

Launch of Cameron Lowe's *Porch Music*, Whitmore Press

By David McCooey, Geelong Gallery, 5 December 2010

I first met Cameron Lowe at Deakin University nearly 15 years ago in a lecture theatre. He and his friend, Paul Howie, had come to give the literary studies students a poetry workshop. I remember Cam repeatedly throwing a large pair of football socks into the student body. For what arcane reason, I can no longer recall. The students, of course, loved him. Back then, in his early twenties, Cam had long blonde hair, a Kombi, and was a surfer. The long blonde hair, if I remember rightly, was often in a pony tail, the thing that Cam once derided the writer Tim Winton for having. (And *Porch Music* is surely a superbly Wintonesque title.)

Phase-two Cameron Lowe saw him sell the Kombi, ditch the surfboard, and cut his hair, making his strong resemblance to David Bowie (c. 1967) or Clint Eastwood (c. 1972) strikingly apparent. In his next phase as a plasterer, Cam left hand-written versions of William Carlos Williams' minimalist poem 'The Red Wheelbarrow' on unpainted plaster boards to secretly grace the suburban homes of the Bellarine Peninsula (a fact adverted to in the poem 'The Plasterer's Revolt'). Finally, we have before us the latest incarnation of Cameron Lowe: PhD candidate (his masters thesis having been awarded an exceptionally high result), part-time plasterer, and poet. In all this time, I believe, Cam has lived in the same house in Normanby Street, East Geelong (the subject of the poem 'Normanby Street').

This mix of change and constancy is particularly Lovian. It is a tension that is both profound and ordinary, as profound and ordinary as the constant and constantly changing cycle of seasons, of weather, and of days and nights. These things all appear repeatedly in *Porch Music*, a title (Wintonesque or not) that highlights the marvellous doubleness at the heart of this brilliant collection of poems. *Porch Music* calls to mind both the domestic and

the lyrical; the material space and the immaterial sound; the mundane and the remarkable. And this mix of day-to-day and extraordinary inhabits the many renderings of locales, times, and occasions that make up this book. Cam shows us how extraordinary it is to live in a string of ordinary days. We see this again and again, as in the line ‘On the fence rail, by the gate, / a green can of VB its own mystery’ (‘Morning Light’), or the image of ‘the quarter moon still hanging, / like a child’s charm, / over the silence of the house’ (‘The Watcher’).

And these days, and nights, are extraordinarily light-filled. The word ‘light’ appears 25 times in *Porch Music*. ‘Sunlight’ appears four times, ‘moonlight’ appears twice, and ‘twilight’ appears once. In addition, ‘lights’ appears three times (twice as a verb, once as a noun), and ‘streetlights’ appears once. Light in English poetry traditionally signifies divinity or transcendence. Here it implies neither of those unambiguous things, but rather a value – either aesthetic or ethical – sometimes inherent in the most ordinary of events or gestures.

The lightness of this collection is one of its great strengths. Cam has an exceptional lightness of touch, and is a master of tone. He is able, for instance, to move from the lyrical to the satirical in a moment:

Standing on Point Lonsdale’s foreshore it feels
like the end of something and the sun hides
behind another cloud, throws a shadow
over Pasquini’s, where an elegant couple
admire their Land Rover, slick
in sea shades, *The Age* real estate section
stuck between them like a gesture to love. (‘Coastal Real Estate’)

‘Gestures to love’ appear repeatedly in this collection, a collection that has a surprising number of love poems. These gestures are sometimes ironised (as in ‘Coastal Real Estate’) and sometimes not. ‘In Lieu of You’ is a brilliant example of the ironic mode, beginning with the killer line, ‘The telephone calls to say I love you’. There is no irony, however, in the

moving poem ‘Alice’ (the name of one of Cam’s sisters), which ends ‘your smile lights and the colours, // all of them, come creeping back’.

I’ve been concentrating on the more lyrical of Cam’s poems, but Cam also has a marvellous skill with the surreal image, whether for comic or unsettling effect. ‘Self-portrait’, for instance, asks us to ‘Note how my hairstyle resembles the 3rd Apostle / at Port Campbell – seen / through heavy fog...’. ‘Abacus’ ends with the observation that ‘No one noticed the fire that washed / the dishes, nor the fat black dog, singing’.

In ‘The Mirror’ we read that ‘Silence is not the answer – nor would shouting unlock any doors’. This suggests another important aspect of Cam’s poetry, and one that I find immensely appealing. Cam’s poems occupy brilliantly the space between silence and shouting. As the title, *Porch Music*, suggests, this space can be thought of as either conversation or as song. Cam manages to write poems with a voice that is magically both the voice of speech and that of song simultaneously. This is an extraordinary achievement.

Poetry, as we all know, is a minority activity. Some engage in special pleading for poetry, claiming that it should be more visible in our public culture, more ‘important’. What I admire about Cam (and about Anthony as a publisher) is that he does not engage in any of this. For him, poetry is what it is. His writing demands attention from those who will give it on purely ‘poetic’ grounds. It is a poetry that engages us in a kind of play of the mind we call creativity. It is *entertaining*, but entertaining in a way that respects us as readers.

Cam’s skill is to give us poetry that is both ordinary and profound. He shows us that to view the world in a poetic way is simply a way of seeing that we can all engage in, even if that engagement only occurs through reading *Porch Music*. I have read this collection numerous times, and many of the individual poems numerous more times again. That these poems continue to reward shows us what a superb poet Cam is. I am honoured and delighted to launch *Porch Music*.