

Launch of *A Perfect Distortion* by Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper  
Kathleen Syme Library and Community Centre, Carlton, 7 February 2016

It has always felt as if Marietta and I have known each other forever. I, at least, had been under the impression that we met well before the turn of the millennium, and was surprised to discover that it was actually only in 2006, around the time of the launch of her first collection of poems, the bilingual volume *Island of Wakefulness* (also published by Hybrid). Today I'm honoured to be launching her new, again bilingual collection, *A Perfect Distortion*.

Whereas that first book revolved around history, childhood, war and remembrance, this one, right at the start, signals a more particular concern with *seeing*, and accordingly with the various objects of that seeing. Prominent among these is the poet's engagement with the natural world, especially in her immediate Darebin neighbourhood. But that's only a part of it. The different *faces* of the seeing are at work in tandem with one another: the poems build into a kind of story, a continuous thread of many colours and moods, and they weave a luminescent tapestry of Marietta's world and of the quicksilver, observing mind – observing life and observing itself as it watches the world. Let me offer a few examples, as I take you through a selective little tour of the book; or strictly, of its English-language pages. The Dutch translator Joris Lenstra is responsible for the book's other half; we might hear something about that process a little later.

Marietta begins with a kind of personal taxonomy of seeing: in the poem 'Four ways of looking at a pond' [3], with its gentle salute to Wallace Stevens, she distils the act of looking into four short lyrics under the headings Logical, Chronological, Aesthetic and Omniscient. A page later, in 'Butterfly' [7], the seeing is more in the *sensing* as she captures a perfect, almost zenlike moment with 'no leaf stirring' in which the butterfly is 'held / in the transparency / of air'. It brings to mind T. S. Eliot's 'still point of the turning world'.

Because for Marietta, time – and its stillness – are integral to the act and activity of seeing and sensing. In 'Perception' [19] (note the title), she remarks how, as she is walking around Yarra Bend Park, each circuit of the track reveals new detail and fresh change: 'you know more leaves have fallen / different water is flowing past'. One can imagine Heraclitus nodding in agreement.

But not content with a single vantage at a time, the poet, in 'Seasons, Darebin Parklands' [13], wishes she could see a lake 'from two places at once' – and goes on to register fragments of the surrounding world across all four seasons: a native hen and its victim carp, a family being photographed, some ducks, a man with mismatched socks, a woman filming the lake. And yes, photography, which is after all a form of applied seeing, features strongly in these poems, and in the strong images that accompany them.

Sometimes, taking a photo can convert the familiar into something strange. Turn the book over and look at the mysterious back-cover selfie of the author, taken in a mirror! Indeed, in another Yarra Bend Park poem, we are told that

As the image draws us  
deeper into the subject  
it loses its thingness [11]

so that suddenly, the subject could be anything. A steady and focused gaze can transform the everyday, enabling us to see with the eyes of the child.

But where there is light for seeing, there must also be shadow – the darker realms of reflection, longing and pain. The book’s title poem , ‘A perfect distortion’, sits, in a sense, at the fulcrum of the collection. Meditating on the elusive beauty of a park morning, and the special quality of the light, the poet adds, almost as an afterthought: ‘and there’s my own / dark overshadow’ [21].

The title of the collection is perfect – it captures both the richness and the fragileness of every singularity of perception, and may even remind us that there are things we cannot possess without destroying. This is wonderfully illustrated in ‘The idea of a rose’.

She would have liked  
to pick the rose  
behind the fence –

in an ordinary garden

but she couldn’t preserve  
the way raindrops  
were scattered

how they caught  
the evening light [23]

These poems are themselves rich and, in a manner of speaking, fragile in their clarity of language and their focus. And inevitably, as in life, that focus must sometimes settle on darker musings – on absence, regret, mortality and loss. In the poem labelled ‘Immortality’ we look back to see the gaps and omissions in our lives – the salt pillars of our tears as we kept walking. What we are and are not is strangely embodied in the world around us – its particulars become touchstones of our experience, along with ‘our laughter echoing / through silent streets’ [27].

‘Before they spoil’ runs on perfectly from the preceding poem – it recalls another attempt to immortalize by artistic representation something beautiful and unique, and yet (again like life) something ultimately transitory, ephemeral:

*Dinner will be late* she says

*I just had to draw the fish  
before I cooked it [29]*

It is precisely what this book – and perhaps all poetry, and all art – is doing!

The obverse of the ephemeral and transitory is that which has been with us for a long while, and may, or may not, outlast us. In ‘Their own perfection’, innocent everyday items are the subject of the poet’s musings – which she has rendered in a finely-wrought pantoum:

If only we could pass these objects on  
Careless perhaps, I’ll leave one cloth behind  
Why should we erase our footprints for a stranger  
The trace of wax will serve as a reminder [33]

Now follows ‘Painbird’, a deceptively simple gem of a poem. Here is no lark ascending, though for me it did call up Vaughan Williams. But instead of a ‘pastoral romance for orchestra’, as the composer called his tone-poem, we have a bittersweet miniature. When the bird of her pain suddenly lifts, gradually rising ‘to a mere speck’ [37], the poet’s surprise is the anticlimax that makes this poem.

This signals the move into a trio of poems that confront cancer head-on. ‘Knowledge’ [39] depicts a moment of self-examination in the mirror, and beyond it. Then, in ‘Poised’, the poet reflects on ‘the yes and the no hovering / like the needle’ [41]; this is another still point – but this time of a world turning between hope and dread:

the cat in Schrödinger’s box  
alive and dead

the results of my bone scan  
positive and negative

Until, in ‘Ode’, the poet addresses pain itself – and dignifies it, with sardonic respect, as a ‘noble adversary’ [43].

There is more that I could say – about Marietta’s use of form and stanza design, her skilled orchestration of lines and line-breaks, her use of spaces. I’ve mentioned the pantoum. At the other extreme are her ‘Haiku’. For an example of their wit and charm, here’s one with a wry touch:

Melbourne in autumn light  
you look more beautiful  
than you deserve [62]

Marietta’s meticulous care for words and language is one of the hallmarks of her writing. There are subtle shifts of utterance and tonality across her poems. As we’ve just seen, she can be

playful, even mischievous (naughty Marietta!). Sometimes she can be nicely tricky as well. In ‘Web’ [57] she has woven her lines and stanzas in such a way that, when I came to the end of the poem, its intricate syntax required a second reading for the strands to be separated and finally gathered together. See what *you* think.

Before I conclude, I should mention again the generous illustrations throughout the book. Most of these are photographs taken by the author – except for the one on page 63, by Marietta’s granddaughter, Isabel. These pictures, with their atmosphere and energy, complement the poetry and, without intruding, provide both breathing-space between the poems and colourful, silent interludes. To take one instance of the synergy between image and word, the poem ‘Waterlily’ has actually been inspired by the painting by Danial Kogan, reproduced on page 53, and contains a message that applies to a poem on the page no less than to a painted waterlily: ‘if you stare into its depths / you’ll see // eyes’ [55] – whether the ‘eyes of little fishes’ or something deeper still.

The book ends with ‘Pigeon’ [65], a deliciously counterpointed piece of thirteen lines. Read it for yourselves and savour the richness that can reside within simplicity. It’s a most appropriate poem with which to close this beautiful and rewarding collection.

And now I must close also. I’ve said enough; the rest is up to you. Congratulations to Marietta, and to Hybrid Publishers, and to all of you for being here today. It gives me enormous pleasure to declare *A Perfect Distortion* officially launched.

*Alex Skovron*