

Insomnia and vertigo

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Jordie Albiston
VERTIGO: A CANTATA
John Leonard Press, \$23.95 pb, 51 pp, 9780977578757

Paul Mitchell
AWAKE DESPITE THE HOUR
Five Islands Press, \$21.95 pb, 70 pp, 9780734036940

READING PAUL MITCHELL'S second book of poems during a bout of insomnia seemed apposite not only because of its title but also because Mitchell's poetry occupies a strange middle place, somewhere between dream and reality. *Awake Despite the Hour* illustrates Mitchell's interest in occupying both the 'real' (politics, family and the quotidian) and the extramundane (imagination, the surreal and the metaphysical).

A mix of the everyday and the surreal or metaphysical is present in almost every poem. In 'The Devices We are Left To', household appliances are 'Known to wander at night' and 'gather beneath the passionfruit vine'. In 'Gone Wonderland', 'Boats sail into the harbour with masts at half-mast'. In 'Lyrics for at Least One Love Song', Mitchell rearranges the world through sheer verbal play: 'After driving most of the day, / you give up trafficking in society / and decide there are better ways / to make a loving.'

Mitchell's attraction to puns and other kinds of word play is consistent with a kind of jokiness found in some of his poems' titles (such as the 'How Many Light Bulbs Does it Take'). Such humour is in turn consistent with Mitchell's penchant for satire. In 'Contact' and 'Character Actor', this satirical bent is directed towards social, rather than explicitly political, phenomena. 'Contact' rehearses, perhaps too closely for real comic effect, the 'Did you get my e-mail?' conversation that can be heard around the country.

In poems such as 'Screen Print Activist', 'American Might' and 'ID', the satire has a more overtly political target. Here, too, Mitchell is at his most effective when inflecting the world through surrealism. In 'American Might', for instance, 'our movies are aircraft hangars / for favourite flying dreams'. In 'ID', an American flag is 'lining the insides of all coffins'. 'Screen Print Activist', by contrast, is more direct and apostrophises, to little effect, the famous image of Che Guevara that graces the T-shirts of countless faux activists.

Mitchell's satirical and political interests show that he is a poet of engagement. Ultimately, though, Mitchell's project is extra-political, seeking to engage with the world through a spirituality that may, or may not, be conventionally religious. In poems such as 'Prayer', Mitchell seeks a language for the inexpressible: 'There is no answer / to

my breathing, but I hear / the flutter of a bird's wing, / the curl of a cloud through air. / This is as close as I come.' Religious imagery could be perceived in the bird's wing or the cloud, but this is a poetry of approaches, rather than of the predetermined.

This condition is seen most obviously in the collection's eponymous poem. 'Awake, Despite the Hour' is 'after Kevin Hart', and one can sense Hart's own negative spirituality in the poet's prayer to something or someone unnamed – 'Please come to me'. The poem marks a moving and powerful end to the collection. For me, not all of the poems in *Awake Despite the Hour* are this successful, but Mitchell is clearly a poet who has developed a recognisable voice.

HAVING read Mitchell before sunrise, it seemed appropriate that I should turn to Jordie Albiston's *Vertigo: A Cantata* just as the birds began to sing. *Vertigo* is Albiston's fifth book of poems, and the refrains and chain structures found in her previous superb collection, *The Fall* (2003), have been transformed into an even more explicitly musical mode. The work is structured like a 'Cantata' in its interleaving of 'Arias' and 'Recitatives'. In addition, the lines are 'barred', with some phrases having musical repeat signs. For instance, '||: that is what she believed :||'.

Such a musical conceit could have been precious, but Albiston realises her project with absolute authority. Described by the blurb as telling 'the progress of grief for a lost love', *Vertigo* occupies the paradoxical space that powerful writing often does. It authoritatively images the loss of power; it evokes romance while seeking realist effects; it seeks the universal through the individual. In particular, it finds a way of expressing the most powerful of emotions through the most restrictive of forms.

The collection also works because of its lack of solemnity. There is much humour here, such as in 'Dolente' when the poet affirms that she belongs 'to the Cloud Appreciation Society', or in 'Andante', when she calls out 'Hey Mum! Hey Mum look at me! No man!'. The more dolorous moments are in turn achieved with wit: 'I cook half a / meal and have none of it none of it // eat myself up with regret.' In 'Azzuro', Albiston shows her skill in catalogue verse, listing various evocative things ('one type of / grass | another of blood') to illustrate her 'blue' condition.

As one would expect with a 'musical' work such as this, *Vertigo* is also structured through the elegant use of motifs: clouds, the sea, music, poetry and repeated phrases. The work is also richly intertextual, another method that drives the poetry away from conventional 'confessional verse'. *Vertigo* evokes romance genres – the fairy tale, gothic – as well as myth and the Bible to illustrate the irony of the failure of romance in the real world. In 'Attaco', the lover is urged to defend his 'sea queen' from the attacks of the world.

Cry out your war-cry
throw handfuls of love in their