

***Alight on all things precious* by Sarah Rice (Liquid Amber Press, 2026)
launched by Jen Webb**

It's an honour to launch Sarah's beautiful new book, poems set alongside full-colour artworks produced by a range of artists, including some by Sarah herself. They must be acknowledged and thanked as co-producers, because without them there is no collection of ekphrastic poems.

Poetry books; art catalogues; volumes of art reproductions: these types of books are familiar, but what we don't know quite as well, or see quite as often, are platforms where creative works and creative practitioners are shown in the act of intersecting, overlapping, interacting.

This is visibly at work in Sarah's new collection; bound together in an excellent design and production that makes this book a collector's item.

Its subtitle is "ekphrastic poetry". I struggle a bit with the concept that ekphrasis might be a particular mode of poetry – because what we do as poets is render the things we see and hear and think and feel and remember into poems. Still, there is a specific relationship between visual art and poetry; I'm not sure if it's a familial relationship or a connection because on other sorts of affection, or is a matter of mutual recognition, or conversation; but there's definitely something there, as Gotthold Lessing explains in *Laocoon: an essay on the limits of painting and poetry*.¹

I wouldn't normally raise someone like Lessing as part of the launch of a glorious new creative book. But I am emboldened to do so because I think I see, in the poems, a series of philosophical principles, to the extent that I read this as a three-way conversation: artists, philosophers, and poet.

Sarah writes in the preface:

Word and image ... are caught in each other's cross-beams ... these poems try not so much to make sense of the artworks but to sense them.

And as I read the collection, I find myself caught in their cross-beams; in their conversation with each other; and in sensing the points of connection.

The preface may be deeply immersed in philosophy but it is written in a poetic voice. Here Sarah explains persuasively what the work that resulted in this book aims to deliver: a way of waking up; the crafting of a fresh set of eyes that are able to perceive the tiny as well as the large, the dark as well as the light. It's a refusal of binary thinking. This is, arguably, because the book understands the principles of phenomenology: the philosophical study of what it is to be, in the world. We might tell ourselves that we are intellectual, or spiritual, or empirical; but what we fundamentally are is a community of living bodies, in among other living bodies,

¹ G. E. Lessing 1873 [1766] *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (trans Ellen Frothingham), Roberts Brothers

on a living planet, in a living universe. Sarah's poems reflect this, and fit beautifully into the logic of Willard Spiegelman, articulated in his *How Poets See the World*. It is phenomenological, because the poems articulate and explore the "interdependence of self and world",² an interdependence that is mobile, fluid, but always connected; alighting on all things precious.

The volume is loosely clustered into four parts, and the first, titled Alight, includes artworks and poems that deal with light, and with being alight, and with things alighting; an example is Sarah's poem in conversation with Patsy Hely's *On The Mountain*, a collection of ceramic vessels in the most delicate glaze, and inscribed with images of plant matter, trees, and words about trees. Across eight stanzas the poetic persona is seen walking along a path, up a hill, among trees, across mud, past dams with ducks afloat, all in one sustained sentence (the only period is located at the very end of the poem), so that the reader is caught up in the felt experience of this hill walk.

This image/poem pair is followed by the ekphrastic conversation between Caren Florance and Sarah, which is images of Caren's type, setting out the words of Sarah's poem. Perhaps it's not so much a conversation as an iteration, and together they bring out forcefully the weight, the bite, the solidity of letterpress, set alongside the counterbalance of words and their lightness, their floating.

The second section is titled Appeal; and it feels to me like a group of artworks and poems that are lonely – where the full connectedness of a calm phenomenological experience has been ruptured, disconnected. This is perhaps because I was a bit shaken by the first set of images and poems: the paintings Myuran Sukumaran made in the few days leading up to his judicial murder in Indonesia. The lyric imagery Sarah crafts about him as he awaits his death exemplifies the terrible anguish of paint that, still wet, must outlive the artist who laid it on the canvas: *Drying is a lengthy business / dying far too quick*.

The other poems in this section also deal with appeals of one sort or another, in a sort of poignant, gentle voice, with the recognition that while we might be connected to one another, there is always a gap between the saying and the meaning, between me and thee.

The third section, titled Amiss, opens with a long poem that responds to Lucy Quinn's *My Father's Portrait*; a work that evokes a poetic response about lost fathers, and about failed portraits – or rather, portraits that fail to keep the loved one present. Viv Binns' work, *Lino, Canberra and Tile Formation*, treads similar ground, but here Sarah finds more light: not so much a loss, as reminders of where one had been. Yes, the gap between what a something or someone was, and what it has become might be a matter of missed marks, but it is also a record that something joyful was there.

The poems and artworks in the final section, Attend, are gentle, non-didactic reminders of the fragility of our bodies; of our inevitable death; of our relation to dust. But they are never bleak: rather, if we are, and know we are, living this contingent life, they suggest, this could

² Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p.113

call readers to pay attention; to take in the world, touch and be touched by it. The poem Reach, that responds to Rachel Bowak's sculpture *Bestow*, works on this plane: the fingers that 'no longer reach / to stroke my hand' might be gone, but 'the very air / holds the intention of your touch'.

There is something in all these poems that is both profoundly poignant, and profoundly, joyfully tender. I read this as the capacity to recognise how fleeting are our passions, our capacities, our very lives, and yet how much these things really do matter, if only in the heartbeat in which they occur.

Jen Webb

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Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor Emerita of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Originally from South Africa, she came to Canberra by way of New Zealand, Canada, the UK, the WA outback, and central Queensland. She is a poet and cultural theorist, whose academic works include *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (with Caroline Turner; Manchester UP, 2016); and *Gender and the Creative Labour Market* (with S Brook et al., Palgrave 2022). Her recent poetry collections include *Moving Targets* (2018), *Flight Mode* (with Shé Hawke, 2020), and *The Daily News* (2024; shortlisted for the ACT Poetry Book of the Year 2025). Her scholarly work focuses on the field of creative production, and its relationship to society more broadly; her poetry focuses on material poetics, prose poetry, and questions of seeing.