

Launch speech for *Increments of the Everyday* by Rose Lucas

In alliance and with deep respect for the First Nations people, in particular, the Yalukit-willam people of the Boon-wurrung Country who are the true keepers and teachers of this land upon which we are gathered today, as well as to all First Nations people and descendants who may be in attendance, I acknowledge that this is unceded land.

I am honoured to be standing before you, holding *Increments of the Everyday*, the much anticipated fourth, full-length poetry collection by Rose Lucas. Indeed, this collection is ‘incremental’, in that it is the addition, the gain and the rise of what Rose has produced before. No easy quest, as before this collection, her poetry books assured us of her place in the literary canon. Her debut collection, *Even in the Dark* (UWAP, 2013) with its eloquent word patterns, its ease with the small wonders and how they open us to commonality, deservedly won the 2014 Mary Gilmore Award for Poetry. Her second book, *Unexpected Clearing* (UWAP, 2016) received exceptional reviews in a number of established literary journals, including *TEXT* Vol 20 No 2 October 2016, where Dominique Hecq arguably evoked resonance with *Increments of the Everyday* by stating:

Often, Lucas builds up her poems incrementally, using brief, subtle sequences which let the images bear the emotional weight lightened up by more subtle visual details or attention to sounds.

Here, the word ‘increment’ addresses three aspects of Rose’s poetry making. Firstly, the assured climb from book to book, secondly, the incremental value within the pages of the book itself – how Rose takes us on a journey from first page to last in all of her books, one that increases our understanding of what it means to observe. And thirdly, each poem itself a mountain made from sturdy steps, generously providing gratifying lookouts along the way with the final panorama, breathtaking. I’ll prove this third point when I delve into some of the poems from *Increments of the Everyday*, but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention Rose’s third collection *This Shuttered Eye* (first publisher, *Girls on Key Poetry*, 2020, second publisher, *Liquid Amber Press*, 2021). This third book firmly established Rose as an accomplished ekphrastic poet. I have a close relationship with *This Shuttered Eye* as it supported me to deliver an immersive ekphrastic poetry workshop.

The workshop was in a gallery brimming with art, which overwhelmed some of the participants. Rose’s poem *Family Portrait* depicts a family painted by Flemish Baroque artist, Anthony van Dyck, c.1619. This poem not only conjures the family replete with aristocratic signifiers such as ‘lace ruffs’, it sets about applying the poetic brushstrokes required to fully know ‘the slipperiness of this moment’ between artist and sitter. I asked each participant of the workshop to close their eyes as I read out *Family Portrait*. One of the participants not only saw the family but could hear ‘the bonneted child / dandled on his mother’s knee’.

Rose continues to evoke scenes with additional senses suddenly awakened, such as hearing perhaps smelling, even tasting. Her first poem in *Increments of the Everyday* is one which has this ability. I invite you to close your eyes as I read it.

Midnight Garden
Early Autumn in Melbourne isolation, 2020

A fruit bat flies disconcertingly
close to the back balcony, a clack of leathery wings angling

through dense air and into our night garden – to the lure of
feijoa, tamarillo, and figs

still warm from the unseasonable heat of the day and ready
to extrude their jewelled viscera into the patience of humid shadow

ripe skins slowly splitting and
open to moonlight –

moving among the broad leaves
dark faces turn and gorge and squabble

invisible to me marooned
in my adjacent eyrie where midnight

wakefulness ripples these breathy
currents of other worlds

The first time I read this poem, the fruit bat flew into view feasting on sweet sticky sappy fruit as I salivated. The final lines magnify our collective alertness during that stretched period when we, as a species, considered our imminent extinction. This poem begins the first section of Rose's book, which is aptly titled *Hiatus Diary*. Here, the poems are not only a creative documentation of that period of lockdowns, isolation and vulnerability, they achieve a meditative wisdom. A longed for anchoring of society's anxiety, as Rose's way with pause and breath, word and image, awakens us to the haloed significance of our regular, local and immediate surrounds. In *Further*, she points to 'the quiet comfort of walls', an 'angle of stair', 'a frosted pane', the familiar 'shift /and hold and shift' of our homes, providing a reminder of how we came to know these structures with some reverence:

The sanctity of this marked out space
this collective turning inwards

Reaching within the well of self-knowledge continues throughout the book with its measured, astute and satisfying division into five moods or atmospheres. From *Hiatus Diary* we are

taken to *Impossible*, this section is comprised of poems speaking the truth of grief. Each poem an elegy engaged with loss as a continuum. These poems lament and enlighten. In the remarkable seven-part poem which is a *grief cycle* in memory of a young woman's passing, there is the sense of impermanence, how death is not a leaving:

we carry you in weft and weave of day and
air touch and dream

a child a gift a darkness at the edge of light –

This poem signifies the transcendent quality of Rose's work. Not every book of poetry has this double impact, where we are enthralled with the poetic artistry and gifted with a way to engage with existence. The book begins with an epigraph by Thich Nhat Hanh, which heralds a poetic affinity with his influential and invaluable teachings connected to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, with his own poetry of compassion and transformation, and with his attention to the micro moments. Similarly, in the third section, *Woman, Watching*, there's a focus on the 'small' interactions to enlarge the reader's view. In *Home Late* we sense the grand presence of trees as we walk past them in growing night:

they are noncommittal as darkness
surrounds them filling
up the resined air with the complexity
of shadow
...
 the determination of
roots in soil the arms that sway like
prayers

the singing as we pass

In this poem, trees are named, held and addressed with spirit and psyche in unison.

Art is another sphere where Rose brings her lyrical simpatico with depth and devotion. The fourth section, *Palette*, establishes her ekphrastic skills. Here she incorporates a way of inhabiting the process of making and living for art. She also provides an immersive narrative with *Vault*, which is a heart-breaking rendition of Gertrud Kauders story. Kauders, a Czech artist and Jew, 'managed to conceal 700 of her artworks inside the walls of her friend's house in Prague' just before she was murdered by the Nazis in 1942. These art works were discovered quite recently, in 2018. The opening line to *Vault* in and of itself strikes at the core of Kauder's anguish:

I leave my heart inside these walls where lathes are being nailed

Complimenting not only the *Palette* section but the entire collection is the arresting art by visual artist, Sharon Monagle – we have people positioned in response to each other, family,

neighbourhood, community, with their differences and variations, some with head to the ground equally as important as those with head to the sky, the colours a delicious mix of contrast and comparison, the elements bravely stepping off page, exciting the reader to what dwells within.

The fifth and final section carries the title of the book, dealing with the incremental steps towards healing, containing a six-part sequence distilling the accident that led to hospitalisation and finally recovery. We come full circle with the gravitas of illness being yet another way to live:

in the intensified hiatus of this time –
neither lost into the abyss nor yet returned
to a life where we are blinkered to
the existence of this precipice the sheer uncertainty
of our footing –

I am travelling every step of this torch-lit path
attuned attenuated

I am learning to walk
in a way I have not walked before

This is penetrating yet humble poetry. Poems that fall off the tongue as gratifying as water. Some written in ways that remind me of curved, cascading terraced hillsides. Taking me to places of serenity by honouring our daily encounters found within ceilings and walls, fences and yards, streets and parks, skin and bone. A collection that can be read again and again, kept close at hand, and recited in parts as psalms to help us continue. There is so much more to be said about Rose's *Increments of the Everyday*, but for now let's rejoice with the knowledge that it's officially launched and will soon be an exceptional addition to our bookshelves.

Angela Costi