

Classic Poetry Series

Michael Brennan
- poems -

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Michael Brennan(1973 -)

Michael Brennan, born in Sydney in 1973, is an Australian poet based in Tokyo.

His first volume of poetry, *The Imageless World*, won the Mary Gilmore Award. According to critic David McCooey, together with *Unanimous Night* it forms "the first parts of a triptych", and both books exhibit a "...complex and stylish interplay between opposing categories: light and dark; presence and absence; prose and poetry..." McCooey notes that "[t]he poetry is both brilliantly imagistic and pared back, both worldly and almost mystical in its concerns. In both books we find similar interests and motifs: hunger, darkness, eroticism, the earth and the sky..."

Brennan is the director of Vagabond Press, and the Australian editor of *Poetry International Web*. He is also an academic, and his doctoral thesis was entitled "The Impossible Gaze: [Robert Adamson](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-adamson) and the work of negativity."

Any Place To Go

It was days later. Not long after we left the convent
and the war stopped. I promised to take her
directly to the train station, but the sight of her
on the backseat scrambling out of that uniform,
and the highway opening up, well, what can I say
but we're all sinners at heart. Neither of us had
any place to go and when I made my suggestion,
she crossed herself one last time, and wiggled her toes.
It was outside Oodnadata that we met Rodney,
holding the big red by the scruff of its neck.
I told him, 'The butt of your cigarette is a refugee,
crossing to safety on your tired lips' tide.'
He didn't care for pleasantries, so we set about
the job at hand. Once the roo was staked out,
Georgia and I jumped back in the Holden. I watched
them diminishing in the rear-view mirror,
Rodney nursed the roo's head, whispering softly.
When Georgia flicked the radio on and we heard
the ceasefire had broken, you couldn't blame her,
or feel too bad about Rodney and his frisky red.
I told her, 'The world is a song left out in the rain.'
She countered, 'It is ash daydreaming its fire.'
I liked the drama of it, but preferred the way
the flesh of her lips clung briefly together
before she spoke, like loved ones embracing
and going off to war. I forget the details,
but remember the astonished faces driving past us,
mounted awkwardly on the highway's curb,
Georgia's sweet paddles waving out the car window,
her curled toes tangled in the cloudless blue.

Michael Brennan

Apogee

PRESSED BETWEEN two atmospheres, fatigue swelling in your eyes you rise up and face day, the intrigue of chance cast in the air, a face you assume, a name of so many syllables, so much history. Erstatz-coffee drawn from chicory, azure-leaves as bitter as morning's current affairs: the interminable process of adaptation. You sort the ephemera of the real, loose leaf files, around some system, think of distant friends, sense the mutual gravitation of associated bodies, the logic of words forming syssarcosis, ill-defined ligaments that bind and underwrite the plausible. You breathe in as contingency allows. Close a door, a series of syllables expiring in the mind, fractals of thought rhythmic, language operating below itself, opening in ganglia, flowering toward an impulse to annihilate le travail de destruction. On the wall of the station the metro is a giant's print, the concentric lines break through at points on the peripherique into the violence of unknown spaces. You press the green cardboard ticket between thumb and forefinger, and would decouple light from matter so that the universe grew transparent. You think of Kant unwriting God while a busker strums out a few lines of Brel je ne sais pas pourquoi le vent s'amuse dans les matins clairs. The woman opposite strokes a dog in a gym bag, stares, and you remember a girl in Maastricht now more distant than time and space allow, a name that returns in dreams of beautiful drownings. You cross the wooden tiers, the library stacks tower over you, the premeditations of their architecture grimly wry now the librarians no longer recall the catalogue's shibboleth and so, of course, you have a drink or sit by the river.

- For Tioui

Michael Brennan

Coast Roads

Nipples hard as bullets, that's how her way
With words put it. There wasn't much
Left to say after that, with the ferry leaving
At four. Given good traffic, I'd be home
In time for the coup. I'd been holidaying,
Fixing fishing nets up and down the coast.
I always had a gift for such things,
Prone to long silences and spitting the dummy.
It's sad to leave new friends but who could complain
if the conversation soured a little
Between talk of pet hates and hobbies. It's true,
Like everyone, I like the sound of a kneecap snapping.
Am I criminal simply for saying it? Even so,
Janette ironed the lapels of my uniform, made sure
The gold braid sat straight, that the medals shone
Bright, appropriate given the circumstances.
You have to love the attention to detail,
Her eyes always on the big picture.
Driving up the coast road, with smoke
Gathering on the horizon, I still wasn't sure
What her way with words was, but she did have
Plenty of nets to fix and you can't complain about that.
I'm often staggered by the waste and carelessness
Of people, but was happy to be on the way home,
With plenty of heads ahead to crack, and the thought
of those hard nipples safely tucked away.

Michael Brennan

Ellipses

Stained glass on a winter's day. I read your diary backwards.

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Tea hot in the cup, the sugarbowl empty and, yes, rain beginning to fall outside.

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Green eyes turning hazel in the sunlight.

Laughter on the skin of a peach.

??

Tell her this morning nothing is as sweet as the kiss on her lips, as though
nothing might be more.

Michael Brennan

From Town To Town

I should tell you, it's nothing like home.
Not one of them thinks of me as a stranger,
but they politely welcome me to their houses,
and feed me delicious feasts.
I know, I know it sounds ridiculous.
After each meal, they stroke my eyebrows
and beard, and dry the tears that have run
down my cheeks over months travelling
from town to town.
They tell me they are strangers here,
hanging their word for such things
in the cool night air, between
the beard-stroking and the young eyes
of the oldest among them.
They say soon they will leave me,
but I am to keep feasting in their absence,
that someone will come and I must invite him in,
I must not say too much, but feed him
and afterwards dry his tears.
Before I leave him, I must tell him this
is his home now, that he is no stranger here.
They say, none of this is strange.
They say, they will wait for me in the next town
with their gentle hands and playful eyes,
that the train will take me there, and on the way
I can listen to the old man's crying
and let the lightness of night find my face,
I can remember the feasts from home,
and wait for silence to have its fill.
They tell me, when we meet in the next town,
they will explain it all.

Michael Brennan

Grace

When we get back from here,
tell me how it was,
the stretches of land we crossed,
the friends we made.

Wake me up with a smile
that erases all the wrongs,
that speaks nothing of forgiveness,
that sings a few broken tunes,
half-remembered and off key.

Wait for me on the other side,
where we can dance a last rhumba
and tell each other secrets
we always knew.

Michael Brennan

Letter Home

"Ah, good. I was not very sure, finally, of having initiated the conversation myself."—"But could I have come otherwise?"—"Friendship would have sent you." He reflects again: "I wrote to you didn't I?" - Maurice Blanchot

These are strange lands I barely understand.
We are walking in a park of manicured lawns.
The sky is a mosaic of syllables
Parts of a puzzle.

The people here douse themselves in petrol
As though poetry mattered.
Some of the pieces are missing

And the old man tells me we have to make new some new ones.
He looks through me. It matters little if I am here.

In a corner of the park monks are burying elephants.
I found a word under my tongue but swallowed it whole.

The lawn is a lesson in geometry, it imitates
The cast of the concrete walls,

I don't know if the grass is grey or the concrete grass.
None of it looks like the sky, least of all the sky.

Fashioned out of water, paths no one walks on
Lead into proximity.

The old man spits out tones that sit in pools on the water, Half-oil, half-mercury,
he tests them with one foot.

In the distance someone or something catches fire. Perhaps it is the elephants
coming into bloom.

Michael Brennan

Letter Home (Ii)

On a street in Tenerife she finds a photo
A pigtailed girl she places on her index finger's

Soft pad and balances there each day of her life.
At night she listens to jazz in Stockwell

Where she gets in for free
While outside estate kids hustle for crack

Or she dreams carefully of lavas turned to basalt,
And a boy half-covered by dune sands,

As some morning she could discover certainty
Between the sketches of her notebook:

The woman with the oversized eye, the thin bodies
And small breasts hidden between phone numbers.

She doesn't walk the quickest way home
After the jazz, through the unkempt cemetery,

Where male lovers meet at night to touch
That place between desire and fear, where

She's seen a fig's roots melt over a grave
And clutch a headstone in its liquid grip,

1856 in one hand, today in the other.
She doesn't know the girl with the pigtails

Is already nineteen and works as a temp in the City,
How she laughs with friends and falls in love easily.

Michael Brennan

Postcards

The old man fumbles with his keys,
The waiter appears embarrassed.

'I don't want to talk about love any more,
But sing it on the pebble of your tongue.'

She listens, counts petals of a sunflower on the table between them, and listens.

'I want to sing so the stone rests, knows
Nothing of the world but that love creates us

From a moment, that the world only exists
The fraction before it sings.'

She listens and counts petals just so many grains of sunlight trapped.

Michael Brennan

Revelation

The world was already the world
and we were looking for ourselves.
Like something mispronounced
we kept repeating our names,
each syllable a slice of concrete
we tied to our feet for security.

In those days, there were stories,
an uncle ascending into cirrus,
an aunt who never surfaced again,
we dreamt of the long narrow road,
the precision of a snowflake falling,
the wrong turn that always got us there.

In the end we went out beyond the scrub,
to the free-to-air stations, thinking about
sophisticated things, branch stacking
and pork-barreling, the light in her smile
or the time in the middle of an interview
she reached out and touched his hand.

Michael Brennan

Salvation

I had drifted out far beyond
ill-reputed water metaphors
tipped off by a cunning editor.
Careful not to turn oceans to sand,
I considered cityscapes
as the inside of a river oyster.

I gave up amphetamines and yoga,
hunting around for an autobiography
I could live with. I ate hearty steaks
and wandered aimlessly willingly
until blind chance knocked at my door
yelling, 'The Gold Coast saved me.'

I saw everywhere I'd gone wrong
running about in her sun-filled hazel eyes.
The waves were glass escalators rising
shy with the hum of contentment.
I counted the change in my pockets
as the horizons clouded over with promise.
I had just enough for the last cocktail.

Michael Brennan

The Disaster Of Grace

It's true the mirror was in love, finding itself in every face.
It was not a function of syntax. His life was slurred.
Yes, it's true, the heart hid in the dark with the dream of light.
How did you disguise yourself with only a pause?
How hungry I grew after the lean years.
The mirror stole the face I would have traded for such emptiness.
All those wars of attrition. Silly lovers.

If I could reach you with anything but myself, what then might begin?
Rest maybe. When the sleepless awake. When the dreamers sleep.
What gentleness, the bricks barely brush these first flowers.
Ahk, sly dog, teaching me touch.
My hands fell apart in yours.
Poor soul, dance upon my feet awhile.
Hunger, never leave me alone.
All that I left was a beginning.
I could have cried for him, but for his friendship.
No, not her, the drinking was alone.
Oh, that the half-hearted might find each other!
It was mid-winter when his eyelids said their farewells to each other.
Over those long months, the light remembered the heart's darkness.
When the mirror finally touched me, it was drunk.
What ugliness, the self reflecting, the others looking on.
Will it be gone tomorrow? Tomorrow. When did it begin?
It was a terrible joke. A century of wars you say?
When my coffee is finished and the rain begins and I leave, please, oh please,
this time, break into song.
I dried out when the rain held the promise of colour against the sun.
When did my youth get the paunch and knowing look?
Every word, given time, believes it's another.
That's a cheap trick, paying for dinner then growing old together.
I no longer know if I held it against you, or if it held me from you.
Little devil, youth, with your bad memory and tall tales.
I dreamed of you, friend, this great world without a face.
Oh, don't molest me, words, randy little hot'n'tots.
Stop talking. You won't make honey from mortar.
Why did you stop? Were your vowels cumbersome and long?
Such complicity! Praise this long life of late-running buses!
OK, OK, have your way, senseless little things, consonants and accretions, you

shuffling orgy gone hungry.

Where were you, trouble, when I needed you?

Such tenderness swapping partners, words, holding hands pretending to be friends.

Look, snorkleporkle! All these years together, neither of us aged.

What happiness, a lifetime of delusions against the muttering and miracles.

Cough it up, eh. That love of yours. Hawk it out, a good big gob, rough as it is.

Hey, jerk, stop dreaming me up with such chinless ease!

Don't leave me alone with words. Who will they talk too?

All that tough talk dented the beak of the bird pecking at your temple.

Go on, scuttle off, skip-ship, flip-flap. I'll keep your rudder safe `til you get back.

Ah, sweet feet of clay, what beautiful shapes you might still become!

Michael Brennan

The Saved

We were always mucking about
with the unmentionables,
trudging through the snow.
Winter closing around the heat
concocted by what our desires shared.

It wasn't highbrow anymore
as we learnt to grind and crank
bodies, our saving grace, the fires
of hell these days reserved
for the faint of heart and feckless.

Michael Brennan

Who Is Alibi Wednesday?

Don't worry too much, it's all taken care of.
That's what the city tells you. You're goo-goo about it,
fresh off the boat, looking to be the grit in its dozen oysters.
The tide runs in and out of Sydney Harbour, as though
the city was breathing. It's been doing it for years!
Only after the pretty blonde from the Welcoming Party
checks your papers does she snip the stitches from your lips
and pass you a Southerly Buster. The smugglers told you
the truth: this city squeals delightfully in equal portions of
vodka, ice and speed. It's a heady mix, and after your forty days
in the desert, you're looking for a bit of fun. You're so happy
you shout beautiful curses in a language no one understands.
When the gutterals catch on, you end up in a succès de scandal
corrupting the local dialect and importing foreign literature in bulk.
The executioner rolls in, all black mask, bowie knife and speech
pathology. When you feel the blade's tongue lick your throat,
you are still giddily scratching surfaces, falling in love with the city.

Michael Brennan