

## Reading Helen Koukoutsis's *Cicada Chimes*

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In her collection of poems *Cicada Chimes* (2017), Helen Koukoutsis, an Australian poet of Greek Orthodox heritage, explores the conflicting emotions produced by death and loss in reaction to the passing of her father. The collection begins with her father's funeral and ends with a dramatic manifesto that shows grief's expressive power. *Cicada Chimes* is characterised by an explicit engagement with gender relations in the context of Australian migrant identities. In this essay, I set out to examine how Koukoutsis negotiates her own subject position as a Greek Australian woman and as a follower of the Greek Orthodox religion. Through her speaker's varied voices in *Cicada Chimes*, Koukoutsis interrogates established religious beliefs when she is faced with loss and bereavement. In my reading of her poems I argue that her elegy for the death of her father reflects an alignment with a feminist poetics of the sacred which approaches the divine with an animated style, an oppositional voice and experimental forms.

Koukoutsis's use of parody indicates her scepticism in relation to religious belief, and this transgressive element is emblematic of poetry that contests orthodox traditions. Koukoutsis also probes Greek cultural practices associated with mourning, which tend to emphasise a strict adherence to a forty day period where family members keep the memory of their departed alive. Widows and daughters wear black, and at first daily, then weekly, visit the grave site in order to light candles and incense. In *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses*, Gael Holst-Warhaft (2001) suggests that ritual mourning has a consolatory function for those immersed in their traditions. However for outsiders, such outmoded expressions seem to be extreme in their dramatic intensity. At the same time Holst-Warhaft argues that these performative laments offer more satisfactory ways of grieving than the modern world can offer, given the way secular, contemporary society has 'lost touch with rituals of mourning' (10). I will consider *Cicada Chimes*'s heavy reliance upon symbols, customs and beliefs from Koukoutsis's traditional Greek Orthodox heritage given that she has positioned herself within the context of Australian feminist spirituality. I will examine the poems' treatment of Greek rituals of mourning as offering consolation, when philosophically Koukoutsis has taken a step back from this tradition. Ultimately I will argue that in *Cicada Chimes* Koukoutsis asserts an anti-traditional spirituality that merges ritual expressions with modern sensibilities.

Helen Koukoutsis's grieving speaker in the opening poem of this collection positions herself as part of this modern world which rejects such ritual practices as meaningless. This is evident in the ways she subjects these customs and beliefs to feminist critique because these are associated with a patriarchal tradition. Despite her critical views, her speaker is shown to perform religious ritual gestures to memorialise her father's absence. These instances appear to reflect Koukoutsis's ambivalent relationship with established traditions. Koukoutsis's work may thus be situated in relation to Holst-Warhaft's work, where she argues that modern individuals are trying to translate their grief and perform it in new ways in order to be consoled (11). In the past communal grieving had a conciliatory function, while in modern secular spaces grieving is a private affair and many individuals are at a loss as to how to work through grief. Koukoutsis draws on traditional practices in her effort to work through her grief.

Koukoutsis's negotiation of anti-traditional spirituality and ritual expression can also be compared to the work of Emily Dickinson. According to Victoria Morgan, Emily Dickinson's transformation of the hymn genre writes spirituality as 'the dialectic between community and individuality' (5). In this sense beyond any ethnographic approach, Koukoutsis's work also needs to be examined as contributing to contemporary feminist poetics on the sacred that can be traced back to Dickinson: Koukoutsis's spirituality cannot be fully understood without making connections to her research on Dickinson's alternative faith spirituality. However her writing of the feminist sacred is also uniquely situated in an Australian literary context that is outlined by Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn Mc Credden's edited work, *Creative Suspicions: A Feminist Poetics of the Sacred* (2001). Koukoutsis's poems have found homes in Australian journals, some online and in print such as *Eureka Street*, *Nebu[lab]*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Poetrix* and *Studio: A Journal of Christians Writing*. These journals are platforms that promote feminist and multicultural voices on spirituality.

Given these frameworks, when Koukoutsis targets the patriarchal order of the Orthodox Christian religion by directly addressing God, it becomes clear that she is writing from the position of a contemporary woman whose relationship with institutions and faith is conflicted. Devlin-Glass and McCredden suggest that this kind of ambivalent relationship towards religion can be attributed to the 'kinds of power wielded by organised monotheistic religions' which, they argue, are sites of 'psychic and spiritual, physical and political forms of violence' (3). Koukoutsis's oppositional stance indicates that she is responding to the way women in her generation, as well as the generation that preceded her, were subjected to such power structures. This group of women, because of the experience of migration that placed them in a very different world from that of the Greek villages from which their ancestors came, became aware of the injustices they had suffered because of societal customs and beliefs. As a first-generation descendant of Greek migrants to Australia, Koukoutsis responds to this awareness and so we can read her rhetorical outburst against God as targeted not against religion per se but against traditions of culture that deny women their autonomy and their aspirations. These are traditions the speaker seems to relate more closely to Greek culture. In this sense her work can be read as an example of the 'politicised spiritualities' that Devlin-Glass and McCredden see as the future of feminist spiritualities and that move beyond patriarchal boundaries (245).

In the poem 'Funeral' (7), Koukoutsis negotiates the fraught relations between Greek village traditions and secular feminism. Faced with a growing awareness of the inevitability of death, the speaker voices the tension between believing and not believing in a merciful God. Confronted with the growing numbers of migrants being buried at Rookwood cemetery, the speaker asserts her secular disbelief:

they wonder no more  
when or how  
they'll die  
or even if their pseudo-  
Orthodoxy  
will resurrect them (7)

This crisis of faith does not interrogate religious beliefs as such but rather moves beyond the religious to provide a critique of the social mores and institutions established upon traditional beliefs which are Christian but include some pagan superstitious beliefs as well. In 'Orthodox plot 223,' for example, we see the coexistence of these two traditions typographically placed

on opposite margins. While the mother ‘made the sign of the cross,’ silence reigns and then a superstitious omen presents itself. The speaker records the scene:

...she made the sign  
of the cross...  
Even the car radio  
was hushed.

A crow echoes  
mid-flight  
with short  
successive  
eh-awes (10)

The speaker manipulates the theme of non-alignment by revealing how women and girls from Greek societies suffer when their aspirations for self-fulfilment are not aligned with communal expectations. For example, she shows how women are marginalised when they do not follow the typical life patterns of becoming wives and mothers at a specific time of their life cycle, and they suffer when their creative dreams are not realised. Koukoutsis shows that women rarely have a voice that is listened to, and if they become creative artists, they suffer exceedingly because of the heavy burden of the way their love of their creative work is in conflict with their sense of obligation to their loved ones, particularly when they become wives and mothers. The speaker in the confessional poem ‘3.00 a.m.’ reveals how superstitions create a culture of secrecy for women who are expected to keep the private sphere hidden. When the modern poet reveals her private history, she is conflicted because she sees her miscarriage as a direct punishment. Her creative aspirations to be a writer make achieving motherhood even harder because she has to contravene superstitious beliefs.

You plan  
to do it right  
next time—  
...Most of all  
you promise  
never to write  
about this...(47)

Koukoutsis grew up and lives in Sydney, and so her present-day environment contributes to her suspicions about most communal rituals associated with Greek village life. Nevertheless, despite their oppressive elements, these communal ‘tribal’ practices function to moderate the speaker’s lasting grief. For example, in ‘On the road to Rookwood,’ we read about the weekly visit by mother and daughter to the grave with their flowers, incense and oil for the candle. In these ritual outings they often argue and so the daughter internally queries: ‘*Are you upset with me?*’ Nevertheless, this shared ritual experience, ‘They wait their usual arrangement / on Dad’s grave’ (21) allows for their daily frustrations to be worked through, despite her mother’s disparagement. Holst-Warhaft (6) argues that such ritualistic, communal traditions fulfil a social need to see grief performed. The rites that belong to these traditions can help the bereaved transition back into everyday life and help them to come to a new acceptance of death. Such acceptance does not negate the memory of death, given that the rituals such as chanting hymns, memorial services, and lighting incense and candles continue. This attitude towards death is very different from secular experiences of grief and resonates with Arnold van Gennep’s view that ‘death is a transition rather than a separation’ (in Holst-Warhaft, 8). Mother and daughter

in the above poem are shown to be transitioning into a new relationship between themselves through shared ritual despite the pain of the father's absence.

Reading *Cicada Chimes*, we note that even though the speaker is estranged from ritual village practices, at times she performs them mechanically because of her shared grief with her mother, thereby compromising her anti-traditional and critical position. The speaker comments that her mother wants to continue grieving, 'The only / one still grieving / is Mum' ('Orthodox Plot 223,' 11). Here death and moving on from grief are shaped by 'the way the subject is emotionally positioned' (Rosaldo in Holst-Warhaft 13), but the lines identify also how cultures of belonging affect the subject who is faced with loss. The mother cannot grieve without the rituals, while the daughter wants to 'pull into the car park café / order cinnamon toast / spy on coffee drinkers' (10). The young woman wants to get on with everyday living, but her mother is annoyed with commercialisation in the cemetery because the coffee shop culture implies a diversion from unpleasant memories such as death, while she, the grieving Greek widow, does not want to forget. When the daughter states, she 'wants to smile at the girl / in a blue dress and satin sash' (10) she is expressing a desire for momentary respite from grieving, but the mother has become fuelled with anger because those 'others' around her seem indifferent to her pain. She rants, '*aren't they ashamed / [she] interrupts like gunfire,*' but then stops herself even though she 'wanted to say more' because of her own respectful observance of silence for the dead when at the cemetery. When entering Rookwood cemetery, the speaker observes that her mother always 'made the sign / of the cross / as we drove / through the gates' (10). This strict adherence to village rituals conflicts with the Australian daughter's reluctant engagement with these rituals.

The customs that are important to the mother do not have the same meaning for the daughter poet. However when Koukoutsis includes Orthodox imagery and refers to ritual customs, the reader has the sense that the heaviness of grief is lightened. Even though on the narrative level the presence of these cultural traditions prove to be a source of intergenerational conflict between mother and daughter, on the affective level tradition has a consoling function. In 'Orthodox plot 223,' the daughter questions her mother over the necessity of having such things as 'spinach pitas, the aniseed biscuits / olives, coffee / on doily napkins / at dad's wake.' Her mother's response reaffirms that tradition is essential for her to accept death (Holst-Warhaft 6) but it may also be used by her as a weapon against her daughter's defiance. In its insistence on the consoling function of tradition Koukoutsis's elegy is remarkably different from a tradition of modern elegy that Diana Fuss argues 'tends not to achieve, but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss' (3). Koukoutsis's elegy is bent not on 'sustaining anger and on reopening wounds' (3), but instead shows how ritual practices and cultural beliefs function as an antidote to the inconsolability of dying without rituals (Holst-Warhaft 10):

That's tradition  
she'd say, and  
why do you  
always argue  
with me? (11)

As noted, Koukoutsis's work suggests a connection with that of the American poet Emily Dickinson, because both engage with loss, grief and grieving through anti-traditional poetic forms. Dickinson's poetics was also the subject that Koukoutsis researched in her doctoral work and beyond. She has published on Dickinson and continues to be actively engaged in exploring

this writer's poetics. The nimble written form that Koukoutsis identifies in Dickinson's poetry is also evident throughout *Cicada Chimes* but Koukoutsis combines this with Greek cultural forms as well as imagery of Australian fauna and landscape. Greek poetic forms in Koukoutsis's poems range from a parody of the classical Greek tragic form to the oral traditional form of the *moiroloi*, or what Margaret Alexiou (49) refers to as a 'poetic rehandling of traditional beliefs and practices which have remained alive among people.' In the poem, 'The Longest Day,' for example, when her speaker vents her anger against God—'What garment was there for me to touch? What gall, for me to swallow?' (68)—we read the type of dramatic language used by grieving female characters such as Penelope, Antigone, Electra and Clytemnestra in Ancient Greek tragedy. The content, however, has Biblical allusions reminding us of Christ's crucifixion with the reference to 'gall' and 'garment'—terms often included in Byzantine hymns.

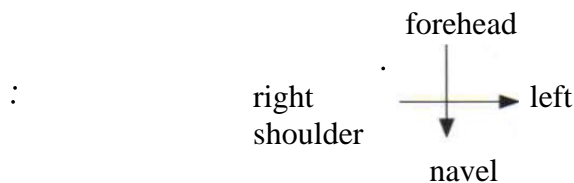
In 'Orthodox Plot' the tone switches register from words that mimic high-brow classical tragedy in the previous poem to the low brow. This performance poetry parodies the sustained cry of the *moiroloi*, a Greek, oral, superstitious practice: 'Crows caw / back and forth. / From the tops / of gum ghosts' (9). The 'crows' metaphorically represent the traditional peasant Greek women dressed in black, who publicly lament in verse song over the dead body. The 'caw, caw' sound replicates foreign sounds suggestive of a tribal identity. Here Koukoutsis borrows from her Australian landscape but incorporates imagery and sounds that appear foreign as well as archaic. When the poet uses the more formal powerful language that is terse and poignant, as in 'The Longest Day'—'Oh, why was I, not granted Rebekah's assurance / though two nations split her womb?' (68)—the poem reveals a dramatic and more individual type of grieving, rather than a tribal one.

Deep sorrow is mediated in poems such as 'Funeral' and 'Orthodox Plot,' when typographically the verses are depicted as repetitive movement, akin to a 'to and fro' swaying action used by mothers to sooth crying infants. This swaying expresses intense grief, and it may also textually depict emotions that oscillate between pity, anger, frustration and relief. Here, too, Koukoutsis explores the philosophical in a way that recalls Dickinson. Herbert Anderson views grief as the process whereby the mourner gains spiritual maturity and understanding, arguing that 'Grief not only shapes our lives; it is a teacher of spiritual wisdom because it reminds us of human limits and deepens our awareness of vulnerability' (127). Bereavement often raises deep questions as well, especially about what comes after death. It is also tied to expressing loss or what Anderson refers to as 'dreams not easily shared' (133). In their writing, Dickinson and Koukoutsis do not shy away from revealing their 'dreams not easily shared' and their respective vulnerabilities but they interpret these in different ways. These complex emotions are well-known features in Dickinson's works. Koukoutsis addresses her own existential dilemmas by borrowing from Dickinson's verbal sign of the m-dash, which according to Eleanor Wilner (143–44), has the dual function of dividing and connecting. When Dickinson uses the symbol of the cross in a poem on mourning, 'I measure every Grief I meet,' it indicates the individual character of grief associated with Calvary and functions as a metaphor of the well-trodden ground of universal human suffering: 'a piercing comfort it affords ... To note the fashions of the Cross ... that some are like my own.' In this way Dickinson rationalises responses to death through her poetry, not by using logical deductive argument, but through playfulness in her rhymes as well as a subtle use of religious references such as the cross, Calvary and Being. Her linguistic and aesthetic playfulness acts as a mask to hide her deep pain.

Koukoutsis, like Dickinson, also uses the m-dash as a signifier of an *aporia* (not knowing). In 'Impossible,' a reflective poem that shows her personal journey towards spiritual growth, she

states, ‘Jesus, instead of God— / too impossible / to pray to every night—’ (23). Here this sign identifies the sense of confusion that accompanies her loss: ‘I already had a Father.’ The death of her father has led her to question her faith and initiates the speaker’s existential questioning. Furthermore, the textual feature of using an alternating left and right margin format in her other poems, such as ‘Dad’ and ‘Hours’ (14, 27) conveys a sense of dialogue between opposing perspectives and time frames. Such shifts between person, place and time replicate what Koukoutsis (2017) refers to as Dickinson’s ‘nimble’ to-and-fro movement of thinking and seeing, believing and not believing, remembering and forgetting, while her own use of multiple perspectives shows that her ideas have been shaped by various cultural traditions. On the rational level Koukoutsis has been influenced by the Western tradition and on the emotional level by the Eastern. The cross motif and its performance is loaded with spiritual as well as cultural significance. She does not use it as an affirmation of her faith but instead shows how it proves to be a stumbling block for her. In the collection’s opening poem, ‘Funeral,’ Koukoutsis’s speaker uses the cross to represent the ritualised performance of the cross as a mark of respect at her father’s funeral:

Just this once  
I try to specialise  
his absence  
with an austere  
performance  
of the cross



and just like  
a compass  
on the moon  
my presence  
among the  
frankincense  
and myrrh  
seems pointless. (8)

The use of, ‘I try’ seems to betray scepticism towards certain practices and rituals. The ritual of crossing oneself, as well as the rituals of burning frankincense and myrrh seem to her to be ‘pointless’ (8), in contrast to the older generation of Orthodox Christians who take comfort in these symbolic gestures. Instead, in ‘Funeral’ we note a similarity to Dickinson’s out of body experience in the latter’s poem, ‘I felt a Funeral in my Brain.’ When she refers to her father’s funeral she appears to be standing outside and observing, ‘Today / another’s to be buried—... he waits’ (8). This sensation of being outside of reality represents an emotionally heightened state of grieving. Koukoutsis’s use of the cross motif, depicted typographically in a descriptive way without any emotion, seems to emphasise how she feels cut off from reality and communal rituals. Her meta-comment on this gesture as mechanical, austere and pointless confirms that she could not comprehend the fact that the person being buried was her father, or indeed that the person looking on was herself.

Koukoutsis's funeral experience, like the funeral and Calvary experience in Dickinson's poems, is depicted as alienating and dividing people from each other. Koukoutsis, however, in contrast to Dickinson shows that it can also connect with others. The cross motif beyond its religious significance has another meaning that is personal rather than religious. It connects the speaker to an experience that many women from traditional Greek societies share. This has to do with the struggle of becoming a mother. Figuratively this is her cross as well as the cross for those in similar circumstances. In the poem '3.00 a.m.' this struggle is depicted in such a highly visual way that it does allude to a type of crucifixion, and the m-dash punctuates the key source of the speaker's grief and her history of loss.

Hot, angry clots  
charge through  
crimson loins—  
you've just expelled  
a lentil. Contractions  
suggest otherwise...  
...life  
death (46)

The scattered recollections preceding the m-dash in '3.00 a.m.' such as '84 heartbeats,' 'a bloated belly,' 'plan to do it right next time,' promise to guard ... against negative thoughts,' are terse statements loaded with painful recollections on the trauma of a miscarriage, but they also show the power of oral superstitions that reinforce guilt. So here we notice a merging of two seemingly distinct ideas—faith and village superstitions—yet for her they represent the same thing:

... You promise to guard  
your mind against  
negative thoughts—...  
... You  
vow to avoid  
the internet  
random superstitions  
and social belief  
of the kind that assume  
all women dive naturally  
into motherhood.  
Most of all you promise  
never to write  
about this  
because inside  
the bowl of waste  
and water  
an embryo has fallen  
like a sparrow / from its nest— (47)

These memories of loss are complex because of the debilitating effect of superstitious guilt. In response, the angry young mother vents her frustration in her final poem, 'The Longest Day.' Here the poet uses a regressive sequence staged over a limited time period, with observations

on relationships, reflections on moods and subtle expressions of silent griefs. She shows how this struggle to achieve motherhood tests her faith, and then she turns to the saints to help her achieve her desire.

...4. I tried so hard  
to conceive without you—  
appealed to Saint Sophia  
and her daughters  
for a child of my own.

When she conceives and gives birth, she has a daughter who, as she critically points out, will never have the life opportunities that male children have in Greek traditional society.

2. They gave me a daughter  
who can never be a saviour ...

Then she includes an afterthought that refers to her lover's agnostic confession of Orthodox Christian beliefs which he deems to be oral wives' tales,

... My other lover recently  
confessed, *I don't believe  
Jesus was God, either...*  
... 6. *And I don't believe*, he said,  
*that our unborn child  
will be punished just because  
I ironed on a holy day.*

These sayings, highlighted by the poet in the above verses in italics, refer to ideas transmitted from mother to daughter in rural communities in Greece and in the Greek diaspora, often disguised as 'religious' beliefs. The lament over the repeated miscarriages alluded to in this poem brings her own doubts to the surface, but then she shifts her position in relation to faith:

7. But he has not seen your wrath  
your jealousy, the millions killed  
in the Great Flood.  
He does not know why  
you give a loaf to every bird  
but just a crumb to me... (69)

This countarpuntal moment is powerful since it shows how a direct experience of emotional and psychic pain can lead either to a denial or to a confession of faith which either divides or connects the subject to a faith community. It also shows how for many individuals, as in the case of her lover and her mother, religious belief is based on superstitious customs and wives' tales and not on religious faith.

... 'the mother you gave me ...  
... insisted that your son  
was crucified every Friday, so,  
no sock, underwear, bra,  
and trouser could be washed.' (70)



The speaker, in contrast to her mother's generation, reacts against superstition. She is on a personal search for truth, initiated by her need to protect her loved ones from death. After interrogating God on whether He is responsible for people dying—'Is it you who implanted / this destiny in us?'—the speaker turns from accusation to identifying herself as God's 'true beloved,' praying to Him like a 'thirsting dianthus' because only He can keep her loved ones alive 'longer than herself' (70, 71). This to-and-fro movement between hope and despair, belief and non-belief, superstition and faith, shows the interaction between rationalism and Eastern beliefs and customs. This writer does not want to follow her inherited traditions, customs and beliefs blindly nor does she want to submit to grief without speaking her pain.

Devlin-Glass and McCredden (3) propose that secular feminist writers use parodies as 'weapons' to contest and challenge male-dominated order in society. In the final poem in Koukoutsis's collection, 'The Longest Day' (66–71), the speaker parodies the patriarchal voice of the Old Testament in *Genesis*, where God the Creator is addressed as the Father, the Lawgiver, and *Logos* of life (and her life in particular). Another voice then interjects and moves the poem from third to first person plural and then first person singular, and this dual voice speaks on behalf of the absent female voice. The poem reads like a modern literary woman's manifesto. Both speaking voices use parody, shifting between a biblical patriarchal voice and that of a modern female struggling with God. This is also associated with Jacob in the Old Testament wrestling with God for a whole night when in despair for his life and the life of his loved ones (Genesis 32:22). Koukoutsis's speaker faces a similar struggle over her faith and moves between despair and hope. Her despair is grounded in modern secular beliefs that in death all life returns to the ground, while her hope stems from the Christian belief in an afterlife. For the religious, prayers are heard and actions seen by the Creator. In 'Easter Poem,' the speaker states: 'God watches our every move' (43). The closing lines in the final poem 'The longest day' uses the following words that allude to the speaker's turn towards faith when she 'prays to keep alive / her lover and child / longer than herself?' (71). Together with ambivalence about faith, the speaker also voices her other oppositional concern, her frustration about the position of women in her culture and religious community. This is seen in the poem 'Sophia.'

... Before motherhood  
 you were a father's dowry— ...  
 ... perpetually pregnant to a husband  
 three times your age  
 who died without an heir ...  
 ... Before maidenhood—  
 a girl with curls— ...  
 ... educated by a devout mother.  
 Paul's virtues fixed like a bolt ...  
 ... Never to be a citizen of this world.  
 Never to write your own laws. (26)

Here Koukoutsis speaks out against crimes against girls and women, and in particular she points out the injustice of marrying young girls to old men. These practices, prevalent in some cultures, remain in the memory of her mother's migrant generation. Beyond the issue of social justice, Koukoutsis's repetitive use of the name 'Sophia'—'wisdom' in Greek—draws attention to a desire to uncover foundational views that lie at the core of religious and cultural Greek traditions. By exposing the violence that underpins social customs as well as religious practices that exclude females, she challenges the idea that wisdom pertains solely to men. In another poem, 'Sunday service,' Koukoutsis makes a strong case that misogynous societies violate the

sense of fairness associated with religious traditions by excluding women, even saints such as Saint Sophia, and hence these societies reject wisdom. When she uses a pun stating that Sophia cannot be in the church named in her honour, she states that in the Greek Orthodox Church no female, and perhaps, not even the saint herself, are allowed an influential position. The poem reads: ‘No mother / daughter / sister / will ever be in St Sophia’s— / not even Sophia?’ (63), nor can females freely enter and exit, ‘(... through that door like they own the space)’ (60). This parenthetical comment enables Koukoutsis to express her opposition to the partiality shown towards men and the subordination of women in public and religious spaces.

As I argued earlier, the final poem in the collection reads like a feminist manifesto against sexist social conventions that exclude women from institutional and cultural traditions. Women from traditional Greek rural societies turn to religion and their saints when modern medicine fails, because they suffer vilification in their societies if they fail to produce children. Significantly, although the speaker in this case is not a traditional woman but a modern woman, she too turns to God for divine intervention: ‘I tried so hard / to conceive without you—.’ She also appeals to ‘Saint Sophia and her daughters / for a child of my own’ (69). The next line, however, offers a subversive secular view: ‘They gave me a daughter / who can never be a saviour’ (69). This defiant but resigned response might be read as expressing a concern that is not just feminist. The speaker’s pain is also in realising that women have limited power to save lives. In traditional Greek societies women rarely have a hegemonic role. Her speaker claims that no woman has had any significant socio-political power throughout Hellenistic history: ‘Never to be a citizen of this world. / Never to write your own laws’ (26). More poignantly, however, and this is the main emphasis of her personal struggle, women do not have the power to sustain the lives of their loved ones despite the maternal need to preserve their offspring from harm (71). In this sense the real issue faced by the speaker may be her sense of powerlessness over the inevitability of death, ‘And this daughter I carry/this lover I’ve married / will die, too. Someday / just like my father’ (70). The poem now shifts beyond a political polemic about women’s rights to an existential consideration about fear of one’s mortality.

Koukoutsis’s work resonates closely with much contemporary Australian women’s writing challenging established tradition by ‘freely show[ing] a passion for things of the spirit in down-to-earth ways’ (Devlin-Glass and McCredden 4). This implies the merging of religious traditions with low-brow cultural forms. Both are spaces in which the concerns of ordinary people are negotiated, and these concerns have to do with how to navigate life’s challenges such as loss, change, motherhood. In ‘Market day’ (54) the poet describes a young woman’s performance in the open public space when visiting a small rural town in Northern Greece. The young body’s swaying movements at the marketplace represent rebellion as well as celebration. Within this male-dominated space Litsa walks and keep walking, indifferent to the male gaze that follows her, not caring, defiant and proud. Movement and performance merge:

... They wait for her  
salivate over her  
follow her ...  
... the way of life here  
even in a small Town like Serres ...

... She walks.

The whale tail of her G-string sways  
like a dinghy in the ocean. She walks.

Her ass rhythmic  
like a metronome. (58)

*Cicada Chimes* is quite explicit in its focus on loss and grief, reflected in so many of the poems. Yet the collection explores various other concerns. As I argued earlier, as an Australian of Greek descent, Koukoutsis often turns her eye to the tension between the ways of the old country and those of her homeland. In her imagery, she draws parallels between the background noises of whispering old local residents on market day in Serres, Northern Greece, and the annoying sounds of cicada chimes in the backyard of suburban Sydney. These noises symbolically represent communal practices tied to rituals. However the performance of the cross signifies a religious custom, while these other noises do not. It is the performance of cultural rituals that the grieving widow uses to ward off the pain of death. However, death is never far away and so the aural effect of cicadas chiming and swelling can be read as giving sound to the speaker's anger about the inevitability of death.

In the poems, 'Funeral' and in 'Orthodox Plot 233' the performance of the symbol of the cross signifies the performance of a symbolic act of remembering a deceased father and husband, but this gesture also signifies an affirmation of faith in God. Memory and faith, anger and hurt are connected and mediated by this dominant symbol of the cross in different ways for the grieving mother on the one hand and the daughter on the other, since each responds differently to death. In the poem '3 a.m.' the theme of life and death dominate the latter's thoughts when as a young mother she faces the death of her unborn child alone in the early hours of the morning. The speaker's history of loss, her pain over the untimely death of a tiny life, is compounded by the absence of her father many years earlier, and so these two memories form the basis of her Calvary experience. These events extend beyond nostalgia to a confession of a deeper loss; the realisation of unspoken hopes and dreams irreparably broken. Her deceased father will never become a grandfather and 'the tiny (lentil sized) embryo is dispelled forever from life in the early hours of the morning '(46). This lost life is metaphorically depicted as 'the fallen sparrow,' and here the speaker may be referring to a human life or may be referring to the gestational process of writing itself. The speaker suggests that the life of a human being, like the creation of a work of art, undergoes a tortuous process where so many aborted attempts precede a birth and ultimately birth leads to death. Death, however, can lead to life through ritual. Amidst the sense of futility that accompanies this speaker's response to the death of her loved ones, there are moments when she reacts against despair through a subversive ritual performance that is modern and celebratory—a young girl walking defiantly for life in the market place.

The speaker, therefore, has shown that she comes to terms with death not in the way that her mother does, but by shifting her attention towards creativity. This is foregrounded in 'November twilight—2009' where, autobiographically, she shows the tortuous process of her own writing, 'I am 36. / 'I am the Cooee bird that / cries out in the distance / at the violent sky, the sparrow / that falls from its nest / defeated ...' (29). This experience of loss, like the loss of her father, is painful and so her writing, like the wail of the Cooee bird, shows a shifting between emotions. Highs and lows intermingle. Writing allows her to express her pain but it also allows her a space wherein to celebrate life. Loss is countered by the hope of a ritual return just as the return of the Cooee bird is a reminder that life continues cyclically.

The cyclical return of the Cooee bird is a symbol of hope and life, just as the liberated young woman, Litsa, in 'Market Day' symbolises the vibrancy of youth. She resists sadness through rebellion, just as the speaker in 'The Longest Day,' rebels against religious and cultural

traditions. Despite the obvious differences between the two female characters, however, both represent the modern woman who refuses despair through the will to survive. The image of a liberated Litsa sharply contrasts with the image of the Eastern widow dressed in traditional mourning clothes in 'Orthodox plot 223.' The silence at the grave site contrasts with the loud and busy Market Place. Here the poet highlights the way that two different worlds cross over, the old and the new, while in the background, in the scene of an Australian summer, the 'cicadas swell like voices in a choir' (13), ominous, loud and annoying. The intensity of heat in the summer months causes the cicadas to swell and this metaphorically represents the intensity of an experience where there are incommensurable merges; the rituals of the East amidst the gravesites of an arid Australian landscape, even as the speaker, a child of both cultures, looks on pensively. This child growing up had imagined herself as Anne of Green Gables, later Emily Dickenson, Plath and finally 'Woolf on the nightstand.' Finally, when grown up, she contends with God and her belief in Him, and these thoughts become for her, '... a mark on the wall (23–5).' Here as elsewhere in the collection the traditional Orthodox and the secular coexist in a creative tension. Faith and culture, death and life, traditional and liberal views are in ongoing struggle in the formation of a person who is trying to work out who she is and what she believes as she negotiates her grief through writing.

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