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Review: Maria Zajkowski's 'The Ascendant' and Krissy Kneen's 'Eating My Grandmother: a grief cycle'

Maria Zajkowski, *The Ascendant*, Puncher & Wattman, 2015. 59 pgs.
Krissy Kneen, *Eating My Grandmother: a grief cycle*, UQP, 2015. 92
pgs.

MAGS WEBSTER

'Poems are human realities...they must be lived in their poetic immensity,'
comments Gaston Bachelard, and the poems in these two new collections both
demand, and earn, that commitment and attention.

scendant



If it's true, as T.S. Eliot once suggested, that poems should communicate before they are understood, then New Zealand-born, Melbourne-based Maria Zajkowski's *The Ascendant* is recommended for anyone unafraid to enter the imaginative intensity of poetry and linger in its mystery—and mysticism—before demanding its meaning.

'I am repeating the unsayable' writes Zajkowski. These are runes for pilgrims of the *via negativa*, negotiating a realm of knowing through unknowing, seeing through unseeing, of taxonomies defined more fruitfully in terms of what things are *not* than of what they are.

Zajkowski was twice winner of the prestigious Josephine Ulrick Prize with suites from this collection. Unspooling like a secular book of hours, the 52

poems read as one long, meditative seduction, 'a marathon of absence'. Yet this is an absence so full of the delights and surprises of Zajkowski's diction and syntax that one does not fret for a map to navigate the landscapes of mind and soul it suggests. These are forays into night, trees, arrows, snow, birds of prey, big cats, rain, mountains, stone, silence, stars, angels; into worlds slippery with time and space, bearing 'the mark of infinity' as Bachelard would say, where:

for a thousand years
we kept a prophet for breakfast

spooning through the have-nots
to make reason for ourselves

Zajkowski's approach to punctuation and capitals is idiosyncratic—most of the poems use neither—and she deploys the art of the fragment to great effect. This disjunctive style results in fresh and unexpected turns at almost every line, for example, from 'The four things I learned from you and how I got about it':

yes further to truth is what happens
I hate you I hate you
says someone in love
through the mouth of a bird

Zajkowski is fearless with poem titles. Many are one-line lyrics in their own right—'How many cats are you', 'We are all critics of bread', and 'Many worlds are silently confused'—that do not squander their poems' secrets up front, but hint at the aphoristic nature of the content.

She is skilful with wordplay—'accrued' morphs into 'accurate' in 'Fifteen griefs'—and soundplay: the 'hearse' of one poem resurfaces in another as 'horse' then again as 'house.' Language loops back onto itself: in 'How many cats are you' the speaker observes:

there is nothing but nothing,
even desire causes no pain
uneven desire is beautiful

then wryly concludes:

... here is nothing
but nothing but.

Using a vocabulary of mismatch, 'spiders / ready to bloom', Zajkowski's technique brings to mind the practice of *kintsugi*, where breakage and repair only increases the aesthetic appeal of an object, the imperfection making it more perfect. In 'Signs of life' the speaker muses:

a rose is a door
a rose is sun death
the evening of dead roses
a tiger swims in

These poems accrete to tell an epic if enigmatic story, as allusive *and* elusive as the absent ascendant, referred to only once, which leaves 'a face in the dark'. Though the language initially dazzles and intrigues this is no sugar-hit book, but one that rewards repeated reading. 'Your Zen is the new me' writes Zajkowski, issuing a lyrical and persuasive invitation into 'the last known unknown / we can be certain of'.

'I pick a grain of her, stolen from the urn / place it on my tongue.' From the first poem in Krissy Kneen's searing debut collection *Eating My Grandmother: a grief cycle*, winner of the 2014 Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize, it is plain that certain difficult, perhaps unpalatable truths will be shared. Yet if the reader has the stomach for it, this poetry has much sustenance to offer.

Queensland-based Kneen is already an accomplished and award-winning writer, and it shows. This reads like an autobiographical verse novel, a carefully nuanced narrative through bereavement and grief, apparently drawn from the experience of Kneen's own family life. She is to be congratulated on how clearly she limns the unspeakable agony of loss, especially a loss as complex as this, for at certain points, this collection reads as much like exorcism as it does elegy. Tempering the love and anguish are anger, frustration, prescience, wisdom, and eroticism. If Zajkowski's poetics hover in a metaphysical space, Kneen's are fervently earthed and corporeal.

Twenty-eight untitled poems are divided into four 'movements'. Kneen is skilled at scene setting, and it's easy to imagine this cycle being performed, for the voice is sure and strong:

I don't fear death. I don't fear
the sudden fall, the wheels
spinning out, the engine hot and loud on my face

Though clearly distraught at the loss of the family matriarch, Kneen's speaker is building no shrines. This was a complicated, dominant, damaging love that

played out across generations:

My mother
who is made of all the love
my grandmother withheld.
A hollow
stuffed to the suffocating brim
full
of longed-for mother love.

The separation (or lack thereof) of identity is a recurring theme: 'when she dies / I die' and 'I will never be / more than she'. If eating her grandmother is a way of the speaker internalising her, of not letting go, paradoxically it is also a way of making her disappear, of killing her. Food, gluttony, starvation have become the metaphor—the pathological stand-ins—for power and love, which for the speaker's family seem to have amounted to the same thing. Eating and not-eating is a disordered battle of wills, and a futile attempt to quell the emptiness within. The speaker talks of her grandmother's bread 'from the oven / from her strong arms / hot with her beating fury' and of 'her anger when I, / fat girl, / would not eat'; but what's implied is that this fury and refusal was part of the shorthand they evolved for communicating with each other. The ingestion of indigestible things (or 'pica') takes emotional eating to the degree that the speaker ends up having to swallow a camera as part of a medical investigation.

It's a scenario in which men don't really feature. The speaker's lover is peripheral, performing a necessary function '...only the promise of sex can wake the blood ... I flare to life briefly' and there is only one mention of a 'father.' For these women, the apron strings seem to have pulled uncomfortably tight across three generations of co-dependency.

Kneen's scoring of the poems is deft; through careful lineation she controls the pace at which they are read. Her language is evocative without being extravagant, but the real strength of this collection lies in the cumulative effect of the cycle and the aching sadness at its core. The implied wish-fulfilment is almost unbearable:

My last meal then
would be pastry
kneaded by her hand
and filled
as if by magic with her love

In handling tropes associated with food—the last meal, cannibalism, her grandmother’s ‘hungry ghost’ in the rain—Kneen displays an intimate understanding of both content and craft. Does the cycle complete itself? Or does it set itself up for another revolve? *Eating My Grandmother* is strong stuff. Devour it.

Mags Webster’s first collection of poetry *The Weather of Tongues* (Sunline Press) won the 2011 Anne Elder Award.

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