

Removing The Kimono by Anne M. Carson

Book Launch

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by Jennifer Harrison

I'm delighted to be here this afternoon to celebrate Anne Carson's poetry and I'm particularly honoured that she has invited me to launch her debut poetry collection *Removing the Kimono*. I met Anne many years ago now— it was in 2006 at the University of Wollongong workshop run at that time by Ron Pretty. Bob Morrow was there that year as well as Anne Gleeson, Paul Dolphin—and many other poets who have continued to write and produce terrific work. The other tutors were Ron Pretty, Michael Sharkey, Susan Hampton and Kevin Brophy. I remember giving a talk on 'Poetry as Fable' and I remember Anne was working on a series of poems set in Greece. Anne and I bonded over poetry—and over a particularly obnoxious workshop participant *who shall remain nameless*. Anne and I have continued a friendship since then. We usually meet at Kanteen on the Yarra, our love of rivers. A few years ago, Anne organized the 'River Soiree', a fundraiser for the Yarra Riverkeepers. It was a superb event and I realized from Anne's presentation that day that she is also a wonderful photographer.

I was invited to work on Anne's manuscript in 2012, the manuscript that was to become *Removing the Kimono*. I think it was this immersion in her poetry, the poems coming with long breath of line, with smooth flow towards and beyond thought, images finding space in a elongated circuitry of lines, that I realized what a wonderful book *Removing the Kimono* would be. Others have commented on Anne's attentiveness to detail, and the *action* of that noun 'attentiveness' is apt. Anne's attentiveness is as much to the calibration of her own emotions as it is to the details of the natural world, landscapes, relationships and social cultures that inform the poems. There is something of tone and stance in the poems that reminds me of ancient oriental poetry; a Japanese spirituality, which is perhaps most clearly referenced in the title poem—and in this delightful haiku by Basho quoted on page 51: 'the temple bell stops / but the sound keeps coming / out of the flowers'. The poems unfold with tactile grace. Calmly, timelessly, they imbue experience with an essence of humanity that is both meaningful and opalescent.

The ancient Chinese poet, Wang Wei, was a painter, calligrapher and musician as well as one of the greatest High Tang poets. His works take a Buddhist perspective, combining an

'attentiveness' to the beauties of nature with an awareness of sensory illusion. I find such resonance here also in Anne's work. Compare these lines from Wang Wei's 'Return to Wang River' (translation by Tony Barnstone):

Willow catkins are light and blow about.
To the east is a rice paddy, color of spring grass.
I close the thorn gate, seized by grief.

with these Carson lines from 'To a flame':

You wave off a moth that joins us in the dark,
Drawn to our flame. It returns, circles our faces
as if they shone with light

The elegant simplicity of the line is a music underscored by light touch and an apt sense of the melodic qualities of words. This quality of tone is seen also in the last section of the poem 'The Dresser Removes the Kimono of Mourning', where the ashes of a beloved are scattered to the river: 'let the water in its wisdom carry you away, let you sink white and ethereal to the pebble floor.'

'The Dresser Removes the Kimono of Mourning' is a pivotal poem in the collection. Anne has said herself in an essay about this poem (and the performance piece that has been inspired by it) that she was looking to create an imaginary ritual after the death of her husband, finding appropriate rituals to be lacking in Western approaches to grief. The entire middle section of the book is devoted to the experience of loss and I don't think there is anyone writing better poems on such themes in Australia currently. The titles of the poems are poems themselves: 'I take up a long lone branch, bone white'; 'Spoonings under the Milky Way'; 'Transubstantiation'; 'the sound of absence' and so on. The concerns of the poet are tuned delicately, firmly, and with intimate vibrancy to the relationship with her husband and to the time they have left together, time treasured, vividly experienced. In these poems time seems to stretch and elongate within the poet's lines such that time itself seems stilled, almost ethereal, a space both abstract and pragmatic that opens and allows all time to lovers who will soon lose each other.

I experienced these particular poems as a kind ritual in which the poet is the dresser/undresser of transmutable grief. Carson removes artifice from the text until something strong and truthful and naked is there on the page. The poems do not sacrifice poetic compression to achieve their effects – the writing is complex but there is no room for any kind of artistic adulteration that shows off, distorts, hides or disguises. The poetry rehearses what it is to be human, unmade and released by grief. The poems allow a future, generously, replete with a singular awareness of how loss invigorates and tempers the future.

The visual power of the poems has affinity with Anne's natural instincts towards photography and botanical art, a visual sensibility that seems to find the emotional clarity of experience most clairvoyantly within landscape. In these poems the natural world is clear-voiced, somehow of itself without manipulation, light filled, unobstructed by the human voice. I think this is a remarkable achievement.

Of course, not all the poems are about the nature of loss. Many poems, including some collaborative wickedness with the late Melbourne poet Joyce Lee, a friend of Anne's and mine, are mischievous. Other subjects include TV detectives (Rebus and Wallander), Desiderata cows, eroticism, the Sydney Biennale, exotic travel (the Federal Hotel, Kuala Lumpur), other cultures and art. The poems about birdlife are full of marvelous detail and there is a terrific poem about psychotherapy in which Carson asks, "Is there always a dead body in therapy?" and a wryly observed poem about a suburban cricket game, which cheekily ends with these lines: 'Masculinity tucked out of sight / in trousers baggy enough to hid the bulge in the bodyline / but for the look-at-me red smear on out-of-bounds body parts'.

Enhancing the delightful humour, though, is a spiritual dimension to the work that is engagingly truthful. The prologue epigraph to the book is from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881 –1955), a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist and who took part in the discovery of Peking Man. Teilhard conceived the idea of the Omega Point (a maximum level of complexity and consciousness towards which he believed the universe was evolving). The epigraph Anne has chosen summarizes, I think, a sense of self fluidity existing in a cosmos that is also fluid: "the only worthwhile joy is to

release some infinitesimal / quantity of the absolute / to free one fragment of being,
forever.”

The poems are allowed to reach towards the complex and transcendent mysteries of life and death with a generosity that hallows the poetry with believability—and profundity. Take for example these strong lines from ‘Oyster of the soul’, the last poem in the book on page 81:

. The breeze tatters pollens from the wattles,
petals from the tea-trees along the drive. They catch the light
in showers of tiny sparks, spotted muslin falling to pattern the ground.
A delicate fabric draped over rough gravel, like the beauty
and grit between us, beauty and grit working together to turn
to pearl in the oyster of the soul.’

Marianne Moore once said, “works of art must be lit with piercing glances into the life of things.” Anne’s work is lit with piercing glances into the nature of things, uncannily so, as though a Brahminy kite observes with keen eye both the poet and the poet’s world: the person, the bat, the heron, the mountain equally important. Buddy Holly jives on CD, bushfires ravish and replenish the bush, crested terns engrave circles in the sky, Kuala Lumpur is made beautiful by neon—and brocade falls from a woman as the dresser removes the inner and outer garments of grief.

This is Anne’s first substantial collection but she has been widely published for many years in a range of literary journals and anthologies including *Best Australian Poems, 2005*. In 2011 she won the Martha Richardson Poetry Medal and she has received many other awards for her poetry. She teaches creative writing and has been the recipient of an Australian Poetry café fellowship. ‘Removing the Kimono of Morning’ and other poems from this collection have inspired a multi-artist performance collaboration with Barbara Weiss and Lindesay Dresden incorporating dance and keyboards. It premiered at the *Words in Winter* arts festival in August this year. Audiovisual records of the performance and the poems have been accepted into The Dax Poetry Collection at the Dax Centre, University of Melbourne.

Anne has also edited a number of anthologies. She has curated two *PoeticA* programs for Radio National including a 2010 program titled *The Writing on the Wall*, which featured

those early poems of Anne's about ancient Greece, themselves inspired by the Slave Wall of ancient Greece, a wall that still bears the names of 1,000 slaves supposedly freed by the gods.

Anne M. Carson is a social worker, activist, artist and poet and her debut collection *Removing the Kimono* arises from the rich experiences of many years of crafted artistry and thought. A first book is to be treasured when there has been a long and harsh love affair with excellence. I particularly like the self-portrait poem that Anne has slipped into the collection, 'Self-portrait -Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia', which can be found on page 9 and which offers these lines taken in part from the whole:

No bird is impressed by what I wear, by who I think I am.

You can pour out the self you imagine real in the world

like you pour your body into the brine-warm rockpool.

Let light invade the body, the way the sun shines

through ruby panels in the black cockatoo's red

tail feathers-stained-glass brilliant against the sky.

A bird might not be impressed by Anne's poetry but I am. And I congratulate Hybrid Publishers, yet again, for their choice of poet, the tasteful production values of the book and its exquisite cover. The delicate fans scattered through the pages engage the senses and there is a contemporary illumined manuscript feel to it, which adds to the holistic pleasure of reading. I am so pleased that Anne has such a beautiful book for her debut collection. I remember once when I commented on the elegant expansiveness of her voice in the poem, 'Compression', she answered: "Really. Do you think so? I just wrote it I suppose."

Congratulations my river friend. You might not yet realize what a fine book you have written but others have and will. I am delighted to declare *Removing the Kimono* launched. It is a bird of leaves that will fly far.