



Verbal Medicine: 21 Contemporary Clinician-Poets of Australia and New Zealand

[Tim Metcalf](#) (ed). Published by [Ginninderra Press](#) (Canberra), 2006.
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As Lois Lane retorted when Superman swooped down to save her from falling to certain death, “Yes, but who’s got you?” While the clinician-as-super-being protests a public image of unique resilience, the clinician-as-poet projects a more vulnerable persona.

Beyond the mythical and the political, Tim Metcalf’s anthology of 21 New Zealand and Australian clinician-poets offers poignant insights into the humanity that the mass media prefer to overlook. From Glenn Colquhoun’s “Haka to be used when reversing the effects of a general anaesthetic” to Andrew Leggett’s “Shower Scene” reflections of the infamous Mengele, Metcalf provides an intense glimpse into the all-too-mortal self-revelation of the empathetic clinician.

Metcalf’s clinician-poets have borne their practice beyond that shock/horror stage where self-medication, alcohol, and denial mask feelings of futility to a more reflective pinnacle. Nevertheless, recurrent images abound. Snatches of conversation imagined, “Now, Bubby, I’ve turned the electricity off ...” culminate too frequently in Shen’s “...silence/ disrupted only by the twitching/ of the second hand of a wall clock.”

Fear, elemental tragedy and two in the morning images, however, contrast with lighter moments—as when incomprehension meets information overload, when metaphorical explanations of how pills work meet righteous indignation and the physician-frustrated, suggests that the “active metabolites in each pharmaceutical ... worked by magic./ She asked me why I didn’t say that in the first place.”

Seeking to illuminate the empathy of the clinician, Metcalf’s selection balances Doris Brett’s powerful reflection on her own cancer, “Losing your hair as the year bled/ leaves, streaming and drifting.” with the torment of John West’s trainee surgeon who, against best advice, sees a dying baby on the table as a chrysalis who “had wings/ but the glue of her birth was keeping them closed.”

The personal is never far from the surface. Craig Powell’s ECT patients, who “glaze on their cool beds/ like dynamited fish.” suggest the reflective capacity that permeates the anthology. In contrast, Saxby Pridmore’s *Coroner’s Delight* where “Another patient hung himself/ in our ward today ... Someone will have to pay.” offers the lighter side of this ‘laugh or you’ll cry’ selection.

As Metcalf observes in his introduction, “Only experience can make the voice lucid.” In consequence, “the scope of the poem ... broadens and strengthens our human field, our reply to chaos, which is our intellectual life.”

The 21 clinicians offering various doses of Verbal Medicine provide a powerful collage of experience filtered and sensibilities unlocked to create a stimulating, even

challenging read. For those seeking a “reply to chaos”, Verbal Medicine offers an “essential interconnectedness”.

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