

# Making It Happen

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Connie Barber  
SAND

Five Islands Press, \$16.95pb, 84pp, 0 86418 758 0

William C. Clarke  
A MOMENTARY STAY

Pandanus Books, \$19.50pb, 40pp, 1 74076 022 0

WILLIAM C. CLARKE cuts an interesting figure. An anthropologist who has concentrated on Pacific populations, Clarke combined this discipline with an interest in poetry in his 2000 lecture 'Pacific Voices, Pacific Views: Poets as Commentators on the Contemporary Pacific'. Clarke used his poetry as a vehicle for considering issues such as land tenure, corruption and tourism. It is angry, astute poetry; this is not the tranquil Hawaii and Fiji of tourist literature. Such poetry is undoubtedly moving, despite Clarke's echo of W.H. Auden's assertion that 'poetry makes nothing happen'.

In *A Momentary Stay*, his first collection, Clarke persists in exploring politically charged issues. He draws attention to the ways we mistreat and misunderstand nature: how 'the soil slides down slope / beneath the dearth of a bird's song'. Politically, nothing may happen due to this collection; on a smaller scale, Clarke's poetry inspires movement, in both poet and audience. As with all good poetry, thoughts are rearranged, positions reconsidered.

The title touches on, ironically perhaps, the meaning of existence. According to Clarke's environmental understanding, we are simply ephemeral dwellers on this earth. The phrase comes from Robert Frost, who argued that poetry 'runs a course of lucky events and ends in clarification of life ... a momentary stay against confusion'. For Frost, the 'momentary stay' of poetry makes something happen; humans have the capacity to understand and order the world through art. It is through the unobjective, illogical language of poetry that we are invited to do both.

So it is for Clarke. In 'Ecology', he struggles against his desire to personify and sentimentalise nature, exploring instead nature's command of order and logic: 'I know the songs of birds / sound not for happiness / but to denote possession.' Yet something happens and the poet is returned to that which he doesn't 'know':

I know the flux of energy  
and interchange of atoms  
maintain our lives  
and that in the momentary stay  
of early morning  
my breath catches

against the depth  
of loveliness  
in the world.

One can't help wondering whether this is the inevitable manifestation of a scientist engaged in art — the 'interchange of atoms' and the 'depth / of loveliness' always, in Clarke's poetry, jostling for position. It is, significantly, in the space between these two ways of understanding that Clarke places the title of his collection. Here, 'momentary stay' denotes that time when the day's direction has not yet been decided; in anticipatory morning, we could go either way.

This characteristic move from scepticism to wonderment also pervades 'At the Pantheon'. It begins by asking 'what spiritual catch can be exacted / from a visit to the ancient city'. By the poem's end, something has shifted in the poet: 'sky and rain and sun and snow / falling softly, softly falling / equipping me to hook shy morsels / swimming there / holy in that apprehended air.' Art makes something happen; here, Clarke is moved from the cynical world of guidebooks, queues and maps to that of abstract ideas, notions suspended but moving in the air. This poem typifies Clarke's care with words, but also highlights his poetic limitations. Lines such as 'falling softly, softly falling' seem hollow and forced in a landscape of original impression.

In this short collection, Clarke searches for that 'exquisite lilt', that 'caress between meanings and music', which he speaks of in 'A Short Essay on Poetry', and there are enough poised moments in the book. While there are thematic preoccupations, the lively contents page attests to the variety of ways in which Clarke is inspired to write poetry, with titles such as 'The Fragrance of Cinnamon', 'Your Skin', 'Long Corridor's End' and 'On Listening to the Stock Market Report'.

In the upfront 'Poem', Clarke reflects on the process of poetry, how it moves us right from the start, but not with the enthusiasm you might expect: 'Oh spare me! Not another / goddamn poem come to take me over, / the occupying impulse / demanding attention like a slighted wife.' Not one of Clarke's best poems, it will leave an unfortunate impression on those who, like me, don't see 'slighted wife' as shorthand for that which is unreasonable and shrewish. In this rare instance, Clarke only succeeded in alienating me.

SAND IS Connie Barber's third collection. Like Clarke, Barber uses the natural world as the subject of her poetry when considering weighty issues, such as ageing and death. The bulk of this volume, however, is taken up with suburban phenomena. Barber's poetry evokes a world where the domestic space is a serene refuge from the ugliness beyond one's door. Barber imagines her poetry sitting safely in that domestic space: in 'Folding', she writes, 'my poem is folded for you / to unfold and read. I think of love, / of folding flour / light as air / into a birthday cake, / of sheep safety in a wolf world.' Fear and insecurity run rampant in this collection, producing honest, but often unrefined, poetry.

The domestic scene is integrated with many different themes. In 'Incomplete Metamorphosis', Barber considers the process of writing poetry: 'daily words demand / more bite to live / than soul's abstractions'; and then 'you move / the freesias into the sun / walk to the park talk / of the winter wind ... alter words'. The significance of such alterations is not always clear; many of Barber's poems could have been more ruthlessly pruned. Still, as in 'Walking up the Street', 'Cleaning up' and 'Collecting the Bread', Barber paints domestic scenes with a personal and playful touch.

Barber is drawn to narrative. In poems such as 'Walking up the Street' and 'We Walk Together', she creates surprising and humorous endings that prompt us to reconsider the poem as a whole. Poems such as 'Rembrandt Lacking an Electronic Medium' might have been more successful had they been presented as narratives. Good things happen in this poem, though, as Barber considers the way art travels where we cannot: how 'only the paint / lively as though still pliant / carries centuries'. When Barber is reminding us of the movement inherent within art, her own lines form with greater verve. The poem continues: 'You see the brush moving, / as in translating words / you hear a voice / feel a heartbeat.' Too often in this collection, we are confronted with unoriginal metaphors that confuse rather than illuminate; metaphors that stop us short rather than move us along.

'Tutti Frutti Lit Crit' is a veritable fruit salad of metaphors, not all of them successful. At face value, it appears to be one of Barber's more playful poems; she uses fruit and vegetables as metaphorical entry points into a discussion about writing. The notion is sound, and when Barber writes, 'I dreamed I would like, if I could, / to write the complex fig, inside out', I know just what she means. The real action, however, is in the next line: 'inviting the probing wasp.' Indeed, it becomes clear throughout 'Tutti Frutti Lit Crit' that this is in fact a pre-emptive strike at detractors; it is a poem written with one eye on the critic. Not that this is inherently problematic: it is just that Barber's playfulness gets a little bogged down by a defensive quality. Speaking of her 'Lit Crit friend', Barber writes: 'She, the dream critic, boasts of her clusters, harvests, juice' and 'she judges my fruit and says, dry / and salted, tasteless fleshless, lacking pips, / stone or seed, nothing to grow on.'

While poetry need not address broader themes to provide something 'to grow on'—the personal often provides the most moving poetry—Barber's misfired metaphors and cluttered lines demonstrate how poetry can indeed make nothing happen.

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