

# Launch of Nathan Curnow's *A Hill to Die On* (Liquid Amber Press, 2024) by Nick Lanyon

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Manning Clark famously said that there are 2 types of political leaders in Australia – the “punishers and straighteners” and the “enlargers of life”.

Now, Nathan may not be a political leader, but he is definitely in the camp with the “enlargers”. Yet how can a poet hope to be an enlarger of life when he and (some of) us seem to be at a point in our lives when we are not expanding, but rather are on the way down the slope, funnelling down into the narrow way?

I think that with this collection of poetry, Nathan leads us all to the top of our respective personal mountains and is asking us to survey the downward slope that exists on the other side of the peak of our lives. This place, a place suggestive of narrowing decline, perhaps counter-intuitively, may be a kind of Canaan - a Land of late-onset Milk and Honey.

I don't think that the collection's argument can be fully understood without grasping the handful of Nathan's poems on the Bronze Age societies of Canaan. These poems occupy the prized place in the collection, enclosed by contemporary meditations on either side of this suite. And they throb at the very centre like an ancient, poetic heartbeat.

The Bible is full of Canaanite mountains and hilltops, but there is a particular hill perched on the edge of Canaan I want to refer to and I suspect that being the renegade son of a Methodist preacher, and now Hilltop Hood, Nathan knows exactly the hilltop I'm about to refer to. And as far as I can tell it's not specifically mentioned, but while reading the poems I felt its shadow fall across the whole collection. It's the Hill that Moses climbed up to die on.

Deuteronomy Chapter 34 tell us:

*Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land—from Gilead...as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.”*

*And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.*

Even at the age of 120, Moses climbs to the top of Mount Pisgah, still with petrol in the tank, and knowing in advance that this is the hill that he will die on – because God has already told him back in Chapter 32, making Yahweh the original, Almighty Plot spoiler. God is also the original Straightener and Punisher, because Moses is being penalised for prior sins. In other words, this is Old Testament, Old Skool Yahweh. He is a tough old bastard and Yahweh is not afraid to tantalise his favourite servant, giving him a glimpse of the Promised Land that is down the bottom of the hill. But even though Moses has brought the Israelites to Canaan, he isn't allowed to get there himself. 'Moses,' says the Celestial soup Nazi...'No Canaan for you'!

Now Nathan and Yahweh have, let's say, some history between them. In the end notes to the poems, Nathan says, 'I was raised in the truths and promises revealed in scripture, but...I no longer subscribe to the teachings that defined my childhood.' But as they say, you can take the boy out of the religion, but you can't always take the religion out of the boy. Perhaps more accurately in the case of Nathan's poetry, it's more that you can't quite take the thirst for the numinous out of the boy. Because one thing that Nathan's poems have always done, and this collection bears it out so powerfully, is that Nathan's poetic antennae quiver in the presence of numinosity in the everyday-ness of our lives. Nathan and I have spoken quite a few times of the shared God-haunted legacy that religious belief has left in our no longer religiously inflected lives. And in poems like 'Wet Parable' and 'Swimming (my lane)' we see that legacy here still – it is incorrigible, inextinguishable in Nathan's poetry – because religious belief has been dismantled, but *belief* hasn't.

In 'Swimming (my lane),' we see one of the speaker's core beliefs. There is a bug in the swimmer's lane, flailing around in the water of a pool, 'drowning fast.' The speaker says:

So I scoop the bug in the pool of my palms.  
I don't think of Anne Sexton right away.  
It's later I recall her posthumous title,  
*The Awful Rowing Toward God*. Over again,  
keeping the beat upon waves of my own  
making, wrestling at daybreak above  
peels of light that shed with every stroke  
I'm attempting. Holding the course, rowing  
the surface, working these bags of breath.  
I scooped the bug just to cup my hands  
as in the days when I had faith to receive.

There is the sweet, aching memory of faith in the action of cupping his hands. And even the choice of 'posthumous,' which seems merely descriptive, carries more weight than first glance. Religion is certainly one way of giving us a Get-Out-Of-Jail Free card via the afterlife, but once we have chosen to throw away that religious life buoy, all we have is life - shorn of afterlife. There is no life, post life, and this is why, like the swimmer, we must do everything in our power to save anything and everything that is in danger of sliding into the never-coming-backness of the posthumous – even a small bug in our lane.

Saving lives is an idea that courses through the collection like a surf riptide that comes to our rescue. And why are we not surprised? How often do you get the chance to say that someone is, quite literally, a lifesaver? Well, Nathan is - twice. Once as a YMCA lifeguard, and now an Ambulance man. Like his Preacher father who saved souls, saving lives is this poet's daytime gig.

In 'Swimming (my lane),' we heard about 'rowing the surface' but in the poem 'The Lifeguard,' Nathan once again shows us how deft he is at finding the existential question within the most quotidian of sources. The wash tank at the pool becomes a holding tank where we allow our deeper questions to settle down the bottom.

as the lappers lug up and back, their wake riding over

the lane ropes, spilling into the wet deck grates,  
where all that excess energy runs, returning

to the balance tank, a dark reservoir beneath us  
rumbling through my toes and feet. I like to stand

on the lid as the swimmers dive in unaware  
of that churning well, their force seeping back

to another pool, unseen, unheard, only felt.

At poem's end, the speaker reflects:

So I'm on the lid, scanning a pool coursing  
with our goals and grief, with the hopes and crimes

that move us, a charging haul that whips  
an unlit tail in the chamber, repaying our volume

in secret. Neighbour, there's another world.  
Stand here, wait a moment. But they exit, flushed

and panting, from all they've spent on loan,  
passing by me guarding this life, and after

I ask them *How did you go?*

This lifeguard is trying to save more than the flesh. '*How did you go?*'

The swimmer saved the bug and in a really big pool called The Sea of Galilee, Jesus saved Peter from drowning. It is one of the reasons these two poems sit side by side. The poem 'Wet Parable' begins with this hook:

We know Jesus wasn't  
a fan of swimming. He walked  
on the water instead. No pin drop plunge,  
no giant bomb

(And note - You can take the poet out of the YMCA, but you can't take the PTSD about the incessant policing of adolescent OH+S flouting bombs out of the poet...)

The poem concludes:

I won't resist in the pouring  
course of each elegant towering wave,  
drenched in a tank of testimony beyond  
a statement of belief. Jesus took Peter  
back to the boat, asking Why did you doubt?

Any poet willing to submerge themselves in the holding tank of full honesty with themselves knows that the membrane between belief and doubt is thin and porous. In conventional evangelical Christianity, doubt is something much to be feared. It is viewed as some sort of

gateway drug to loss of belief and from there, a quick half step to hell and damnation. But for a collection that asserts the need for belief, it also suggests that doubt is a life saver. Like belief, doubt is something that we must hold on to, like a life buoy. And even though doubt looks different going up the hill to the doubt that comes with us on the way down, it goes with us all the way to the end.

The doubts that the collection encompasses are manifold. Am I a Good Dad? Am I a Good enough Dad? Will my family be enough to see me down the other side of the slope? How important are simple pleasures, like opening a jar of Hollandaise sauce, in sustaining me over the remaining years? Saving lives...is it worth the effort? Can I save my own?

Is poetry enough? Is poetry...enough?

In the poem sequence 'Canaan,' the speaker wonders

Who was the Canaanite miner that invented the alphabet, carving characters into the dark mine walls, linking sound with symbol? A, B, C, D...

Poetry has been with humanity for millennia. Poetry is inadequate, full of limitations, doubts, evasions and aversions, but there is no longer anything or anyone who can save us, eternally. Poetry might have to be just enough to accompany us to the end.

Thus, Poetry is the compulsion. You can hear it here in 'Swimming (my lane)' as the black lines painted on swimming lanes become line after line after line after line. And once again, it is all in the timing of the turn of the line, like so many sweetly executed barrel rolls at the end of the lane.

My times are slipping but I still have reasons  
for getting wet every day, hauling myself  
up that long, black line, the monologue  
I have to follow. The print keeps me straight,  
a fat stemmed gift I steer to a sudden T.  
I've seen so many—junctions, crossroads—  
relapsing every fifty metres. All I do  
is cry out, kick off, go back like moving forward,  
up and down that stem

As I round this out, I want to move back to the beginning of the collection, which starts, quite deliciously, with the poem titled, 'Giving up':

Giving up is such a long, slow slide,  
something Icarus knew nothing about,  
he fell so fast there was barely time  
to lose faith in youth or flight.

Looking at the age of the people in the room, I suspect we can hear the groaning, moaning weight of those long vowel sounds in 'Giving up is such a long, slow slide.'

What would we give to relive the exhilarating youthful flight in the monosyllabic breakneck speed of 'he fell so fast.'

But it's a moot question, because of course we've been falling from the very beginning. The question is now one of recognition. The speaker asks in 'Back Back Corner':

Teach me  
to wither well. How much can I learn  
before I fall?

This collection represents the poet's current answer to that question, a question that burns through all his prior work and a question I think he has been wrestling with since his began to turn Canaanite A, B, C and D's into poetry.

Like a reverse progressive dinner from our shared God-haunted pasts, I'll finish with the beginning and this most beautiful of leave takings. It is from the 'The Leaving Poem,' and although its placement on the dedication page to Kerryn means she kind of owns it, when I read it aloud, the soft, faint, falling dactyls in the final lines reverberated in my chest with a hush, transmitting themselves from Nathan, to Kerryn and out to all of us. And in trying to save us all and give us a glimpse of his own personal Canaan, I hope that our reaction is a gift we can give back to the poet as he makes his own way down the slope we all must take.

...I promise, we'll be there soon  
they grew into their names long ago  
the failing is done and the stars are out  
our last gift is the gift of going