

As is collage, so is poetry:

Loni Jeffs reviews

Lost Lake

Bella Li

Vagabond Press, 2018

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In her first collection of poetry *Argosy* (Vagabond Press, 2017), Bella Li revealed her writing to be unconventionally and intriguingly visual. This is undoubtedly reinforced by her second title, *Lost Lake* (Vagabond Press, 2018). More than poet, Li assumes the role of archivist, collector: she creates collages, both written and visual, from a variety of sources, cataloguing history, popular culture, religion and literature. The result is a compelling art-literary hybrid, containing within its covers a surreal and expansive narrative and thematic world.

Poetry has never confined itself to being only words on a page. The visual dimension of the text alone strongly connects it to image-making. Consider Blake's illuminated manuscripts, the practice of ekphrasis, concrete poetry; that poets were so tied up in movements like dadaism, surrealism. The crossroads of visual art and poetry is incredibly rich and a space Li navigates with ease.

Because this work is built from the texts and images of history and literature, the constructed world of *Lost Lake* feels eerily familiar, like our own. This is a surrealist means of art making, taking recognisable objects, concepts, voices and splicing them together to form a new reality. The result is a rupture of logic, of rational concepts. Consider the cover collage, *A*

Second Curiosity, a grainy, midcentury illustration of a domestic interior in which a heart-snapped cutting of bees in their hive goes almost unnoticed, resting atop a three-seater couch. Adorned with three small daisies, it is quaint. Unnerving.

In the book's first part, 'absence or – the Witch –', a sense of degeneration is evoked, a foreshadowing of something apocalyptic:

But in this World, there is no Happiness perpetual. Whoever travels over this Wilderness, their Experiences of Regeneration, should be troubled so much. What went we out to find. There will come Times in after Ages, when the *Clouds will overshadow and darken the Sky*.

The language is biblical, scripture-like, sourced from books about 17th century Salem and—contrastingly, relatedly—the very small, hard-worked life of the honeybee. Similarly, part two, 'CIRCLES (A Parable)', begins with the epigraph:

Let us descend into the blind world now

Drawing heavily from Milton's epic work *Paradise Lost*, this section, broken into nine books (a nod to Milton's original form) describes a fall from grace. The visuals in this section are elemental—earth, fire, water. They are also transcontinental—images of a desert, the canyon, volcano, wetlands and so prescribe to the reader a migratory sense of movement. And ever so slightly, these are collages too, an image pasted over its larger self, to create a small discontinuity. A subtle fracture.

In text, a similar subtlety of irrationality is conjured. From 'Book V':

I saw vague forms of men running, from the depths of the woods. Carried off by foxes. I arrived at the place from which, on clear days, you could see a chain of mountains.

And then:

The road turned a little corner and vanished into the distance.

In *Argosy*, Li established the voyage or journey as a central theme, the collection inspired by the story of French explorer Jean-François de Galaup de La Pérouse. In *Lost Lake* however, the journey seems like an escape, an act of necessity: a pilgrimage.

In an interview with the podcast *On Writing*, Li identifies the fourth section '[CORNELL]' as the genesis of *Lost Lake*'s form. A commission for the *Archives of American Art Journal*, Li was limited to using materials found in a box which contained objects once belonging to Joseph Cornell. A pioneer of assemblage, heavily influenced by Surrealism, Cornell was an expert in creating expansive, dreamlike worlds, which were neatly housed within the confines of a box or page.

In *Lost Lake*, Li does the same. She is navigating, recording, archiving the documents she encounters/notices/reads and then writes *with* them. The dialogues that occur between these and between the reader are what make *Lost Lake* so compelling. Much of poetics is the act of connection-making, engaging with writers of the past, histories, myths and drawing connections between them and to the contemporary.

In the second half of *Lost Lake*, authorship becomes slightly more tangible. In 'DEFINITIONS OF THE FRONTIERS', the images are photographs taken by Li, and the writing also seems to be 'hers'. The pieces in this sequence feel like small town stories, folklore. They are peaceful, but infer a sense of disconnectedness to each other:

When he left, he left the 'Hot Doughnuts Now' sign plugged in, so people were always pulling up and then driving away because there weren't any doughnuts anymore, not even cold ones.

It is a carefully considered act of framing and reframing that Li executes in *Lost Lake*. An action that is so integral to poetry in any case. The white space between words and lines, the page itself, a book's physical dimensions—each kind of perimeter affects what is contained within. Even Li's photographs are tied to this action. Consider that it is rare to take a photo, without first framing up the shot.

The role of the reader, like that of writer, is renegotiated in *Lost Lake*, as each individual will bring to the collection their own 'frames' of reference. A reader may be able to make meaning of the source material, or may not. Both readings are valid. An in-depth *Notes* section, which lists each of her references and influences, provides an opportunity for active reading: to cross reference, begin again, research, adding layers of context, layers of meaning. In this way the reader experiences, even enacts, a kind of collaging.

Lost Lake's eponymous sequence shows a rocky landscape that looks chalky, mineral-based. At face value, the photographs show what one might assume to be a barren landscape. They capture however, a geothermal area on New Zealand's North Island where heat escapes at the Earth's surface, propelling water almost 30 metres into the air. A trajectory the narrative seems also to take:

So the years passed, each like the next. Not resting on the planet itself, but suspended above.

Li has been involved in every step of this book's production. She has been designer, typesetter, illustrator—taking the acts of publishing on as part of her practice. *Lost Lake* is testament to what results when the author is involved at all points of publication. A full-colour print, spacious in its layout, yet a compact object, this book achieves an artwork-like beauty that only enhances its literary qualities. The covers, the paper quality, the type of binding—in fixing together each of these elements Li designates a guiding choreography for the reader.

The eighth and final section of this book, 'The Star Diaries', draws from writers such as JG Ballard, Ursula Le Guin, Stanislaw Lem, and from films like *Solaris* and *Blade Runner 2049*. This sequence relays 21 voyages, beginning at the seventh, combining prose poems and photographs. Overwhelmingly, this closing section of *Lost Lake* tells the story of movement, traversing seas, landscapes, architectures. Time expands in this section, days and years pass in what feels like exponential increments. There is a sense of watching things go by, as the passing of time and distance merge into a singular dystopian, surreal experience:

Rusted steel girders, dark zodiacs with their blurred walls. In the months before, that slow odyssey, country by country, through the drowned south. Drifting over former libraries and museums, all sunk beneath the jelly-green water. The old scow navigated, under white midnight, past ghostly deltas, luminous beaches; each in their turn submerged and sinking.

The eight sequences of *Lost Lake* exemplify a unique and precise poetics. The journey, voyage, time, space and literature are all at play. The materiality of words, image, paper, memories. The expansion of the image, not merely as documentation, or decoration, but as a dedicated storyteller. The futuristic, the historical. Bees, trains. Photos taken on the Californian coast. Li constructs a space for making connections, allowing readers to navigate relationships between seemingly disparate source texts. What Li has constructed is an incredibly rich text, which so comfortably occupies a crevice between art, poetry and literature.

Opposite: *Worsening Improvement* (2019), acrylic, spray paint, oil stick, wax crayon, charcoal, graphite on canvas, 152 x 183 cm, Joi Murugavell