

How to occupy our selves by David Howard and Fiona Pardington. Wellington: HeadworX, 2003. RRP: \$29.95

REVIEWED BY Terry Locke

This book is a collection of 18 poems, many in sequences (by Howard) and 17 photographs (by Pardington). Apart from the cover photograph, all are grouped together. Nonetheless, there is an implicit invitation to view the photographs and poems as operating in a "complementary" way. Indeed, a point of entry into this compelling book is the last paragraph of Howard's acknowledgments, where he writes: "My most extensive debt, however, is to Fiona Pardington for devoting two years to photographing in response to inchoate drafts from this pernicky collaborator."

Howard then proceeds to note the genesis of the collaboration, providing a direct quotation from Pardington:

I especially enjoy the beautiful language of the Song of Songs, the imagery has been an inspiration to me. The wedding motif is a description of the completion of the individuation process, of an ultimate union of psychic opposites, and the entrance into a state of divine wholeness. That seems to me to be a corner-stone for the enormous attraction of religious belief – the hope of a complete union.

Here then are three clues to the kind of experience this book provides: word/image resonance, an exploration of opposites and the attraction of religious belief. In this brief review, I will provide a couple of illustrative instances of this.

Two commonplace words used by critics (and teachers) in talking about literature are "fiction" and "invent". The practice of making literature is often associated with the idea of inventing an alternative world. Part of the experience of reading literature, then, is the experience of juxtaposition, where two worlds – the fictive and the "real" world as we experience it day to day – become counterposed in all sorts of rich ways. Some critics, associated with the label of Russian Formalism, have used the term *defamiliarisation* to describe this aspect of literature as presenting the world in radically new ways and thereby disrupting habitual reactions.

Howard's last poem, "Heroin", formed part of an exhibition curated in Dallas, Texas which asks questions about the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon which will surely prove to be one of the defining moments of this century. The poem is in six sections, some in prose paragraphs, some using more conventional stanzas and interspersed with lyrics from Lou Reed's song of the same title. Here is a paragraph from section 5:

The interpretation of the word. Listen and this load will slip from your shoulder. If you are hit with the stick then know that your bones will break it. Inspect your weapons for they are superior to those of your enemies. Your breath is death to the ungenerous; your vestments will be hemmed with their entrails. Even the loftiest tree can be chopped.

The language here is redolent with a particular kind of religious discourse. Think of the New Testament (Matthew, 11:28: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give your rest") and the Psalms (83:13 "O my god, make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind."). But this is *not* the Bible, nor any other sacred book. Rather, it is an invention that both assumes the mantle of the discourse and contests it. And in telling phases such as "Inspect your weapons", it draws on an ancient discourse to direct readers towards contemporary realities (Iraq).

A similar strategy is at work in Pardington's photographs. The cover shows a left female hand (with painted nails) clasping what I take to be a sparrow. This is pure image, yet the resonances operate in a similar way to the verbal example above. There is a certain discourse within which one can find expressions such as "Even the sparrow finds a home" (Psalms, 84:3) and "there is providence in the fall of a sparrow" (*Hamlet*). On the one hand, one is called upon to acknowledge the image's intertextual reference. On the other hand, one must acknowledge that the "providential" hand which clasps the sparrow is terribly human and perfectly capable of squeezing all life out of the creature.

I would describe this book as a sustained meditation on humankind's need for a metaphysic. In "The human tongue", the poem begins:

What is the difference
between sinews and strings,
three-part harmony and Trinitarian prayer,
anonymous wood and the Cross?

– Intention, which causes rumours to
stopper your mouth...

And the beautifully crafted and lyrical "There you go" – the first poem in the collection – contains such lines as:

Prayer,
that foreign
yet familiar
language; soft
prayer,

aching
memory
of a heaven
heavy as
granite;

What is extraordinary about this writing is the number of tensions it sustains without quite resolving, between the foreign (defamiliarised) and familiar, the present and the remembered, the soft and the hard, the fleeting and the permanent.

This has been a difficult book to review, I think because it simply doesn't allow one to feel that one has settled into a confirmed reading. I'm suggesting then, that it be

approached as an opportunity for prayer, but only in the context of seeing belief systems as radically capable of being rewritten through acts of imaginative attention and deference to the prophetic voices of our own times, like Lou Reed. Buy one, and take it with you next time you slip into a place of worship.

Peter Simpson reviews

How To Occupy Ourselves by David Howard and Fiona Pardington

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David Howard's new book is a collaboration with the photographer Fiona Pardington. In a note of acknowledgement the photographer is thanked 'for devoting two years to photographing in response to inchoate drafts from this pernicky collaborator'. The 16 photographs appear in a group, one per page, about a third of the way into the book. They are printed on different paper from the text, and are quite small — the portrait shaped images being about 80 x 60 mm while those in 'landscape' format are smaller, about 53 x 70mm. The photographs are printed in a brown/ mauvish colour, not precisely 'sepia toned', I think, but the effect is similar.

In subject matter the photographs are extremely diverse, though with some clustering and emphasis. Several are images of women — the close up of a tear stained eye ('Roimata'); a blond woman in a strapless, see-through dress, the image cropped so her eyes are invisible ('Amanda'); a smiling young woman lifting her top to bare her breasts ('Marina'); a naked woman lying face down on a bed ('His Lover'); 'Chinese Fingers' shows a hand — elegantly be-ringed — and a thigh; 'Akura' depicts a beautiful girl with downcast eyes. Other images are associated with females, too. There is a small image of the Virgin Mary; another shows a scrap of text reading (in a child's hand) 'Dear Grandma I am going to write you a poem'; 'Bruised Rose' is an image of a damaged flower; and there are two images of fabric — 'Buttonhole' and 'Lace'. There are no images of men, except by implication: 'Wayne's Partner' shows a place-setting at a dinner table; 'Gray's Window' is a view of a curtained window with vegetation and weatherboards visible outside; as mentioned above one of the women's images is called 'His Lover'. Three images are not obviously connected to gender either explicitly or implicitly: 'I Not Retarded' is a piece of graffiti carved into a succulent and thorn-edged leaf (a yucca or some such plant); another shows a close-up of a 'Merino Muzzle'; 'Firewood' is an image of sawn and split wood piled around a living tree.

This sequence of evocative images presents the viewer with a bit of a puzzle. It seems far from arbitrary, but on the other hand resists narrative explanation, while at the same time encouraging it. Female experience is foregrounded, as is erotic attraction and disappointment. Religion is present by implication (the virgin, the rose, a rosary-shape within the lace?) and also the points of connection between

religion and sex, the sacred and the profane. Some images resist appropriation to whatever narrative or composite image the reader wants to propose. The sheep's muzzle, and the pile of firewood for example. One further image needs to be mentioned. This, the most dramatic and striking image of all, is on the cover, is much larger than the images inside and is called 'Bird in Fist', a precise description of the subject. A bright-eyed bird (a sparrow?) is held firmly by a hand which one assumes to be female because of the painted finger-nails.

How do these enigmatic images relate to the poems? The short answer to this is, not at all obviously. One searches in vain for any direct correspondence between the individual images and the poems. Perhaps a clue of sorts is provided by one poem which uses a quote from Pardington as an epigraph. The poem is called 'I (A Rebuke to Kai Jensen)', and the epigraph goes:

'Though I am part of a movement of women who support feminist issues, I disagree with any moralising which insists on restricting artists' expression to a thoroughly political agenda...The genuine spectrum of sexuality does encompass all from the most unsettling obsessions to the most safe, mutually recognising activities.'

The poems encompass several of the same preoccupations as the photographs. Especially in the long opening poem, 'There You Go', there is a comparable coalescing of the secular and spiritual; one can infer a kind of dialogue between poet and photographer, male and female. But both artists share a reticence, a subtlety of approach, an obliqueness of perspective, an avoidance of the obvious. Their sensibilities seem well-attuned in this regard. This is a book which does not yield its mysteries easily. It needs to be pondered, lived with, meditated. It grows on you.

Turning to the poems, *How to Occupy Yourself* consists of three longish poems, and a number of shorter pieces. I will deal with the longer pieces first.

There You Go, the first poem in the book, and in many ways the most effective one, is 15 pages long, consisting of 5 line stanzas, organised syllabically: 2/ 3/ 4/ 3/ 2; a gracefully symmetrical stanza form that is a variant of William Carlos Williams' triadic stanza but more strictly measured by syllable, as illustrated by the opening two stanza:

Seven
days to dry
out. Away you
go: no smile
divines

the sky,
inviting
bird beast or flower
along, no
glimmer...

While shifting pronouns make interpretation necessarily tentative, it reads initially as a poem of separation from a woman, or possibly (as the poem unfolds) from God — the same slippage between the profane and sacred observable in the photographs also operates here. 'Dry out' means to endure separation, love being figured as a kind of addiction. 'You' is primarily self-referential. The speaker is alone in a house, trying to come to terms with absence. Word play is constant: 'the real is/ real difficult', as is the shuffling between the secular and spiritual: 'you queue/ for her kiss/ or His blessing'; 'You wear one/ cross, bear/ one up/ hill, dying/ to reach the end'. Note that the cross imagery is emphasised by a design motif used throughout the book — the design is by Howard and Kim Peters (to whom the book is dedicated). Each title is preceded by a small dagger-shaped cross, and in one instance, 'The Carrion Flower', rows of triple crosses run down the left or right margin of each page. Larger dagger-crosses decorate several of the preliminary pages, and also a blank page at the end. The insistence of this motif inevitably colours how the poems are read.

The solipsistic narrator, documenting the passing of time, drifts into memories of a labouring grandfather ('his rare hands/ calloused'), of a stern father ('a cross honours/ the tomcat/ he drowned'), of 'workaday/ miracles' experienced in childhood ('You jump/ verdigrised/ railings to graze/ with slate shards/ the pond'). A wide range of reference — Socrates, Hitler, Neil Armstrong, Huxley, Rousseau, Ruskin — complicates the texture. Other memories intrude from later years ('Among the dunes/ size nine shoes/ pursue/ the dream'). Increasingly, religion begins to dominate the imagery. There are references to Paradise, Adam, Abel, the confessional, the Lord, heaven, prayer. A Catholic raised child, one infers, engages in adolescent struggles with matters of belief ('your eyes lift/ -irony-/ towards/ / heaven,/ which you doubt/ arches over/ whoever/ you are'). Poetry, one infers again, begins to take the place of inherited belief: 'the image/ your word makes here/ makes the world/ over'. It is an ambitious and sometimes difficult poem, and

I'm not sure I fully grasp it yet, but it does impress with its rapt precision of image and phrasing.

On the back of Howard's *Shebang: Collected Poems 1980-2000* (Steele Roberts, 2000), the late great Kendrick Smithyman is quoted as saying of an earlier Howard collection:

A sense of shock, an uncommon astonishment at the extraordinary poise...A certain authority matched with an appreciable intelligence, a body of information used with taste guides the reader into puzzling and on to delight, under government and restraint.

This pretty nearly sums up my reaction to 'There You Go', the most impressive poem in this collection.

The second long poem is 'The Carrion Flower', around 20 pages long, though there is a lot of white space, including some pages with no words of all just vertical rows of the afore-mentioned triple crosses. An earlier version of this poem was published nearly 20 years ago in 1985, in a small book from Warwick Jordan's Hard Echo Press, a collection which was entirely omitted from *Shebang*, Howard's *Collected Poems*. According to a prefatory note 'The Carrion Flower' 'was recast as an oratorio in 1992-93', and it is in this form that it appears here. It is a dramatic piece with a cast of 10 speaking characters that focuses on the assassination of the Nazi Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in 1942. The setting is 'Prague & environs 1941-2'. The characters, listed at the start are Jan Kubis and Josef Gabčík, British-trained Czech paratroopers, a number of other Czechs, including several members of the Czech underground, a number of walk-on parts — a gamekeeper, a General Practitioner, a van driver; also the spirit of a deported Czech, and Reinhard Heydrich, the SS Leader of Occupied Czechoslovakia. Heydrich's presence helps to convey the impression that this story is fact not fiction at least in its essentials.

We begin with the paratroopers about to make their jump into their occupied homeland; they make their wills, and launch into the night skies. In the second part, the jump has occurred, one of them has injured himself in the landing; they hide their parachutes and light a fire for warmth. In the morning they are found by a sympathetic gamekeeper who hides them in a barn. Members of the Underground are informed, but are suspicious they may be agent provocateurs. Nevertheless the injured agent is taken to see a doctor, who helps fix them up with false papers. Members of the underground recall a colleague who was seized by the Germans and whose spirit speaks of his arrest. The terror of life under the Nazis is evoked by the despairing underground workers. Heydrich articulates the grim Nazi philosophy of the final solution. An attempted assassination on the street is arranged by the underground to 'stun the Reich'; a van driver is told to take the injured Nazi to hospital: 'In my head I heard/ the last rites a hundred times/ for my countrymen smelt/ the carrion flower smiled/ like an undertaker'. The last words are given to the dying Heydrich:

And I dug this ditch:
every memory

slipped
in. Now, help me
down.

It is a curious piece and difficult to assimilate in this format, especially because the text is not continuous from one page to the next but works according to the lay-out of the speeches on each double-page opening. The effect is I suppose contrapuntal, as if each page corresponds to the placement of voices in a music setting of an oratorio. The columns of crosses down the outside of each page are part of this effect. It as if the lay out is an attempt to communicate spatially and typographically something of the effect of a musical performance. It would be interesting to hear the work in oratorio format.

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The third long piece is entitled 'Heroin' followed by the words in brackets [New York, Washington, Pennsylvania 11th September 2001]. There is an epigraph from Lou Reed: *'I don't know just where I'm going'*. Each of the six numbered sections is introduced by a line from the Velvet Underground song 'Heroin':

But I'm gonna try for the kingdom, if I can
'cause it makes me feel like I'm a man
When I put a spike into my vein
And I tell you things aren't quite the same
When I'm rushing on my run
And I feel just like Jesus' son

From the Acknowledgements we learn that 'Heroin' 'formed part of the exhibition *Why: Art about the attack on the World Trade Centre & Pentagon* curated by Bill Barteel for the Quorum Gallery in Dallas, Texas, November 2001'.

This 11 page text is written in a mixture of verse and prose. Apart from the subtitle there is no overt reference to the events of September 11, 2001. Although there are occasional contemporary references most of the text reads like a pastiche of an Old Testament prophet and much of the language and imagery is Biblical. The following sample may be taken as typical:

Cut the root and the fruit pales; the next day and every thereafter it darkens.
When people remove the Covenant of God from their hearts —
broadcasting it in black and white, in analogue and digital, in Kiwi and
Strine — then they make sport which causes the fallen to gamble.

It is a mysterious and evocative poem depending for its effect on the juxtaposition of the language and imagery of the Holy Land with the urban realities suggested by the Lou Reed lyrics. It's relation to the events of September 11 remains oblique and speculative.

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After the various challenges of the longer poems, which are impressive but somewhat unapproachable, it is something of a relief to turn to Howard's shorter poems, of which there are about fifteen. They are a various group in themselves, encompassing traditional themes of love, absence, death and memory, among others, all animated with the sensuous intelligence and wit which seems to be Howard's signifying characteristic, as demonstrated by this passage from the poem 'Yonder':

The roadside apple, the arbour's pear
ignore the condensate from a horse's nostrils —
what are blood and sweat to them? All the same
you'll tether your mare, collect windfalls...
Or you'll rest where riverbanks
loosen to an estuary
a boy fishes at dawn, his father calling
to the heavens mackerel clouds swim.

Plenty of times to tell stories

now, bulging like summer plums,
your eyes size up
the tractor on that hill. The overalled tomboy
swaying through the swaying grass
towards you. *Hi. I'm Eve.*

Among these shorter poems — not all that short either; some of them are in several sections — some which especially appealed are ‘The Human Tongue’, ‘Private Life’ and ‘Getting There’. But if I had to choose a single poem to illustrate Howard’s qualities I would go for ‘Home Comforts’ a poem in three parts written for the painter Eion Stevens. Images of Stevens’ slightly surreal version of domestic life are incorporated in the poem, which also employs the device of interleaving lines from two different poems throughout. Single lines in italic scripts are alternated with couplets in Roman typeface. The poem can be read in either of two ways. Either we can read the poem line by line, with its cubist-like discontinuities and juxtapositions, or we can ignore the lay-out and read the two poems separately. This is easier to illustrate than describe. Here are the opening lines:

we see only objects, not light

let the light into a room too long
shuttered like an out-house

interior oracular fire: you must burn in order to become

the only one in the red room who knows
how to blush, you know

another: nostalgia for the emotion of the moment

we don’t need to see each other to be
in love, that the idea of cleaving can

yet

transform the scent of the nor’westerly
into sweaty flesh, and that you were

to come: nostalgia for the words ‘I expect you’

moved like cumulous in my direction
now this house

cannot hold our breath

and that is not the half of it (exhale)

These are poems worth spending time with. In my experience they continue to yield pleasure as one becomes more familiar with them. I will certainly be alerted by this book to anything Howard does in future. He certainly deserves a higher profile than he has achieved so far among New Zealand poets.

