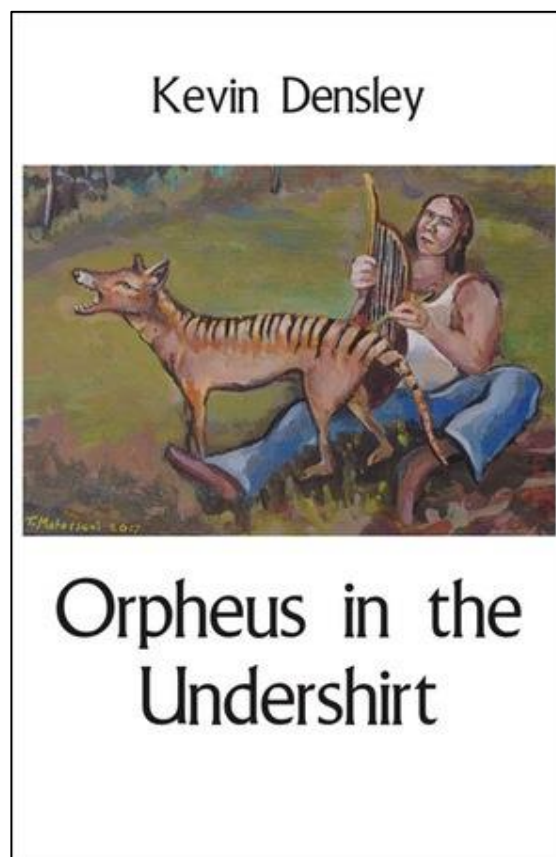


Kevin Densley's *Orpheus in the Undershirt*

By Tenille McDermott

A series of contrasts—visual, thematic and temporal—lie at the heart of *Orpheus in the Undershirt*. The very title of this, Kevin Densley's third collection of poetry, is evocative of the two types of poems found within its pages. The image of the mythological Orpheus clad in the accoutrements of the blue-collar Australian is a playful one, a simultaneous contradiction and consolidation of classical and working-class conceptions of masculinity. Such contrariety prefigures many of the poems in the collection, which propose a series of unexpected comparisons and contrasts that are, by turns, playful and wry. Orpheus is, however, also a reminder of the power of poetry and music to move and provoke, and other poems in this volume draw inspiration from art, history and place in order to demonstrate poetry's capacity to serve as a channel for unique insight.

Throughout the collection, Densley weaves the gravitas of high art into the minutiae of everyday experience. In "Handel's Father was a Barber-surgeon," for instance, AC/DC's tracks are considered in the light of the works of Bach and Mary Shelley. Densley wonders if "the guitar obbligato / that old Angus plays" in "Thunderstruck" is "essentially Bach's / 'Toccatà and Fugue' / played backwards? /—Jesus, I hope



so." Meanwhile, the song "Who Made Who" is likewise compared to Shelley's *Frankenstein* (16). "The Valley of the Shadow of" similarly blends the biblical and the working-class, describing Melbourne's Racecourse Road as "the valley of the shadow of / the high-rise housing commission flats" (24). While the effect of such contrasts is lighthearted in "Handel's Father," here it strikes notes of pathos. Densley describes the area as one "where Melbourne's cheapest

beer can be bought / in any of three supermarkets / (for stupefaction purposes, / the proletariat in the high-rise / need affordable alcohol)” (24). In both works, the cultured and the uncouth are brought together in a union that suggests both are vital to the broader human experience.

One of the longer poems in the collection, “Triptych,” directly references Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque*, and juxtaposes the figure of the concubine with that most modern of modern conveniences: fast food. Densley’s odalisque lies “naked upon the divan,” the curve of her back “long and sensual” (40). Attention is drawn to “the ripe firmness of the visible breast,” while nearby is placed “a biodegradable brown-paper bag / upon which is a symbol known / throughout the world” (40). In the second panel of the titular triptych, the odalisque is poised to consume the burger, and Densley neatly parodies the voice of an art critic in the last lines of the stanza: “Notice that the slice of cheese / in the bun she is holding / has curled its corners up, / as if it is rejecting / the burger underneath it” (41). The final panel reveals a “stark, horrible sight,” the body of the odalisque transformed so that its features “sag” and “hang limply,” the eyes “open, vacant, gelatinous” (41). Here, the meeting of fine art and contemporary consumer culture indicts the exploitative nature of both.

Several other poems in *Orpheus in the Undershirt* are similarly inspired by works of art and historical artefacts, but achieve different ends.

Rather than contrasting classical and contemporary cultural touchstones, these works aim to reimagine the past through the lens of the present, transporting both the poet and reader. In poems such as “Late-in-life Photo of Captain Albert Jacka (1893–1932) VC, MC and Bar,” Densley’s descriptions bring both the images, and the inner lives of their subjects, to life: “Monochrome day / ‘28 or ‘9. / What season? Winter? / Hard to say” (23). Jacka, “aged beyond his years,” overlooks St Kilda Beach; “Offshore, the waves, / bleak and black” (23). The longest poem in the collection, “A Notable Colonial Fistfight: Edward ‘Ned’ Kelly vs Isaiah ‘Wild’ Wright, Beechworth, Victoria, 8 August 1874,” reimagines a twenty-round fight between the two bushrangers. The poem rollicks along with short, snappy lines, placing us right in the middle of the action:

Ned’s first blow,
a short right to the solar plexus,
is thrown from the heels.
Wild doubles over, lets out a groan,
for his trouble gets two jabs to the head.
He stumbles back, hands up, blinking,
trying to clear his vision.
He smiles.
Fighters always smile
when they know they’re in trouble. (50)

A third of these historical poems, “Three Photographs from the Early Life of Frances Scott Fitzgerald Lanahan Smith (1921–1986),” explores moments in the life of the daughter of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald with a delicate

melancholy. Scott is “battling with his drinking,” Zelda is “madly practicing / far too late / to be a ballerina,” and the poem’s conclusion is pointedly bittersweet.

These re-imaginings narrow the gap between the past and the present just as other poems in *Orpheus in the Undershirt* find high art in the mundane (not to mention the mundane in high

art). Each of the poems permits a glimpse into another world. As Densley writes in “A Poem (Almost) Writes Itself,” “I invoke my inner muse. / Let the channel open” (21). Like Orpheus with his golden lyre, Densley assumes the role of the bard, a figure who blurs the distinctions between musician, poet and oracle.

Works Cited

Densley, Kevin. *Orpheus in the Undershirt*. Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2018.