

Launch speech

by Tracy Ryan

It's a great honour to be launching Emily Sun's book today; working with her to edit *Vociferate* was a rewarding experience, a privilege. To vociferate is to make your voice heard, and loud. To make it carry and be carried – from Latin roots, and Latin, in fact, is only one of the many languages that spar and jostle within this highly dialogic collection of poems. We're not talking about one voice, expressing or issuing from some stable idea of identity. Instead we're talking with and about many voices, echoes, ripostes and retorts, a call and response at times – other times fragments of speech, of visual image, of song, though there is also the recourse to pure music as the only possible adequacy:

“must I belong? can I belong with/ so many incongruencies?/ and this is why I hold onto/ songs without words/ the only logic that appeals” (打完仗都有和平)

Yet when there are words, they are not hesitant, static or mild; they carry – both in sound and in the weight they bear. These poems *are* densely weighty and yet their movement is light and engaging, because they deliver with irony at almost all times. The reader will quickly notice that the whole work is interwoven with song, film and TV references, with a strong emphasis on listening and on what is heard. The presence of many languages in the poems will highlight the heard and spoken, and throw the onus onto those reading, forcing recognition of a complex interaction between sounds as well as meanings.

So Emily Sun's poems are as much about writing and naming as they are about their ostensible subject matter, but at the same time they are the proof, the awareness, that these realms are not ultimately separable. That language labels people within a set of potential constrictions, as in the poem “Initialisms”, largely made up of acronyms and “what of humanity?/ a game of balderdash”.

But if naming and definition can be a problem, so too can the indifference of anonymity, as we see in the poem “Boxing Days”: “Anonymous brown

bodies in colourful death shrouds"; "If I were anywhere but here, would they try to identify me/ Or would my corpse be stockpiled?" These poems know that speech and writing bring "things" into being as much as they apprehend "things". Throughout this book, objects have auras, histories and implications – whether a tape-deck and the pencil used to rewind the tape, or food and drink, as in the poem "High Tea" which reconnects Earl Grey tea with its historical colonial contexts: realia are reconfigured. Or the ironic turning inside out of a term like "toxic childhoods", to give voice to environmental health concerns.

From the very first poem, we are privy to a kind of discussion or turning over of ideas and invited to take part in it. To say that here the reader must do some work is not to exclude the possibility of pleasure, either – the pleasures of recognition, for better or for worse; but also the pleasures of non-recognition, of finding yourself confronted with matters and events you had only partly, if at all, understood before you met them filtered through Sun's poetic lens.

There is also the great pleasure of humour, always sharp-edged, as in the linchpin of a poem, a kind of core for the book's modus operandi, called "National Treasures Coming Home", in which the speaker is invited to eat at the boss's house upon Ming dynasty crockery, a poem which unleashes a fluid, witty, slippery dressing-down of both colonialism and class-consciousness: "I usually pay to admire stolen goods, encased in glass cabinets". The speaker fantasises about graffitiiing the statue of Queen Victoria in Hong Kong.

There is a tart defamiliarisation going on when the poem asks "what I should wear to a meal with the descendants/ of drug dealers who poisoned a nation with opioids", an image that contemporary British boosterism could do with taking on board. Australians too, elsewhere in the book, get a vivid flash of the mirror: "if you choose to walk to my place/ you need to have that *je ne sais quoi* stride/ especially when you walk past the/house with the 'Love it or Leave it' SUV" ("Come Visit Us?").

Yet the book lives in the complications of the idea of home: in the poem “Psithurism”, juxtaposing evergreens overseas with the memory of Australian trees, the speaker is told “go back.../ Go home”, and the poem ends, “But to where?” The book’s movement is across many places: the UK, the USA, Hong Kong, New Zealand, as well as places others have lived through and from which they have passed on their stories. As Adam Aitken once wrote in an article, “In the context of a transnational flow of bodies and influence, hybridity challenges the notion that a poet should become the voice of the nations they live in or originate from. For many Asian Australian poets, cosmopolitan cultural influences dominate the nationalistic.” While noting that the hyphen in Asian-Australian can be reductive and ambiguous, Aitken adds that in such a context, “many poets have arrived at the Anglophone literary heritage from elsewhere, and apply a kind of linguistic freedom to their poems.”

That linguistic freedom is strongly evident in Emily Sun’s work, as is the interrogation of the concept of “home” that Aitken later pinpoints in Ouyang Yu’s lines, “i say i’m returning to my home country/ when i go to australia/ i say i’m returning to my home country/ wherever i go” (from “The Double Man”) but in the case of Emily Sun’s poetic reverberations, this situation is more than double, it is multiple, because home is not located within one individual, and the visions are further nuanced through questions of gender, vociferously laid out: “what she really wanted was to be paganini/ the mad bad lord byron or deaf ludwig van/ for no one ever said *he* had a resting bitch face” – you see what I mean about the humour, which leavens every heavy message we might take away from the work, and brings us back to re-read time and again.

The stories that proliferate in *Vociferate* don’t run beginning-middle-end, but, as you’ll see from the book’s three sections, Beginning-Wandering-Continuing. It’s been a powerful and fruitful beginning and wandering, and we can all look forward to Emily Sun’s continuing on her innovative and distinctive poetic path – with huge congratulations to Fremantle Press and to Emily herself as this first full-length work is now launched.

References

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