

**Dennis Haskell. *And Yet . . .* . WA Poets Publishing, 2020. 88 pages
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And Yet . . ., Dennis Haskell's ninth collection of poems, is a (late?) string quartet, its four movements attenuating poetic moments, moods and wordplay with poise and emotional intelligence. The first movement 'Afterwards' is a jugular-seeking, sonata-form allegro, spinning words around experiences of grieving after the deaths of his wife, his mother and his father-in-law: 'No matter how blanketed, you can't get warm / because the blizzard of death is blowing / from within; blood leaches from your body / all the dim day and all through the night' ('Go Gently').

Despite the busy, public 'front matter' of these poems—they're set around Perth, but also in Brisbane, Sydney, Taiwan, Arles and the Philippines—there's a persistent elegiac note and more than one echo of Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells': 'your voice is louder / now it can no longer be heard, / ... your hand is softer / now it can no longer be held' ('Holding'), and 'Why do I talk to you, despite myself, / when you have done with time altogether? / We who are alive are commanded by time / in all its dimensions' ('The Second Time'). The poems are both conversational and intense, juggling confessionally distant moments of memory ('forgettories' Haskell calls them), fondness, anguish, ironic reflection: 'But scratch the skin of happiness / and you bleed grief in an instant' ('Brisbane Holiday'). Haskell's language is compelling, layered, interrogatory in its orchestration of the 'big questions': 'As if life was a test of absolutes / not gradations' ('On the UP Campus'). The poetry is emotionally labile and holds the reader in a fine, lyrical immediacy with a keen, sceptical gaze: 'Sleepless, I staggered up in the early hours / with an intemperate cough / as though I had got you / caught in my throat' ('The Morning of Your Birthday'). This allegro invites the reader to sketch a hypothetical autofiction: as well as formally composing in a number of language registers and styles there is a directness of 'life writing' in the poetry.

The second movement, 'Shifting Out,' exhibits a change of pace and tone as the poems move away from the interior world of the poet's immediate emotional spaces to the external worlds of the Philippines, Malta and Hong Kong 'Where action is everything, flowers have / at least this to do: to bloom and, blooming, prove / that the useless, and only the useless, can give / a meaning, untouchable, outside style, fashion, cars' ('Along Canton Street'). And to the vicaria of ekphrasis, with Haskell as our tour-guide-poet taking in European cultural and artistic history, mythology and a dash of photography. In 'Hashtag Me Too,' after Rembrandt's *Susanna*, Haskell wryly sees the perving Elders 'hidden in the thickets of the future' while Susanna is 'clutching to her curves / that stark loneliness in nudity / only we of the animals feel / and fear.' Writing about *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* by Rubens and Breughel the Elder, Haskell muses on the 'ferocious passivity' of the lion in Eden's 'delicious insufficiency,' adding that 'The painting possesses . . . / the vacancy, or perfection, of silence . . . / . . . The serpent / is passing apples that will taste / like a burst of midnight.' This section of *And Yet . . .* is more of an allegretto, with its sense of collecting and skipping through experiences ('my hopscotch mind')—ironic rather than brooding—as Haskell uses language's appraising consciousness to mediate art's prestidigitation in the contemporary world.

Movement three, 'Doubtful Solemnities,' shortest of all, lives up to its agnostic innuendoes, interrogating a number of shibboleths—it's something of a minuet, dancing through writers' festivals, art and haiku with acerbic force. 'Writers Festival' is a jaunty satire on literary panels

and author-signing whose tone is suggested by its metonymic opening ‘Three books sit on a bare, attic-like stage . . .’ and its bathetic: ‘There is a touch / of stardust in the air, like pollen . . .’ ‘The Hippocampus’ sustains a fanciful but judicious conceit about contemporary universities and students. The ekphrastic sonnet ‘After Hopper—Edward, not Hedda’ has a fine phrase describing the figures in Edward Hopper’s painting *Nighthawks* as ‘huddled in separation,’ which seems to suggest this section’s take on human existence. For me, the haiku decade ‘Ten Perceptions of the Deeply Meaningful’ sustains this section’s agnosticism unevenly, the opening two haiku work beautifully (Basho would be proud of these minute moments within eternity) but the next two seem a bit ‘clever’ (‘sashful . . . bashful . . . Basho’). The fifth haiku is beautifully artficed: ‘A frozen shadow sings . . .’ but the next four are more senryu-like. And yet (if you’ll pardon the pun) the final haiku closes the sequence deftly, in touch with both the universe and the ground, transience and permanence (‘shoes . . . rain . . . cloud . . . lake’)—ending this particular dance as a disguised couplet.

Movement four ‘The Moon, There’ returns, rondo-like, to the ‘tonic key’ of the poet’s emotional life and embraces a sense of renaissance based on accepting the persistence of grief but acknowledging that there is ‘Yet’ more to be told/felt/written about. The poems here include tributes to/portraits of colleagues and acquaintances, such as the witty sonnet ‘The Adjectives’ for Delys Bird, the affectionate prefix poem ‘Ways to Live’ for Milly Ingate, the satirical (Bruce Dawe-inspired?) reflection on ‘Mick Tenacius, the high school’s / most defiant delinquent’ (‘The Spitter in the Rye’), and a moving celebration of the birth of (I presume) a granddaughter in ‘Wisdom’: ‘I thank heaven, or fate, or chance / or whatever, for what you absorb / and absolve.’ There’s a definite sense of an ending in these poems as *And Yet . . .*’s narrative arc pirouettes through the fine sonnet ‘Poppies’ with its intense focus on the immediate everyday ‘Poppies alive as fire-sent / scintillation . . . / . . . a startling brocade of light.’ Some of the poems echo earlier grieving, for example over the poet’s mother’s death after some years of dementia: ‘My mother / died quietly, almost abstractedly; my brothers / and sister and I of course knew, but she / wasn’t there when it happened’ (‘Presence’). But the closing notes of the collection are of promise, renewal and re-reading the world: ‘It feels as if someone has strewn magic on my life’ (‘Beginnings’). And the final (Christmas) poem ‘Yet’ enacts a sense of rebirth and connection with ordinary, everyday emotional and social experiences of a new relationship: ‘and by some process I don’t pretend / to understand . . . / I feel, though too far off / you are yet almost beside me . . .’

Dennis Haskell’s poems in this ninth collection address, engage and embrace the reader. It’s a very satisfying read. There’s an accomplished, subtle craftsmanship and an honest maturity in this late string quartet of poems where threads of mourning, wry reflecting and judicious observing are carefully unskined and savoured. I found myself delighting in the turns of phrase, imagery, striking insights and musings. Often I found myself deliberately slowing my reading to pause, think, annotate (inserting omitted cedillas, accents and apostrophes, pencilling hortatory quibbles in the margins. I hope the title signifies there will be a tenth . . . and more . . .

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