

A preface and some extracts regarding Martin Johnston

I'll situate these extracts with a brief history of my acquaintance with Martin. In 1971 Alan Wearne had been invited to go to an inter-university arts festival in Canberra. He couldn't make it but sent my name to Kathy Bosser who was organising the poetry readings. I went there with my military jacket, scarves and beads, met John Tranter again (I'd seen him in Sydney the previous New Year) and met for the first time Terry Larsen, Andrew Huntley and Martin, three very different poets who by then had clearly performed together often. We all got on well so when I moved to Sydney from Melbourne in February the next year I soon got in touch and would often read with them. The three poets had by then published stapled quarto-sized collections of their work, Martin's being *Shadowmass*. Since then he had written 'The Blood Aquarium' which I admired greatly. Nonetheless I was very much aware of the differences between Martin's education and my own, even noting at one point a slight discomfort with the complex vocabulary in the work. Even John Forbes whom I met later felt the same way. The truth of the matter was that we were both suburban boys who through luck or determination (or both) had been to university. Martin's education was from a much deeper source than ours but I think at the time we were cautious, flaunting our parochialism, leavened as it was with readings of the New York poets. Despite all this we both (John and I) realised that Martin's work was of a high level. I guess to some extent he educated us even while taking aboard some of the American work we admired if with a certain scepticism.

In the early 1980s I wrote a series of parodies of Australian poets including some of poets whose work I admired. Martin was one of these poets and in 1985 we shared a Hale and Iremonger book launch at the Court House Hotel in Newtown. My book was *The Great Divide*, Martin's *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee Trap*. Instead of immediately reading from his book, he read my parody entitled 'from Micromicturatography':

Through Aesculaepius oesophagus
with juicy salience grape pursues grape
– on this island they always get you pissed.

The five Scythian gods of alcoholism
form a perfect metrical line, though
sometimes I'm hard put to know
what else to bloody do with them.

I would see Martin mostly at poetry readings but lost touch to some extent when I moved back to Melbourne in 1986. In June 1990 Gig Ryan phoned to let me know the sad news. I wrote the long poem 'Ornithology' some three years later. It is the last section of a book-length project called *Memorials*, published by Ken Bolton in 1996. At the time of writing John Forbes was still around. In retrospect it has become an elegy for him as well as Martin and the other lost poets. It's hard to disentangle the parts of this particular sequence that deal directly with Martin but I've made an attempt here.

(from 'Ornithology'):

Art Blakey
has just played 'Moanin'
a favorite from 1958
but I've removed my headphones
to see in May of 1993

a service today for Bob Harris,

which John attended - without Martin Johnston's 'In Memorium'
(buried in my caché of poetry, somewhere in a box labelled Tampax
up the road at Jenny's place.

I imagined Jas Duke
playing chess with Martin: they would have found community
though they never actually met.

Bob, Jas and Martin: all to some extent
'self-educated' - or at least
(in Martin's case)
'eccentrically' educated.

But Bob didn't

(as far as I know) play chess,
and wasn't a lover of knowledge for its own sake.

He was more directed,
funelling all things into poetry.

Jas could tell you about the I.W.W.
or the American electoral system;

Martin, anything

you'd want to know about Greek-Turkish conflict
or poets imprisoned by the junta.

Jas would recite my poems.

He knew them better than I did

- *his* concern

not *my* bad memory.

That I couldn't locate

Martin's poem for John

due to our interior rearrangement
- books elsewhere, except for a few odd titles,
the hall piled with junk (what useful things become
when shifted to inaccessible locations
- a creaking metaphor
for our lives' rearrangement, distantly
though importantly
by these dead poets.

* * *

I think about Art

- Art Blakey, that is,
and the Jazz Messengers -
and Jas, Martin and Bob:
their notions of art about as various as it's possible to be.

I remember once

John and I, criticising Martin's long poem
'To the Innate Island'
noting (to his chagrin)
this sort of poem couldn't be written anymore
(the poem with a whole culture as its burden)
but he'd written it, and
there it was, and is.
Younger, we were not aware
how deep the cut would be.

And now the poem exists;
a construct which gives pleasure
and gives the lie
to notions otherwise expressed
applauding the 'vernacular republic'
- John said of *that* one it implied
'the kingdom of proper usage' was elsewhere.
We wished to escape these handy apothegms,
write *what* was possible
as it was.

* * *

The Selected Martin Johnston
(John says) including prose
to appear next month
(will there ever be a collected poems?).

We would taunt Martin
with his prized pentameter
'polychromatic springtime's gay cadenza'
recited in race-callers' tones.
Martin, I remember mostly
weaving, snake-like at a table
barely able to stand
voicing his poems perfectly.

Laurie Duggan