



13 JUL, 2019

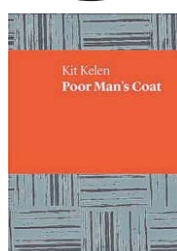
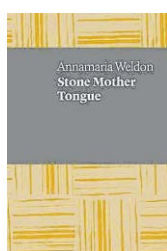
Gods, ecology and Norwegian woods

Weekend Australian, Australia



Page 1 of 4

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STONE MOTHER TONGUE

By Annamaria Weldon
UWAP, 134pp, \$22.95

WILDLIFE OF BERLIN

By Philip Neilsen
UWAP, 107pp, \$22.99

POOR MAN'S COAT: HARDANGER POEMS

By Kit Kelen
UWAP, 195pp, \$22.99

Geoff Page

The history of poetry publishing in this country is an honourable, if unstable, one. Presses arise (often through the enthusiasm of one person), thrive for a few years, even decades, then die (from a variety of causes, too many to list here). At roughly 10 collections a year in its first three years, the UWAP Poetry Series, driven mainly by Terri-ann White at the University of Western Australia, is in its vigorous early stages.

Annamaria Weldon, the first of three UWAP poets to be considered here, was born in Malta and emigrated to Western Australia in 1984. *Stone Mother Tongue* is a highly evocative live compose about her ancient island homeland, with a short tailpiece set in WA.

The Maltese poems are divided into "Prehistoric Malta" and "Phoenician Malta" and focus particularly on Malta's distinctive Mediterranean landscapes, especially its geology.

Weldon is deeply interested in how the ancient Maltese gods (and goddesses, especially Sansuna) appear to persist in the landscape, despite the arrival of later gods and secularism. In this she has something in common with modern Greek poets such as George Seferis and Yannis Ritsos.

Given the absence of any written record, however, it's hard to know whether Weldon is being unduly nostalgic about her Maltese goddess. In the book's title poem, though, her evocation (almost an invocation) is convincing enough: "Goddess, when your body was worshipped / a holy matrix of the world incarnate / no clerics or sceptics mocked our devotion / and love conjured more

power than hate."

A standout in the book's second part is Weldon's 10-poem sequence, *The Quartermaster's scribe*. Starting from the detail that "captive women could be / assigned as scribes to passing merchants", the poet creates a taut, persuasive love story, written from the woman's point of view.

At first the scribe has to keep her love secret and also endure long periods waiting for her Phoenician lover to return: "Memories are haptic fragments, sharp as shards / of pottery, strange yet familiar as his skin first felt against mine."

Philip Neilsen, born in 1949, is one of a diminishing breed of Australian poets whose poems are always incisive and tightly focused. Often witty, but poignant too, they rarely run to more than two pages and almost unfailingly leave a distinct impression on the emotions.

Wildlife in Berlin is Neilsen's sixth collection. The first, *Faces of a Sitting Man*, appeared in 1975.

The reasons for this relative paucity are hinted at, if not explained, in his poem *The University Makes a Poem*: "We creative writing academics keep saying / I must find time. Submit an ARC application / and a short story is snuffed out, / supervise enough PhDs and a novel bites the dust."

Though self-directed, the satire is mordant. Halfway through, Neilsen notes: "a student reading Proust on the quadrangle lawn / is hailed as a guru." Yet there are consolations: "classes still have epiphanies which come / and pass, well-lit, like a night train".

With characteristic subtlety Neilsen remembers that the great writers "worked in banks, toiled as labourers, / fought fascism". There's also a nicely oblique reference to Virginia Woolf: "Even the privileged were worn down / by river stones of despair."

It's touches like that which take Neilsen so easily from satire to tenderness, opposite polarities reinforced by their adjacency.

Wildlife in Berlin is in five loosely thematic parts, the first two of which are concerned, at least tangentially, with climate change and its ecological impact. Unlike some other eco-poets, Neilsen has nothing lugubrious or theoretical about him. He simply rejoices in an animal's unique presence and then, often sardonically, laments its imminent departure.

Excessive emissions of CO₂ are not the only problem, though. In *Americans are Shooting Elephants*, Neilsen's anger is distilled — and effective. The first six lines of the poem are among the best in the book, while also being characteristic. "A man fat and flushed as a tallow factory / scowls behind a lion he has shot. / His belly circumnavigates the acacias, / the scrap of a wife's hand on one shoulder. // A blonde girl, cute as a cartridge, / lies smiling besides her collapsed giraffe."

Wildlife of Berlin is one of those rare collections where the reviewer, in naughtily turning down corners to quote from later, discovers that they have almost ruined the whole book. There's



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hardly a poem that couldn't be profitably sampled to illustrate one of the book's many pleasures. Take, for instance, the last four lines of *School Chemistry Class*, about an early girlfriend: "Your mother still liked me though, / said there are plenty of atoms in the sea // but I knew only one had your odour, colour, / unique properties under conditions of heat."

It may not always be a compliment to the author to say so but one of the joys of reading a book such as Kit Kelen's *Poor Man's Coat: Hardanger Poems* is all the other poets it pleausurably brings to mind — and this is not to take away from Kelen's individuality. This reviewer has certainly not read in recent years an Australian collection remotely like it.

Perhaps the most far-reaching presence is that of the Japanese haiku writer Matsuo Basho (1644-94). Kelen has a comparable approach to nature: enthusiastic and relishing its detail.

EE Cummings is another presence (his many poems about spring, for instance), as are William Carlos Williams and Emily Dickinson, the latter with her mixture of nature and metaphysics

and her easy movement between the two. Even Gerard Manley Hopkins — the lyrical octaves of his nature sonnets before the theology cuts in.

There's also an echo of our own Michael Dransfield — his metaphysical poems, not the drug ones. One might even add the Great American Songbook. With their snappy rhythms and clever internal rhymes, many of Kelen's poems feel like songs even if they're not written to the 32-bar, AABA format).

Poor Man's Coat comes from two long residencies in the small industrial Norwegian town of Alvik, though Kelen is much more interested in its landscapes, seasons and weather than he is in its industry. He's almost as much in love with the mountains as Maria in *The Sound of Music* (though he does get dangerously lost on at least one occasion).

It may be significant here that Kelen credits, in passing, Project 366, where poets agreed to write a poem a day for a year and workshop them online. In some parts of the book, one can gain the uneasy feeling that Kelen is writing the same poem over and over again and not quite getting it right. Clouds, for instance, are wonderfully ubiquitous. Likewise, mountains.

One of this reviewer's favourite poems is one of the least cloud-filled: *I don't know what they make in there*. The poet starts by admitting "I read a description but it didn't stick" and then goes on to note "it has a name I can't remember / it has to have a use".

Near the end he adds: "I can't tell by smell / but I can smell it / I know there's money there". Then, risking being seen as a typical poet, he concludes: "I like to walk away from it // must be the mountain calls".

More characteristic, though, is the mysteriously metaphysical *the other worlds*, short enough to quote in full. Its airy, almost naive tone and its echoes of children's songs are typical of the collection more generally. "The other worlds // are all among us / tune of the time / each its own peculiar calling / and some are mapped / and some are sung / and some lie under / the hands of a breeze / so gentle no leaf stirs."

Geoff Page is a poet and critic.



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Poets Annamaria
Weldon, Philip
Neilsen, below
right; and
Kit Kelen