

**A Review of Tracy Ryan's
Hoard and Jan Napier's
*Thylacine***
Mags Webster

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

Tracy Ryan, *Hoard*, Whitmore Press, 2015. RRP \$22.95, 49pp., ISBN 978-0-9873866-5-6

Jan Napier, *Thylacine*, Regime Books, 2015. RRP \$19.95, 85pp., ISBN 978-0-9874821-8-1

'I'm really elsewhere' (1) confides the first line of Tracy Ryan's *Hoard*, and from that moment on, so is the reader, spirited to the ancient wetlands of Ireland, plumbing the 'banked darkness' (13) of peat bog. Here in the moist archive of earth, the past, present and pre-history merge, and are broken down and embedded together. Accordingly, as this short collection accretes poem by poem, bog becomes synonymous with hoard: becomes accumulation and treasure, place of storage and the action of storing. It takes rare skill to tease such nuances to the surface without stripping them of their mystique and leaning too heavily on obvious metaphor, but as one of Australia's finest poets, Ryan is more than equal to the task.

This collection (Ryan's eighth, and co-winner of the 2014 Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize) is essentially thirty-three ways of looking at a bog, and beyond that, at an intricate relationship of people to land, and to a primal identity. The bog is a 'dense ledger' (40), which is 'only gathering material' (37). It is like some great digestive tract, 'swallowing all conceivable' (29) which continually absorbs and regurgitates collective as well as individual secrets and memory. It signifies fuel (in the form of peat or turf), cache, livelihood and grave. But to whom do these uses and rights belong, and indeed, 'what is right to a bog' (31)? It yields precious artefacts:

gorget and manchette
torc and horn

penannular clasp
torn from garment (47)

Yet these seem freighted with an implication that the significance we place in material objects becomes more burdensome than the things themselves:

weight you grasp only
as wearer
heavy the way
they say crowns are (18)

For the changeling—the ‘burn & freckle’ (1) Australian descendant addressing Ireland, bog (and family forebears) in the fine opening poem—this wetland terrain is the key to a complex genealogy, a possible ‘recognition of kin’ (17), and a place of instinctive connection where

like the newborn
I must imprint’ (5)

yet also where belonging is not a given:

must I rip up my share like turf
& knowingly trespass
to get some warmth (8)

A variety of voices speak from ‘the otherworld’ (15): hoard hider, hoard finder, the quick and the dead, the just-surfaced, the long-buried, the ‘discarnate’ (44). Through all of them, the bog itself speaks:

...keeping charge

of every detail
never forgetful (27)

At once absorbent and resistant, effusive and reticent, it has ‘the gape & gaze of a Medusa’ (36), is ‘vulval and dentate’ (45) like a Sheela Na Gig, though the speaker in ‘Rhetorical’ does question the sexual politics of assigning gender, asking:

am I not complicit in a history
of dangerous conflations (34)

Ultimately, however, ‘bog is what bog does’ (41). Most of all, it endures. It

...may flinch at yielding
secrets yet recover (19)

whereas the secrets themselves are not always so resilient. Hoards get ‘damaged in transit’ and worse, ‘recast as meaningless’ (19). Yet when not misappropriated

Hoard is bog disclosure
to those who would hear (19)

And for ‘those who would hear’, Ryan’s habitual mastery with acoustics as well as language is much in evidence in this collection: even if one is unsure what an ‘inscrutable crotal’ (16) is, a surprisingly apt mental image can immediately be fashioned courtesy of the sound. She eschews punctuation in preference for perfectly judged arrangement of spacing and lineation, here mimicking the effort of breath and step on challenging ground, there expressing the topography of the landscape. An interrogation into the layers and complexities of ancestry, ownership and belonging, *Hoard* is indeed ‘more than ordinary soil’ (37), and a profoundly satisfying read.

Taking its cue from the eponymous—and mysterious—creature of the title, Western Australia-based poet Jan Napier’s debut collection *Thylacine* hymns the slippage between things lost, things sought and things not always found.

First collections are often a miscellany of themes, and *Thylacine* is no exception. Consisting of seventy (mostly one-page) poems divided into four sections, the book encompasses a wide repertoire of subject matter: place-based vignettes about home and overseas, interior journeys, personal relationships, and pocket narratives, many delivered with a subtle wash of surrealism. There can’t be many collections that span, for example, references to French tightrope walker Blondin, Babylon’s Ishtar Gate and Italian violin makers alongside poems about ageing and arthritic Pontiffs, fishnet stockings, and Frida Kahlo.

Napier establishes an evocative tone of mind (and place) in poems like ‘Lamped Streets’, the speaker ‘haunting this mystery of rain’ (7) and likewise in the first half of the six-line poem ‘Two Degrees North’. Just these three lines in fact are enough:

In a Zen garden there are no trucks entering.
White herons fish shadows rake gravel.
Wind moves the moon two degrees North. (28)

‘North of Twenty-Six’ is a wry stream-of-consciousness love song to the nation’s remote north, the ‘real’ Australia, one suspects: ‘think barbies flyslap festive’, where ‘They all have dogs and wives, these blokes’ (and in that order) and the south is written off as a place that’s

...soft and pale with rain
where drought just means lawns go brown and steak gets
more expensive (12)

When she writes about specific people, Napier's poems are powerful and affecting. In 'My Mother's Weather', she captures the frustrations of age and failing faculties, the slow draining away of self:

She scrabbles for syllables
that won't untongue
storms *I'm not stupid.*
Even the dictionaries' weary leaves
blued with additions
are vexatious now (52)

'Hand Made', by contrast, shows the woman 'mother' used to be, in command and practical:

My mother chooses the fabric
It is good quality, she says,
and will last. (35)

Other highlights include 'Interim', a threnody for a lost love, where the setting is everyday, the emotion anything but. The speaker's heart may be 'a cindery black thing' but it's the observation a couple of lines later that 'His rubber boots have perished too' (76) that really drives home the sense of desolation. Likewise, in 'Back Home', a whole sad history leaks from lines such as:

His absence on the verandah is a welcome estimated carefully
as mileage, there's no place set at the table and no carnival
word (42)

'Clay' is a fine poem, elegantly phrased:

At times cups slump and pink lips droop.
She whisks aside what's graceless
a dragonfly husband looted dreams
this shivery hut nutshells the robe around herself.
Begins again. (75)

This poem's narrative thread is well judged throughout, leading to an unexpected and satisfying ending.

Whether dealing with things transient, things earthly, the domestic or the uncanny, Napier has a distinctive, whimsical and occasionally dry voice. She displays a broad vocabulary and is unafraid of experimenting with lineation and form. *Thylacine* is a commendable debut, and it will be interesting to observe how this poet's work evolves.