

***Remarkable as Breathing: Poems by Rose Lucas*, published by Liquid Amber Press 2024, launch speech by Jennifer Harrison, delivered 15.6.2024 as part of Williamstown Literary Festival at Williamstown Library**

These elegant poems, or portals into seeing, 'sink into what is already deep' ('Logan's Beach in winter'): the ocean, stillness, love, the mind, gratitude. Rose Lucas brings unapologetic beauty to the unfolding spirit of breathing and being. What a delight to walk this path with her, seeing what the poet sees and, indeed, feeling that each poem is a path that you have never walked before.

These endorsement words, written for the back cover of *Remarkable as Breathing*, came out of several deep readings of the manuscript, and it's a privilege to launch the collection itself to well-wishers, poetry aficionados and those who might be new to Lucas's succinct, joyous and thoughtful poetry.

Lucas has published four poetry books and is the founding editor of Liquid Amber Press, which produces both individual collections and anthologies, including last year's marvellous *Poetry of Home*. Lucas embraces Buddhist practice, about which I know little, but from the book's biography she is a member of both the Compassionate Ocean (an online mindfulness community) and the Abundant Earth sanghas, communities in the Plum Village Zen tradition, which follows the teachings of the peace activist, Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, and works to promote peace, social justice and environmental sustainability.

These values are important to understand the themes of *Remarkable as Breathing*: contemplative practice, the ways in which a poem pays close attention to love, the landscape, the loss of parents, growing older – what we learn from a deep listening to the world. A second important theme is the question of how the process of deep listening to the multifaceted, interconnected and multi-factual world begins with breath – with breath space, inhalation, exhalation, breath time, the present participle of breathing.

The practice of mindfulness can be seen in the most remarkable poem about zoom that I have ever read, particularly since COVID as we have become more jaded by the alienating characteristics of zoom (which incidentally unlike many of my colleagues I value greatly). The poem titled 'Zen Monastic Teaches on Zoom', from the book's section 'On Air and Breath', celebrates

this cleared space you have made
with the intimate gift of your face its kindness
 presence distilled
in a screen you find your way
into our rooms into our heart and

in return we bring our own faces

illuminated with attention the openness
of palms fingers ready to
listen

One of the great gifts of these poems is Lucas' expertise in making the familiar (such as a zoom meeting, a walk on the beach, seeing whales, a father's belongings, an exploration of 'the mind's cabinet' with a therapist) take on new clarity, a more generous one. This is an important frame within which to read the poems, which are so tender, so accepting of one's presence in the temporary world, so consenting to become untethered by one's being, one's perspective. The poems are arranged into four sections: 'Cusp', 'Of Air and Breath', 'The World is Full of Listening' and 'Deep Well of Rest', and the sections form a journey of sorts - from beginning to perceive the directions of love as interconnected, to becoming one with loss's beauty and the inexorable passing of physical embodiments of people, animals, things.

The formal innovation of these poems is striking. The spacing of words, the absence of punctuation, the way the poems traverse the page seemingly randomly or following, at other times, a pattern of traditional lineation and versification, resemble different rhythms of breathing. We find tercet verses, for example in the poem 'there is a certain place' from the final section 'Deep Well of Rest' (one of my many favourites), which begins

There is a certain place along this road
of wind and leaves and direction
I know I'll come to it where grit crunches

underfoot and ruts are scored by rain
and the breath of the world enters a body
like the words of a blessing

The poet does find that surprising place of sublime transcendence. And then in a poem written in couplets from the same section called 'Ways to Rest' the poet muses, forgivingly, 'Lay down the day's tools knowing / that whatever it was possible to do //was done'. In an earlier poem in the collection from the first section, the poet recounts a trip to Ballarat as a young girl which is set out in the precise, balladic stitchery of quatrains.

I was particularly interested to see where Lucas breaks her lines because spacing without punctuation or with sparse punctuation is a form I have also been experimenting with in a new collection, *Finials*. I say this because I don't want Rose to think I am copying her – but it is interesting to consider why we are both grappling with what non-traditional approaches can offer; with investigating what lineage, space and caesura reveal about poetry and its possibilities.

In *Remarkable as Breathing*, Lucas breaks the line in all the places that we are taught we shouldn't: after conjunctions, adverbs, participles, hanging adjectives. She is following her own breath, her own rhythms, her instincts, and the 'remarkable' result is a poetry that allows the abstractions that poetry often addresses (compassion, love, faith) to become vivid, essential, integrated. Lucas is an expert practitioner of poem endings, again and again taking us on a surprising journey yet bringing us, somehow, home – always home. A good example of this can be found in a masterful poem on the theme of death 'To touch the earth' from the book's third section, 'The World is Full of Listening'. This poem begins with finding a dead kangaroo carcass caught in a wire fence and ends

with ant maggot raven fox
we are moving together in this expanse where
we have always wandered

have always been falling
into the cushioned arms of earth
so wide and dark and welcoming

they will gently unclothe us
unpicking the moment's hubris with
love's quiet tenacity remaking us

Lucas's deep respect for the planet, its creatures, landscapes and oceans, is another theme that whistles through the book; thrums like a steady inhalation, exhalation in poems such as 'Where I have walked' with its '... repeated pathways of the familiar and // the wondrous world that still unfolds ...' and the poem 'Walking Meditation, New Year's Day' from the first section, 'Cusp',

then over the waves of

sweet vernal burnt to gold
while shafts of bright light
not yet so brassy break
through a sway of greens and greys
its fiery fingers on my skin anointing me
at this cusp of one thing and another

There is an elegiac quality to these poems. The death or memory of a parent is the subject of several poems. What did those relationships mean? How do we come to terms with the insularity of a previous generation's moral imperatives and choices? I particularly responded to the poem describing the burial of a beloved pet ('the day after we buried you'), and to the poem dedicated to Lucas's father 'In Darwin, 2022', which ends with the couplet 'you were not yet my father /

you are always my father'. In the poem that immediately follows, 'You came back', Lucas describes a parent struggling to let go of her independent child

and how she stood
on the footpath outside the share house trying not
to touch me or hold me only asking
me to come home but I went anyway my face
turned resolutely in a different direction

My share house was in Bondi, Sydney. I was eighteen. This was my mother, too.

In these poems boundaries have dissipated and there is no edge between autobiography and the myriad experiences of a world outside of self. These poems embody mindfulness, not only in the way I think about it as a psychiatrist, in terms of meditation as a way of seeking to live in the moment of less worry, but also the way spirituality places us in relationship to others and nature. As such, it is difficult to pick out particular poems to quote. The collection seems, to me, to be one poem, a continuous joyful and generous exaltation, which in a deep sense resonates for me with the poetry of the mystic, 13th century Rumi, or that of the Indian poetess Mirabai from the 16th century, and other poets of hard-won praise and uncompromising autonomy. I say I shouldn't pick out particular poems, but I love, love the poem on 'love' titled 'I want to say', a prose poem in boxy form, yet retaining still those wonderful Lucas spacings, and which begins

that love is a cool compress of quiet attention
that comes a gift in the midst of flush the
fevered stories that we tell ourselves the ones
that sap our bones it comes to rest just where
discomfort settles say where damp hair lies
against a forehead love it's like your mother's
hand the one who stands with you in the onslaught
of whatever torments you

and ends

with time to gather the things that
are precious to let them go the falling of water
the attention of love such a small kindness
asking for nothing changing everything

If I can leave you with one suggestion, it is to savour both the seemingly simple poems in the collection as well as those with more complex philosophies. Treasures are to be found as much in the small noticings (the idiosyncratic use of a verb, turn of line, or phrase) as in the large-hearted poems that reference autobiography, Buddhism or the search for meaning of the

self, which in opening, becomes an inventive context from which to view the swirling world. The result is magical. The gorgeous little shadow detail, designed to wrap the outer corner at the bottom of each page, is another continuity that seems to make the pages of the collection fly. Congratulations to Liquid Amber Press and to Rose Lucas. I am both delighted and privileged to declare this beautiful book launched.

By Jennifer Harrison

Jennifer Harrison has written eight books of poetry, most recently *Anywhy* (Black Pepper 2018). She is Chair of the World Psychiatry Association's Section for Art and Psychiatry and received the 2012 Christopher Brennan Award for sustained contribution to Australian poetry. Recent work has appeared in *Australian Book Review* 2022, *Best of Australian Poems* 2022, *Australian Poetry Journal* 2023, *Rabbit* 2022, *The Hyacinth Review* 2023 (France), *Unusual Work* 2023 and *The Fourth River* 2023 (USA).