takes no notice of “new-found methods and ... compounds strange”. He would rather “spend again what is already spent”, “dressing old words new”.

Burghauser uses the line from Shakespeare to indicate that he is staying with the same themes and indeed the same forms. Perhaps he mines them more deeply and perhaps he finds “the sun daily new and old”. Shakespeare’s sonnet may be a love poem: “So is my love still telling what is told.” But I hear this with the sense, “I still love telling what is told”, and am immersed in the traditional themes. *Still Telling What is Told* includes seventeen highly crafted sonnets.

The longer poem “Dactylic Song” is humorous, clever, intricately rhymed and an exercise in dactylic metre. *Quadrant* readers can web-search dactylic and mark up the stresses for this poem’s metre. It will increase your admiration for it. It begins, “Railway

lines under my window invite / Many occasions of clamor at night.” This first stanza is repeated as a chorus throughout the poem. Cleverly, Burghauser changes the central line in the chorus stanza each time he repeats it, and these central lines considered by themselves form a Masefield-like inventory of cargo, but this time in freight wagons. The central lines read:

Hoppers of hillbilly coal to enable my day ...
Apple computers asleep in synthetical hay ...
Boxes of dishes concocted from catchpenny clay ...
Pineapples, pastries and sofas immune to decay.

It is a lovely poem to read, at any age.

Burghauser’s skill and mastery make each poem vivid and arresting. Ability to convey sensed detail keeps the poems fresh each time one re-reads them. This true of the two poems, “29th Annual Appalachian String Band Festival”, and “In Appalachia”. Is he talking about the landscape or the music in this?

Here’s the lane
That extends until
Fiddle’s Bane.
Up a mossy hill. Down a lesser knoll. Repeat.
Thus the upward spill.

“The Prodigy” is another example of his longer “dialogical skills” where what seems to be a verbatim conversation takes poetic form. On a train journey, while writing something about Dylan Thomas, he meets a man who interjects: “I got drunk with him, you know.” Three and a half pages unfold.

Burghauser is among the most competent poets I have read in recent years, and among the most satisfying. He is aged about forty and so we can hope for the good that will come. I close with the last stanza in this book:

Hebrew is my holy mother tongue,
And my wife (a *shiksa* raised among
Prairie solos) couldn’t hail a bus
In such Hebrew as she has. And thus,
My own children cannot understand
When their dad is talking to himself.

I do not think that this poet is simply talking to himself and I hope that more in Australia will read and enjoy his works.

Ivan Head is a frequent contributor of prose and poetry. His most recent omnibus poetry review appeared in the November 2020 issue.