

Launch speech for *Invisible Wasp* by Stephanie Powell

By Emilie Collyer

Being, as I am, a theatre person as well as a poet person, I will begin today with the epigraph at the start of Stephanie Powell's book *Invisible Wasp* which is a short quote from the character Nina in Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull*. Nina says:

'I'm a seagull – no that's not it, I'm an actress ... when I think of my vocation, I'm not afraid of life.'

Oh Nina. I have a great fondness for Chekhov (as a side note, some of my plays have been called Chekhovian for the way they explore frissons and tragi-comicness of everyday life), and I particularly love this play and Nina's passionate, naïve, insecure, honest searching for who she is.

I love that Steph selected this quote for her book. A quote from a play, by a character, a quote that is both a philosophical inquiry and a love letter to and about art.

The quote, and Steph's mercurial, clever book are both alert to a shifting and never settled balance between artifice and deeply felt experience. I think the word artifice can get a bad rap – as something 'fake'. But I use the word in its essential sense, from the Latin root words **ars** - art and **facere** - to make. To make art. The doing. The act. The work of it.

We want art to be constructed, to be about how things are formed. Artifice allows for the gap between our lived, often reactive, and certainly mostly uncontrollable lives and how we might make sense of these lives, find patterns, perhaps a little meaning now and then, and not be subsumed.

Chekhov, Nina, Steph and *Invisible Wasp* are also in the business of role playing, of words trying on things for size, and of a practice of layering and unlayering. What happens if I build this small construction around this unsettling affective moment? What happens if I take part of that construction away and let the air in?

Reading *Invisible Wasp* brought to mind for me another of my very favourite poets and books *The Bee Hut* by Dorothy Porter. In both books the titular buzzing insects speak of something that can't quite be named or even properly seen but is there, thrumming, under our efforts to connect with others and to reveal, to ourselves, who we might be. Many years ago we had bees living in our back wall and a bee man came and gently removed the hive. We watched, fascinated as the tiny creatures, crawling and endlessly in motion, were taken away. Last year there was a wasp in my bedroom, buzzing and banging against a window. I left it well alone and eventually it died. Its perfect wasp body still sits on my small chest of drawers, a tiny black and gold sculpture.

I first encountered Steph's poetry when she won the Melbourne Poets Union International Poetry Prize in 2022. The poem was 'Bellarine Peninsula' and it is this amazing, dream-like poem that evokes a sense of movement through place both past and present – in that way only poetry can do. It is in Steph's book *Gentle Creatures* the first full-length book by her I read (though I am aware she has one more titled *Bone*).

In reading that poem and *Gentle Creatures* I was aware immediately of Steph's ability to use language to both connect and disconnect, to make life deeply familiar and to make it utterly strange. I loved *Gentle Creatures* for its blend of poetic style and narrative, anecdotal quality. The poems were range-y and felt like intimacies being shared but from a distance.

Invisible Wasp is an apt inheritor and feels and reads like Steph is drawing language further through a funnel, any excess is shaved and gently falls away like pencil sharpenings. The poems still have that intimate and remote feel but they are, for the most part, shorter, more distilled, in some ways less conversational. A collection by a poet who has a different sense of time, of body in the world, one perhaps under a little more pressure.

In *Invisible Wasp* I am in the company of a poet truly working the paradox that poet Susan Howe (in her book *Midnight*) asserts that 'at the heart of language lies what language can't express' (70).

This delightful and perplexing conundrum of why those of us who write poetry write it and why, too, we read it. To approach but never quite reach the ineffable. To be near it and therefore to have our 'nearness' as mortal beings, to ourselves, to the past, to each other, to our futures and what will come long after us, to have this 'nearness' affirmed.

I wrote in my blurb for this book that it is like 'spending time with your cool friend who helps you navigate life's strangeness'. The poems in *Invisible Wasp* that recall youthful friendships are erotic, joyful and unsettling. In 'Paris, Christmas 2016' the speaker writes of being delivered 'a thousand small kicks' to the 'harbour' of her knee by her sleeping friend. A harbour is safe. Here it is, being 'slapped' by an intimate other. They are living here, temporarily, in Paris in 'the debris of our twenties', 'all glittering / trash, all anchorless as we are' (22). The poem ends in a liminal state, both patient and slightly eye-rolling:

'On Boxing Day, she is depressed
and sits alone in the kitchen.

In bed I listen:

 amidst the crying
 nails on plastic
the flow of urine louder than tears.

Now we are laughing
 or dying, whatever' (23)

The ease with which Steph moves between affect, objects, place, voice and how she uses the shape and sound of words to do so is remarkable. The soft, feminine sibilance of depressed, listen, amidst. The sharper clatter of kitchen, nails and plastic and that final word drifting with open vowel sounds and cut through with a crisp consonant: whatever.

'Hold my hand' and 'We are young and delicious' steep the reader in deeper memory time, of being young and trying to figure out the potency and eros of bodies, between genders, between young girls and older men, those eager and potentially dangerous explorations.

I am particularly taken by the poem 'In class' which is shaped on the page like the triangle in its opening line, and I'm going to read this one in full:

'I left my legs open, cotton triangle visible and boys died
many deaths in the name of puberty hormones sparking
fires that would've gutted the science block
if Mr Dickson hadn't slammed down the
textbook and told them to keep *it* in check
and if Pamela hadn't whispered, like a
good friend, *close your thighs, everyone*
can see.... now they're clenched
so tight I can't
let go' (29)

Again how Steph takes the invisible wasp of friendship between girls and lets it buzz, that 'good friend' keeping her in check and its ramifications. The brutal shock of being seen, being judged, the lifelong 'tight clenching' women are taught to do, schooled by each other at such a young age.

The pleasures, pains, desires, excesses and vagaries of the body are woven deeply through this collection. Writing as an act from and through body. The body as something to live with, contend with. Some poems evoke a deep familiarity: the flippant, urgent yearnings of teenage girl and young womanhood, the vivid sweatiness of childhood. Others are unfamiliar but lead me to different knowledges, such as that of pregnant, childbearing, birthing bodies.

In 'Fertility investigation, ultrasound 1' there is brutality in form and language. The poem is placed on the page in terse tercets, each short line declarative with capitalisation:

'Brackish womb
Misfiring, the report notes
Age: 35 with

Heavy metals
In bloodstream
Poisoned waters

CHILDLess behaves differently
Next to *by choice*
Or *without choice*' (28)

The collection flows back and forth through time, memory and place. It is not a literal chronology and yet something in its sense of body, particularly the birthing body, does build throughout and the final section 'Flate' carries the reader through a series of visceral, sharp and startling pregnancy poems. These poems brim with biological imagery, with fish and figs, peaches, mouths and tongues. Steph uses words to burrow inside the reader's body and toss us all about as here in 'Pregnant, eating oranges, tastes like a family holiday' where a caring American cradles pressure points on the speaker's wrists:

'like a mother
splashed them with water

still wearing my vomit' (71)

and the poem's speaker

'held an orange wedge
between my teeth like a
mouth guard
juice broiling
my lacerated throat' (71)

The final poem in the collection, 'Notes from Greenland' delivers the most extraordinary landscape of a pregnant body:

'A crater had opened in the middle of my back, sparse towns and villages resisting shoals of black pebble

and gravel, up along the spine, the coast, the sea spitting from endless channels, lungs blowing air the shape of chandeliers' (75)

Here, Steph's poetry is that which Matthew Longenbach exhorts the poem must do which is to be 'An event that happens on the page rather than a recounting of an event that happened prior to the page' Longenbach (113).

Which brings us back to artifice, in its essential essence. These poems are crafted with precision. They are events of language and form in themselves, not simply recollections or anecdotes. Steph invites us to be actively involved. We make the poems too, we enter the fray. The poems reconnect us to life, that of others and our own, in new ways.

These poems and this collection are deeply human but they are also strange and at times alienating. There is a strong sense in the book of how alien it is to be a human, to be trying to be with other humans. In the poem 'Invisible moths' from which the title of the book is taken, the speaker writes about the minutely violent act of 'Invisible wasps / stitching eggs into moths, devouring / larvae when born. Until the moths / died out and the wasps starved' (62) and the peculiar and particular intimacy of a marriage, the daily humdrum reality of laundry thrumming with this invisible something, this unease: 'I fold, you refold, we repeat / surrounded by unseen insects / eating themselves to oblivion' (62).

In 'Marinara', another poem about the exquisite agony of domesticity, the trappedness and the routineness, I find great comfort. That my own malcontent and unease and sudden pricks of annoyance and also weird pleasures – are okay too. Like many of my favourite poetry collections, *Invisible Wasp* is a self-help book for those of us who maybe think we are too smart for self-help books. But of course we all need help. I'll finish by reading this one stanza from 'Marinara' in which the speaker is stuck inside on a rainy day, making pasta, partner coughing in the next room:

'Up there
a crustacean smile of sky
 glimpses of pure lobster
curdling, meaner
than anything' (18)

These five lines are doing so much. The red of a crustacean sky – which is normally, in literature, blue or grey. The glimpse of ‘pure lobster’ – the word sounds like monster and yet lobster is also a luxury food, far away from this frustrated domestic day. It’s mean too, almost mocking what we, inside, down here, can’t have. And yet it is the doing, the making of pasta sauce, the repetition in the poem of the rain, not being able to walk the dog, go to the shops, how our ordinary Sisyphean human tasks, our marinara mix, are both rare and utterly common.

There is so much more to this book than I have time to talk about here. There are pops of geography and history, a kind of eco-poetics as part of everyday life, of what is always underneath and around us, in our wake and tapping at us to notice. The collection documents contemporary concerns with climate, environment and legacy but in subtle ways, peppered throughout.

I really love this book and know it will find so many readers and provide them with the same familiar, strange, surprising and unsettling self-help quality that I have. Jane Hirshfield suggests that the task of poetry to not only be concerned with ‘accounts of leaders and gods’ (191) but also its capacity to ‘carry the passions of daily life’. To return to Nina and her declamation about life as an artist which is that ‘the main thing is not fame or applause it’s that you keep going’.

We are so glad that Stephanie Powell has kept going and hope she will continue to do so! With *Invisible Wasp* Steph exalts these daily life passions, accompanying us as readers, as the final words of the book utter: ‘like a blind explorer’ (75).

Congratulations to Steph and to Liquid Amber on this wonderful book which I now declare officially launched!

Works cited

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