

Review by Christopher Ringrose: Koulouris and Ziguras

Niki Koulouris, *The sea with no one in it*. ISBN 978-0-88984-393-9. Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 2013. RRP \$(Canadian) 14.95

Jakob Ziguras, *Chains of Snow*. ISBN 978-1-922080-20-2. Sydney, NSW: Pitt Street Poetry, 2013. RRP \$25

In these two beautifully-produced volumes, The Porcupine's Quill press and Pitt Street Poetry have provided their poets with first collections that are a pleasure to handle and read. Both writers are impressive, too, in their contrasting ways, showing contemporary poetry to be hospitable to a variety of styles and modes.

Sydney's Jakob Ziguras has already built a reputation in Australia, where he has been short-listed for major prizes, and published in prestigious journals. *Chains of Snow* hardly feels like a first collection; far from being tentative in tone, it allies grave assurance to a fine use of rhyme and meter. These give each poem a momentum that often comes to rest in glowing images. At the end of 'The Rare Book Library' the delight in learning is palpable:

The room's low ceiling fills with harmony
Of patiently illuminated things;
And suddenly an unexpected wind
Blows through orders of dusty folded wings.

"Cordoba" connects a sense of Spanish summer heat to the writer's physical longing:

A church grew in the paradise of palms.
Outside, the heat, drunk with jealous rage,
Pounded on doors, possessive of your charms: (80)

(The phrase 'your charms' there has a slightly antique quality that is not uncharacteristic of this collection, but one which the poet is able to carry off.) Ziguras's subjects are rich ones – the visions of the young Pharaoh Akhenaten, Orpheus's backward look at Eurydice, Aristotle depicted on his death-bed, evocations of Poland (where Ziguras was born in 1977) and other geographical locations – and he quarries them with an awareness of mortality, a smouldering sense of injustice, and hopes of renewal. His use of blank verse and suave rhymed forms is well-

suiting to his material, but there are also free verse poems, some of which deploy his wry sense of humour.

Some of the Australian-set poems carry less of the weight of history that freights much of *Chains of Snow*. 'The Skink' 'curls around a sapling's slender wrist', and this vivid simile beckons the poem on to a meditation on the differences between skink time and human time: 'His time is honey: fragrant, viscous, warm'. The portrait of Sydney's Derwent Street is harsher, but even there jasmine 'climb[s] backyard fences/Like a drunk schoolgirl sneaking home'. In Paris, Ziguras visits the Père Lachaise Cemetery, where a letter left on Oscar Wilde's tomb in 'a schoolgirl's scrawl' mourns that 'The only man I could ever love is dead'.

Ziguras has no fear of abstractions; like the American poet J.V. Cunningham, he blends philosophical meditation with a modern sensibility. At times, these meditations result in a portentousness that I found less appealing, especially when it went on at length. In 'Abendland', the poet trespasses at 4 a.m. in an abandoned power station in Balmain and finds that:

Dawn is a clear alembic where the night
Refines its substance; darkness is distilled
Into elixir of new life and light
Gilds the horizon's gently curving rim. (28)

He adds that the venue resembles 'a Castle of Wonders that Clinschor built/to bind the virgin beauties to his whim'. Here there is a sense of strain that does not register when Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' is lightly touched on in 'Coastal Evening' – or in the tense web of forces between Simone Weil, the Old Testament and Rembrandt in the free verse poem 'Abraham and Isaac'. The latter poem fixes on Rembrandt's rendering of the moment where the knife is poised above the neck of Isaac. Judgement, error, certainty and evil are often explored in *Chains of Snow*. 'Stone Courtyard' powerfully imagines the place where the men memorialized in Zbigniew Herbert's celebrated poem 'Five Men' were executed, and opens with a grimly realistic detail: 'these have no faces, till the hessian sacks/are pulled off' (41). Indeed, Ziguras's own humanism recalls that of Herbert's fine poem.

The sea with no one in it provides an intriguing contrast to *Chains of Snow* in many respects, though here, too, the writing is of high quality. Former Melburnian Niki Koulouris currently resides in Canada, where this collection was published. The first section comprises a sustained seascape. Sound patterns and seductive brief phrases play off a metaphysical sense of the ocean, and its power over the imagination, against more concrete images and ideas. Words and phrases nudge against each other and form alliances. The sea is ‘a realmless bridge’ (24) that connects continents and countries, themselves shaped on the map like ‘the steak of Africa’ or ‘the broken comma/of New Zealand’. Koulouris’s sea resists the reassuring or threatening realities of the shore:

The sea does not need lions in it
needless elephants and bears
from here there is nothing to behold
but the solitary cranking out of waves
though speared it has no enemies
it does not need ashes in it (23)

Nevertheless, here one is reminded that the (Southern) Cross, the (Great) Bear and the (Constellation) Leo are reflected in the ocean, even if it is indifferent to them, as it is to the scattering of funerary ashes. I enjoyed the enigmatic quality of other images, like the ‘cowled’ figures in Poem 14 of ‘who walked on sand/as dangerous as bread (24). They suggest asceticism and containment; the paradoxical “dangerous bread” evokes communion, crucifixion and religious conflict, as well as the struggle for human survival. The productivity of the images makes these only provisional conclusions. Indeed, the significance of the sea itself is always deferred:

when I think of the sea
it is never like this
look at it as if it
is all you will see

it is here because
you thought of it
and because you thought of it
it is dynamite

In the final poem (Number 20) of Part One, Jasper Johns' paintings of flags – parodic evocations of allegiances and symbol-making – lead into a compressed history of human development: shields, helmets, crosses, with all their implications of empire.

This poem acts as a bridge into Part 2, where a number of ekphrastic poems exuberantly inhabit the work of modern artists and ancient monuments. Some readers will readily relate to the evocations of the work of Anselm Kiefer, Philip Guston and Maurice Sendak, and to Berlin's Pergamon Museum. Others will be intrigued enough to seek out the originals. It would be hard not to look up the Philip Guston paintings that inspired the cunningly musical juxtapositions of 'Arrows for Stone Fruit':

painter of cartoon Klansmen, distended bricks, light bulbs,
an eye or two, paintbrushes, the under soles of boots,
the odd telephone and sandwich, plank, clock,
and cigarette rolled into a snail. (35)

Koulouris's writing can itself be painterly, as in the detailing of the effects of rain in Poem 36:

soon it will leave
rivets in ivy
thin nations on windcreens
the holes of centimes
or drachmas (50)

There is a delight in language through Part 2. This includes an enjoyable homage to St Kilda's Esplanade Hotel in Melbourne, with its 'slab portico ... wide as the wingspan of Pegasus' and its atmosphere redolent of 'bygone clouds of/Lolly Gobble Bliss Bomb' (53), as well as clever wordplay in the last poem in the book (Poem 44):

the river
no wider than
a cross

you are a fish
in the Seine

the midnight mast
of the brakeless
Nile (58)

These are two fine collections; the two poets will undoubtedly go on to produce more. This would be a good point for readers to acquire and enjoy first editions of their debut volumes.

Christopher Ringrose is a writer of poetry and fiction who lives in Melbourne, where he is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. He co-edits the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and the Sydney-based magazine *Papier-Mache*.