

Ioana Petrescu, *Persuading Plato*. Adelaide, Australia: Ginnendera Press, 2012. 64 pp. ISBN 978-1-74027-742-6.

Better than anything I could write, these words from one of Scottish poet Kenneth White's poems best describes the poems in *Persuading Plato*, Ioana Petrescu's new poetry collection: "Ah, the clear-sounding words/ and a world/ opening, opening."¹ From "Tear Gas (Romania 1991)" on the first page, to the deceptively simple "Thoughts" on the last, I learn something new every time I read her clear-sounding words as they open new worlds and shed new light on old memories. "Words: Parts of me/ on a journey" (64). Think about it for a moment and it's clear that is what words are: a profound insight simply and profoundly put.

The collection begins with three poems set in Romania before and during the revolution in 1989. In two of them – "Tear Gas (Romania, 1991)" and "Revolution Scenario, Romania, 1989" – I am reminded of Romanian immigrants I knew in Seattle in the early 1990s and the stories they told me. In "Tear Gas" she writes of riding in a train compartment with a miner who tells of the riots he was in a year ago. Listening, she realises that had they met then, he and his fellows would probably have beaten her up. "I look him directly in the face./ His eyes aren't swollen and itchy any more. Mine are." In "Revolution Scenario" "Molten fear flows/ through transparent arteries,/ sets the veins alight" and "Words hang on men's lips/ like wet cigarette tips/ stain their breath and tongues," putting me in mind of something a young man from Timisoara told me about the revolution and the fear he felt until he saw a soldier shoot and kill a young pregnant woman. "And then I fought!" he said, his voice husky with emotion.

In "Migrants" she writes of leaving Romania for Australia, and the challenges that presented. I am reminded of when my wife and I moved from Seattle to Sapporo, Japan in 2008; for Ioana Petrescu, the situation was far different. "Twenty kilograms per person, says a voice on the phone/ and I look at my suitcase. A few clothes, shoes,/ two books – I ripped off the covers to make them lighter./ The other books I own will have to stay behind." Her son arrived in Adelaide with a grey elephant, "some Lego bricks, two books,/ and the light toys courtesy of the airlines." For years her son will sleep with the elephant, "building dreams out of Lego bricks" (12). In "Do you miss us?" she wonders if those who left ten years ago are missed, or has the void been filled with new generations, theirs long forgotten? In "Camping" an Australian friend

¹ From "Scotia Deserta." Kenneth White, *Open World: The Collected Poems 1960-2000*. Edinburgh, Polygon Books, 2003. 599.

takes his family to the outback to “rough it.” What was hard for them (peeing in the bushes in the cold, eating canned food from the boot and being without all the conveniences of genteel city living) was nothing compared to what she lived through. When asked if she enjoys camping, she realises “that’s what it was/ back home before the ‘89 revolution –/ forever camping” (16).

In “Pickled Tongue” “language (is) an olive on my pickled tongue.../ cry in a language, laugh in another, add pepper and chili” (17) – the experience of being an immigrant in a strange land, something that many modern people know so well.

There is so much here in these sixty-four pages. Near the end of the collection she returns to Romania in two poems about her parents, “Poem for my mother who died of cancer in 2007,” she writes: “I dreamt you with violets –/ the kind from home with big round petals/ their colour and fragrance so cliched/ that they felt familiar, close/ almost as if/ you were” (61), the period is missing because the experience has no end. In the next poem, “His Collarbone,” her father’s bones are buried at the foot of his wife’s coffin. “First time I see my father after twenty years,/ a bag of bones ... / all I can see poking through the bag/ is this delicately curved white collarbone./ I wonder how he could carry me when I was little,/ on his back, if his white bones were all that delicate” (62). So very poignant and unforgettable.

The four poems on the subject of writing – “Writing,” “Expecting,” “Hands” and “Editing” are gems, each one easily expandable into a “Lecture.” The shortest poems, each one a gold nugget: “Geometry,” “Silly Moon Verses,” “Sketches for women,” “Gnomes,” and “Thoughts.” Each one, clear-sounding words that open onto a world of meaning. “The moon is a round Swiss cheese./ The poet sifts his imagination through it” (45). “The moon stayed late last night./ The poet smears makeup on its purple rings” (“Silly Moon Verses 45). Hafiz could have written that.

There is simply no end to the richness in this fine collection. In “Thoughts,” she has this to say about poetry: “Poem: Words huddled together/ waiting to be shaped by the warmth of a moment” to an open, opening world beyond. Endless, isn’t it, once you think about it. And that is what makes Iona Petrescu’s poetry so appealing to the reader. There is poetry literally everywhere in everything, if we have the presence of mind and heart to see it.

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