

*Here Come the Nice*

Bill Tinley, *Grace*. New Island, €12 (pbk)

Nigel McLoughlin, *At the Waters' Clearing*. Flambard/Black Mountain, €11.50 (pbk)

Both of these collections describe classic first book trajectories. Nigel McLoughlin's *At the Waters' Clearing* is a concentrated rite of passage which identifies the constitutive elements of his poetic adolescence, while Bill Tinley's *Grace* works to justify the dubious honour of being "long-awaited". Both of these poets are faced with the task of making an announcement: McLoughlin to tell us of his arrival, and Tinley (the Kavanagh Award winner of 1996) to explain why he has taken so long to get here. As their gentle titles suggest, these books are not spectacular entrances, and the most characteristic work of both poets promotes the intimacy of domesticity and romance while adopting poetic attitudes of humility and restraint. Yet for all the intimate tendresses and decencies, the problem is that if intimacy is to be regarded as good in itself, it diminishes the world elsewhere, and you are left with poetry by self-possessed monads written for... more monads? The world is atomised enough, without tender lyrics proving that it is so. The fundamental and necessary immodesty of being a lyric poet (and a reviewer) must be faced, and, just occasionally, you want the Æolian harp to be given a good twang rather than a delicate picking. But perhaps poets can no longer bear very much society.

The amount of time that Tinley has taken to produce this likeably problematic collection means that the lyrics contained within it chart a remarkable spread of events: on page 12, he is blissfully goofing off with friends in Italy, twelve pages later he is married, and by page 31 the dreaded kids have arrived and all the poet is fit for are lullabies and a good night's sleep. The plethora of experience seems enormous compared to the number of poems that represent it. Tinley's poetry has had a prolonged ges-

tation and I can't help but think that this is a book which he is glad to be rid of. The last poem of the collection (also very nearly its best), "Ulysses", makes this gloriously clear. Tinley's Ulysses, even more than Tennyson's, is a middle-class man at mid-life who is prepared to admit that his life can be summed up as a complex of frustrations and incompletions. Rather than celebrating the aleatory universe in a hushed manner (as was his modest tendency earlier in the book), Tinley adopts an attitude towards it. In doing so, he is signalling the clear intention of dispensing with the Tinleys who have been congregated in *Grace*, and of moving towards writing a more human and indecent poetry in the future:

And while you're at it, add what might have been,  
The second thoughts you left without reprieve  
To lead, in parallel, another life;  
Now you can, take every chance direction,  
Become your countless alter egos; live  
Redundant futures day-by-day, each one  
Replete with promise. Unburdened and naïve,  
Set out tomorrow for the far horizon.

Tinley has published a poetry that he himself is tired of. On this level, *Grace* is an extraordinary book, because it is not attempting to ingratiate us but instead is asking that we might give the poet release. This encourages the reader even as Tinley is encouraging himself, and it hints that there is a lot more to come.

However, now to the unhypothetical poems. *Grace* is a book with considerable formalist ambitions, and Tinley sets himself high standards in this regard. When he meets them the poems are quietly gratifying, when he doesn't, slight of hand becomes slough of mind:

That scree of fallen pine nuts underfoot, a  
Line of pavement ants advancing inch-by-inch  
On acres of deserted terracotta.

Tinley is admirably committed to apt use of traditional forms, but there are times when all that formal exercise is just that, poetic calorie-burning. Tinley's half-rhymes can also be off the mark: "All day we'll tend this cramped savannah/ From the shade of our veranda."

The effective formalist works discreetly, prettily engaging you while taking your mind hostage (it's not for nothing that the finest formalist of them all was called Ransom). If you ignore the gauche title, the Frostian sonnet, "Trompe l'Oeil", provides a good example of how Tinley's particular version of formalism works best when it is undeclared:

After forty minutes at a fair pace  
Walking through the snow, halted now for air  
Above the lake, it's hard to say for sure  
If that cold water's cataract of ice  
Is stuck on all sides to the grassy shore,  
A clouded fixture for the passer-by,  
Or if, unmoored, a mirror of the sky,  
It's drifting off, receding by the hour.

What with Vermeer on the cover, and trickery of the light and the eye, Tinley is a poet who is obsessed with looking and also drawn to the void that every sight conceals. Voyeurism in Irish poetry (particularly after Heaney's artful version of it in *North*) is a flagrant form of what an Australian calls "big-noting", that is, making yourself as obtrusive and observable as possible. "Voyeur", Tinley's first poem in *Grace*, is acutely aware of this; no matter how much his poetic structures may permit him a precarious appearance of quiet anonymity, he is faced continually with the unavoidability of his own presence or performance—the nice quietness is bogus:

I sit here, staring at my face,  
An inscrutable reflection  
Of myself, my soul, my fall from grace.

More scrutable than it at first appears, then, Tinley-as-voyeur's face tells him of a massive chasm between his perceiving and perceived self, an awareness with which Tinley-as-Ulysses also effectively closes his book. What with all that Real in between the voyeur and the voyeur viewed, it's enough to make a Lacanian weep. Belying its gentle surfaces and mellow tones, therefore, *Grace* is describing a process of attempted *suture*, but using poetry as a stitching mechanism has its dangers, and a wilful attempt at a graceful poetic process does not guarantee the achievement

of grace as a state. When Tinley relents from using his forms as supervisory conditioning for his language and finds a way of expressing (rather than repressing) the darker energies of his work, then he will be a poet who is more appreciated than anticipated.

McLoughlin's book also begs a question about where to go from here. *At the Waters' Clearing* is a book full of deference, with many tender and affecting poems of tribute and memory to family and friends. As an elegist, he is carefully unintrusive, harmonising loss and marshalling sentiment. Poetic self-consciousness dominates other forms of consciousness, and the event of the poem is always made the dominant emotional reality rather than performing a merely compensatory function. It is not so much that the poem heals, rather it is the thing that can always be done.

His work's integrity comes from the sense that he is "a poet", and he is particularly reluctant to try out any other role for himself, although we have to be mindful that McLoughlin's continual insistence on being-a-poet is in itself a form of acting. Here is the rub with the poetry of quietly decent and plain-speaking poets: poetic modesty can appear as arch reticence. In "Anti-Sestina", he is superficially embarrassed about the formal sophistication of the poem he is writing: "It is not my way to form/ Lines with such regularity/ As these". Yet as poem after poem and agonistic nod after agonistic nod in this collection shows, McLoughlin's imaginative habit is to inhabit one set of regular lines after another as he moves from form to form, however promiscuously and skittishly. "Anti-Sestina" dreams of a tepid experimentalism that McLoughlin has no hope of actually adopting:

Nails in a coffin, holding a dead poem six  
Stanzas long. If I could I'd outlaw walls,  
Play a little with the form,  
Stop all the endless repeating,  
Drag off the mask,  
Force it to beautiful irregularity.

Manners make poets, whatever fantasies of power they may enjoy. "Anti-Sestina" is a brand of self-referential fun, of course, but it is also as pointless as an alcoholic musing on the shape of a naggin. Self-conscious fun is not much fun at all, and what is miss-

ing from *At the Waters' Edge* is any gaiety or release; pleasure is always tangible, and solemnly so. The love poems that begin it are full of a grim tenderness that converts laconic seductions into earnest self-satisfactions and (in "Driven Home") makes sanctimony out of a post-coital fug:

I had come fresh from you,  
Unshowered, to the car, still  
Tasting you, still heavy with  
Your scent. I drove across  
Dawn home, as mountains  
Unmapped from mist,  
From horizon. I pictured  
You sleepless in the quiet  
Of that house, left to drive  
Your lack of dreams  
Across unopened country.

How much work goes into selecting a pussyfooting word like "Unshowered", our poet determined to inform us of his beautifully bestial self-scentedness yet decorous enough to remind us that he does bathe regularly. The real absence here is of a metaphysical outlet from the poet's sense of gratitude and gratification. There is no room for the sublime in such a claustrophobic satiety, and no room for the reader. The demon-driver travels solo.

To have fun as a poet you don't have to be nice, and interesting work can emerge from disagreements with the muse. Surface timidity in these poets have not yet given way altogether to mature complexities. In *Grace*, however, Tinley has created a framework in which he allows the beginnings of an interesting argument to develop, and it promises much. In comparison, McLoughlin's view of his medium is uncritical, and consequently, his view of his own role is complacent and benign. His struggles lie ahead. Both deserve to be followed with some curiosity.