

Launch Speech for *Back to Earth* by Tony Page

31st May 2019, 3.30pm

Kathleen Symes Library, Faraday Street, Carlton

The gallery of presences on the cover of *Back to Earth* is both an invitation and a question raiser: whose are these faces and why have they been chosen? To enter the collection is to learn that each face is either well known to Tony, or a presence met briefly and powerfully enough to have left an imprint. Diamond, the one non-human face, is the tiger in the poem *Orphan in the Forest, Laos 2005*. Orphaned by poachers, Diamond is not alone in being abandoned: “*Abandoned on his search, the venturer/stumbles into some village where/children are playing with a tiger*”. The result is entrancement, the tiger’s eyes a “*force field into which/he sinks as the world dissolves*”. This suspension from a world previously known, coupled with the theme of stranger, outsider, is pivotal to the collection, as is the compulsion to taste the world through someone else’s eyes, to morph and inhabit if only briefly: what “*spurs him through the years is discovery*” (*Perhaps he Should Stop*, p.91), even when the “*Dream has no clothes*” (*Super-Sized Sin, Las Vegas 1993*, p.42).

All art is a form of journeying of course. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, Keats described the chameleon poet — a concept not irrelevant to this collection — as having “*no self, it is everything and nothing - it has no character...A poet is the most unpoetical thing in existence, because he has no identity...he is continually in for — and filling some other body*”. In whatever guise the venturer in this collection undertakes the journey, whether as an Unlikely Shaman, a Morphing Misanthrope, a Cambodian hotel maid, an airport guard, a frequent-flying masochist, a pilot, a Kalahari Bushman, an Amazon tracker, an immigration officer, a Bangkok Bar Girl, a Japanese businessman, the goal is enlightenment, even if this occurs in “*SNAKE-INFESTED zones*” (*Not Knowing What to Look For*, p.34).

It is not difficult to recognise Tony in the black and white photograph of a schoolboy. The boy, wholly absorbed, poised over paper with pen in hand, could well be a young apprentice, the seeds of poetic pilgrimage already being sown. In essence *Back to Earth* is a collection of thought journeys fed by a myriad physical ones. In his poem *Thought* D.H.Lawrence characterises thought as a “*man in his wholeness wholly attending*”: clearly applicable to *Back to Earth*. In turn Tony challenges the reader’s thinking by not offering a linear framework of time and place as pathway or guide. Instead the poems meander, engaging each other in a way similar to quantum entanglement. Cohesion and variance are created through various techniques. Nouns of engagement: exploration, inspiration, celebration, speculation, expectation, appreciation, deprecation, confrontation, frustration, and castigation (often castigation of self) are aided by juxtaposition and contrasting styles, as well as by the tonal colours of satire, irony, self-mockery, disbelief, scorn, humour, wonder, lyricism, serenity, joy.

The more I read through the poems the more I appreciate Tony’s use of the Omega symbol, the great O, to foreground the collection’s preoccupation with Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Indeed the symbol is widely used in various fields — from religion to astrology, physics, chemistry, linguistics, computer science, mathematics and molecular biology as well as for branding purposes. Alphabets can be defined by beginnings and ends but *reality, power,*

identity, and *experience* are less biddable. The God-Voice in Revelations may well dismiss all equivocation — "I am the Alpha and the Omega--the beginning and the end... I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come" — but the pilgrim-poet, lacking God-head capacity, must resort to poetics. A seemingly offhand tone can result, as in *Stranger Kindness* (p.15). If you extract the words in upper case from the rest and read them in isolation you can catch a hint of poetic shouting, even poetic tantrum.

It is not surprising then that many of the Omega poems are prose poems often couched in conversational, even vernacular terms, as if scepticism-in-disguise can rein in the metaphysical aspirations of the questing spirit, the thirsting spirit, without surrendering control of Alpha and Omega. Again and again while reading through the poems I was reminded of Yeats's view that "we make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry". The tenor of the collection certainly resonates with this, especially in poems such as *Perhaps he should stop* (p.91).

There's no argument from the venturer-poet that coming back to earth, both literally and idiomatically, is inevitable. Earth as departure and returning point is not in dispute, but whether to stay bound to one home, one bed, one self, to embrace only the known, the familiar, or to "TARGET ANYWHERE" (*Google Earth*, p.99) is a juggling act, a blur of up-in-the-air choices. Tony has chosen not to close the collection with a bookend poem. *Home* (p.96) which could function as such, is sandwiched between *Passport* and *Unlikely Shaman*, followed by *Google Earth* and the final poem, *Water Bearers*. In fact *Water Bearers* hints at new interest, a new starting point, To end then is to begin again, echoic of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quarters*, which Tony evokes in *Not Knowing What to Look For* (p.34): "in my end is my beginning to arrive at a / place and know it for the first time".

In her collection, *Our Dead Behind Us*, the late American poet Audre Lorde wrote: "I cannot recall the words of my first poem/but I remember a promise/I made my pen/never to leave it/lying/in someone else's blood" (*To The Poet Who Happens to Be Black/and the Black Poet Who/Happens to be a Woman*). Tony too has wielded his pen with care. The book's many morphings, and catastrophes large and small, give and take with empathy, insight and challenge. I urge you to buy, read and savour *Back to Earth*'s provocations, and it is my pleasure to declare it launched.

Patricia Sykes, 31st March, 2019.