

Seven Thousand Starlets

John Tranter, *Studio Moon*. Salt Publishing, £8.95

Aside altogether from his prolific decade-long presence in British publishing (with Bloodaxe, Polygon, Arc, Barque, Shoestring and Salt), John Tranter has probably done more than any other poet-editor to internationalise and broaden the tastes of English-language poetry readers with his website *Jacket*. His fondness for John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara is clear there and in all of his work, but browsers of *Jacket*'s more experimental selections will be surprised at how immediately approachable its editor's poems are. His engagement with linguistically innovative poetry has led him into many surprising and fruitful vocabularies, but it has never made him simply throw up his hands or ask his reader to edit or work out a poem for themselves. Instead it leads to a frantically enjoyable discursive chasing of coherence as Tranter tries to include *everything* in the poem's ambit, as in this short quotation from about halfway through the self-styled "verse thriller" *The Floor of Heaven*:

If you'd told Hunter he'd spend that night
in the arms of a self-confessed murderer,
drinking gin and listening to Billie Holiday
singing the blues, he wouldn't have believed you;
but as it happened that's where he ended up.

Around them the Australian economy staggered
under the assault of various foreign banks,
and crowds of workers lately turned into their
doppelgangers shopped angrily, consuming
what they produced in a different incarnation.
It seemed that the contradictions engendered
by the anomalous life-style of the urban worker

were producing a kind of psychic acid,
and it rained around them in a thin mist.

In his excellent new collection, *Studio Moon*, Tranter continues to pursue this sort of heterogeneity, most obviously through a form which he has named a “terminal”. Tranter has taken the idea for this form from John Ashbery’s reworking of the end words of a Swinburne double sestina in *Flow Chart*. Here, for instance, Tranter borrows the end words of Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and rewrites the poem twice, first as “Grover Leach” and, then as “See Rover Reach” (and he also “does” poems by Auden, O’Hara, Barbara Guest and others). His “Dover Beach” terminals call to mind Anthony Hecht’s “The Dover Bitch” (and also the danger that a parody can end up dating far worse than its object). However, Tranter’s gossipy, over-populated responses seem to take themselves and their era far less seriously than Hecht’s did. Here are Arnold’s lines:

Listen! You hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin...

These are then made to serve an utterly different, urban, anti-authoritative æsthetic becoming, first, in “Grover Leach”

Meet me where the mob’s roar
drowns our laughter, and our mad fling
will magnetically excite each strand
of feeling in the crowd, and the Wheel will begin...

And, second, in “See Rover Reach”:

You know there’s something about the crowd’s roar
in Madison Square Garden, when the stripper’s about to fling
her bra into the audience, and a guy—like Mark Strand,
say—catches it—then the good times begin...

This comic ingenuity is enjoyable, but the terminals are also instructive about how a Tranter poem aspires to be heard as a shout in a noisy street rather than as an echo on an almost empty shore. The comedy is only a part of *Studio Moon*’s appeal, although these terminals’ mix of informality with surprising and

well-timed rhetorical flourishes defines his best poems.

The number of people in his poems is astonishing: his elegies simply describe individuals through the societies of friends and brilliantly angled biographical context, although he does feel the need to note of his "Three Poems about Kenneth Koch" (another terminal) that "Only a lunatic would take any particular statement in the poem to be necessarily true". "God on a Bicycle (for John Forbes)" begins with a typically urban scene which quickly mutates into a telling guess at its subject's worldview:

A handful of snow turns into a cloud
shaped like a camel, then a weasel, and briefly
troubles Carlton's sidewalk restaurateurs
before cruising on to Port Phillip Bay
to ruin things for the weekend sailors—
or is all this just a wish
projected from the forehead of the cyclist weaving
through the traffic outside "Readings" bookshop?

In the same spirit as the terminals, *Studio Moon* also contains notable (and notably loose) versions of canonical French and German poems, including Rilke's first Duino Elegy, which here, irresistibly, begins: "I hate this place. If I were to throw a fit, who/ among the seven thousand starlets in Hollywood/ would give a flying fuck?" His love of disorientation is also evident in the book's first poem, which adopts an anthropological tone as it invents myths for the "stockbrokers of Lakeville, Connecticut" alongside the "Guarani Indians of Paraguay" and the "fishermen of Muckle Roe".

The collection's resourcefulness does not, however, consist of only punky cover versions and novel forms. He also persistently resorts to the formal strategies of the novel, including much dialogue, walk-on parts which lead to acute but improbably true general observations, a detailed attention to the materialism of urban society, and omniscient summaries that lift the poems' material into greater significance. The volume's originality and tone are maintained throughout by its copious use of more traditional forms, in all of the pantoums ("This is her best dream, isn't it pathetic", begins one), sonnets, Sapphics, haibun and sestinas (including one for the Clare-born Australian poet Christopher Brennan [1870-1932] who is imagined thus: "Like a good

German/ he had a method for everything, and like the French/ he wasted it on writing// poems about feeling like writing/ all though the night”).

Tranter packs potent emotional sucker punches in many of the later poems, especially in the narratives which freeze-frame time and then fast-forward rapidly. These are the most satisfying poems in this consistently enthralling, various collection. In “The Moths”, a teacher’s life disappears into his daily routine; in “Journey” a boy turns quickly into “hardly the handsome dandy after all, more the nervous// middle-aged college visitor bewildered at tea/ ashamed of his tie”; “Curriculum Vitæ” ends “not too far/ from who I used to be” while “Decalcomania” begins “Your ruin begins here” and in “A Marriage” Tranter simply presents a series of snapshots of married life so that the young couple who marry in the first stanza (“He takes her hand: she clambers/ from the black car and smiles/ awkwardly at the crowd of strangers”) end up in a rest home, where

The sun makes a lovely show among the cumulus,
like a painting trying to tell us a story.
A black car idles on the gravel drive.

There’s something he wants to say—the words
Are on the tip of his tongue. She gives him
That anxious smile, and squeezes his hand.