

Marion May Campbell, *Fragments From A Paper Witch* (Salt, 2008)

Marion Campbell is an unsettling presence in Australian writing. Her seminal work, *Lines of Flight*, flowed onto the local stage in 1985 and seemed utterly divorced from the concerns of other Australian writers of the time. Campbell's novels are imbued with a ferocious intelligence steeped in European culture. Fluent in French and German, having more than a nodding acquaintance with other languages, and eager to wrestle with time and space, Marion Campbell seemed to create holes in her writing canvas. These holes revealed other canvases, labyrinths of meaning.

Twenty five years after the publication of her first novel, Marion Campbell still works from and through a different canvas. Campbell's writing world is located somewhere on a Styx unique to her, but as these 'fragments' attest, this is the same river she has travelled all along. The writer, as she has matured, has learnt that the Styx is deeper, longer and more treacherous, yet still a sustaining force. *Fragments From A Paper Witch* contains previously uncollected pieces from all stages of Campbell's writing life and allows the reader some insight into her preoccupations.

Let us dive into the middle of the work to the subversive, deceptive little essay which bestows its name on the whole book. Katerina Kepler, the mother of the astronomer, Johannes Kepler, informs this piece in that Katerina is one of the witches at work in this book. 'Exhibit one: the broom behind her kitchen door' (49). This is followed by a reference to Fioxhilde of Iceland, the mythic witch who, in a fit of rage, gave away her child. 'Exhibit two: the herbs laid out on your mother's racks to dry' (49).

The astronomer Kepler (1571-1630) defined the laws of planetary motion. Putting it simply, he proposed that the planets travelled around the sun, rather than the other way around. In further refinements Kepler demonstrated that some orbits, such as that of the planet Mars, are elliptical. He also described a nightmarish vision of a world on the moon that prefigured Cervantes in an attempt at novelistic structure. In 1619 Kepler's third law was promulgated as *Harmonice Mundi* (Harmony of the Worlds).

Kepler's mother, Katerina, was imprisoned for five years on the charge of practising witchcraft. Marion Campbell has Katerina Kepler say from her prison cell: 'He's made me ... a paper witch with his stories.' (49). The 'he' is not identified. Possibly the 'he' is the inquisitor who incarcerated the mother. Perhaps the mother is being punished for the sin of giving birth to the astronomer. In the early seventeenth century, to the background of the Thirty Years War, being able to look at the stars, to make sense of a universe that defied religious belief was magic.

In the blink of a caesura, Campbell takes us to another world. Another woman, under a star-filled sky utters what is probably one of the most famous life sentences of Australian history. 'You say it quietly: the dingo took my baby' (49). This mother too, was subjected to a type of inquisition and imprisoned. Two mothers, separated by half a millennium, encounter each other on the paper.

Mothers – creatures daemonic, engulfing, nurturing and all shades in between – haunt the text. In the section entitled 'Spectacular Motherhood' Campbell reveals a self soaked in various European myths. A baby waiting to be born is trapped in the

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vaginal labyrinth. Perceval, the knight of Arthur's Round Table, who goes on to find the Holy Grail in order to relieve a barren world, sacrifices his mother. A child called Zoë is born perfectly formed, perfectly limp, delivered by a mythic trio of three graces. If the child had not survived they might equally have been part of a hellish possibility. That awful possibility plays upon the writer's psyche: the powerful image of a child drowning in silence. The writer berates herself for storing the image for later screening. She ends with a rhetorical question about mothering, being reflexive, making a spectacle of oneself, and then using that spectacle as a writerly possibility.

The other haunting within this text is a dead poets' society. Campbell, the poet, returns again and again to Mallarmé. In the last and defining section of this book 'i, of the swarm', the narrator returns to early encounters. In what reads like a private reflection, she notes the process of ageing, the need to adopt a sort of fictional sheath. The necessity to earn a living from teaching has taken its literary toll. She appears to look back at her 24-year-old self, but it is Mallarmé who confronts her – and us. The poet is haunted by the theft of words: his words, all words. Yet he is also a thief of the words of others. 'This is how texts become you,' Campbell says: of Mallarmé, of herself, of any creator (148).

A few pages later, Campbell evokes the image of Paul Celan, a survivor of the Holocaust, who, suicided at the horror (so we are led to believe)¹ of having his famous poem 'Death Fugue' coopted into the German school curriculum 'through which, it seemed to Celan to become an agent of amnesia' (156). Campbell sees Celan as extending the poetic experiments begun by Mallarmé. But is that another type of theft, a more subtle plagiarism?

Theft, intellectual borrowings, and transformation bound and rebound through Campbell's work. She reflects on whether or not women writers are still forever trapped in a reflexive mode, entering male texts and stealing away. Thus the image of a swarm, a subjective flux, 'a prose swarming with the words of others' (150). This swarming is, however, enabling for Campbell, and any other writer, who sees the swarm as a new entity with endless possibilities of forming and reforming finally sending 'new assemblages' (155) out of the swarm.

In her generous and thoughtful preface to *Fragments of a Paper Witch*, Gail Jones remarks on the excellence and sophistication of Campbell's poetry. Marion Campbell writes prose imbued with poetic notions and form, therefore one should not be surprised that there were uncollected poems gathering their own strength in a bottom drawer, waiting for the right swarm with which to coalesce. '... endless space junk / from old hubris / falling through the tumble-dry / of planets' comes from a poem entitled '1999' (53-53). Mallarmé, Celan, and Shakespeare's Hamlet all make swift appearances in this short work.

Marion Campbell is a witch who has bewitched herself on the power, the exhilaration of language. She conjures onto the page connections and a sense of connectedness that is shockingly familiar yet strange. This slim volume, suggesting fragments, appearing fragmentary, is witchery of the highest order. Truly, the text becomes her. Anyone watching the swarm of words passing by would be advised to catch a ride.

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¹ Campbell quotes: Felstiner, John: *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995