

Reviewed by Graham Jensen

Leigh Kotsilidis

Hypotheticals. Coach House, 2011.

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“In the beginning there was nothing, which exploded,” claims Terry Pratchett in the epigraph to *Hypotheticals*, Leigh Kotsilidis’s gutsy poetic debut. But in the subsequent poems about origins, anatomy, tennis, meteorology, birds, and violence—among many other subjects—Pratchett’s revisionary précis of Genesis might easily be replaced with something more like “Now there is everything, and it’s still exploding.” As the speaker of “Darwin’s Family Tree” seems to understand, the most probing questions about life, love, and loss are never irrelevant “when there is no stasis, / when every platypus, squid // and moose turns / to mulch” (14). Nature is still exploding, still evolving, and yet the riotous orgy of animals, organs, and green matter depicted in Kotsilidis’s pulsating text proceeds against not only a backdrop of the grand narratives of geographic but also the more personal, recognizable narratives of day-to-day life and human drama.

In Kotsilidis’s hands, language is also exploding, moulting, and registering almost imperceptible shifts—in the seasons, in the growth of a tree, or in human knowledge. However, while she co-opts scientific language and theories in order to discuss topics such as meteorology (“Fortune Teller,” “Almanac,” “Reverse Forecast,” “Before Meteorologists”), anatomy (“Grey Matter,” “Nervous System”), and evolution (“*Homo sapiens sapiens*,” “Best Foot Forward”), the poet never forgets that she is, after all, writing poetry. *Hypotheticals* teems with instances of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and cacophony. Additionally, its author punctuates her belief that “we are nearly everything” (“Flukes” 65)—and, consequently, that “we are being obliterated” (65)—by using enjambment and multiple clauses strung together with commas to concatenate seemingly disparate images, ideas, and identities. In “By Any Name,” too, Kotsilidis points out that “[t]he average vocabulary // is 10,000 words, and one / easily stands in for another” (11); only a few pages later, though, she re-asserts difference as an important counterbalance to this kind of interchangeability and mutual assimilation when she says, “Listen, climb in, I’ll show you / what I mean by *rock*” (19). Reminiscent of Eliot’s unnerving invitation to “[c]ome in under the shadow of this red rock” in *The Waste Land*, this imperative can also be read as an indirect re-assertion of identity, of an “I” that surfaces somewhat infrequently throughout the collection.

The collection’s ostensibly haphazard catalogues and comparisons of disparate objects are always imaginative, sometimes enlightening, but occasionally cloying. To be sure, Kotsilidis is a remarkably gifted wordsmith: particularly memorable metaphors include her passing reference to “the crotch // of a branch” (“Seasonal Menu” 53) and her description of a man’s mouth as “a clam / shucked of sound” (“Artificial Reef” 57). For a time, at least, the reader can forgive, if not

derive great pleasure from, her bizarre combinations or her descriptions of Neruda-esque activities, such as “[shaking] hummingbirds from seaweed” (“Flukes” 63). In a few instances, however, the poems’ metaphors are truly challenging, as a clear connection between the tenor and vehicle is neither clearly established nor immediately evident.

For some readers, the cumulative effect of passages such as “we avalanche // into flimsy-hearted / swans and slumping honeysuckle” (“Nothing to Write Home” 70) may be utter bewilderment. And yet Kotsilidis appears to have anticipated such a reaction to her work: “*Throw me a bone*” (66), complains an anonymous interlocutor in “Flukes.” Nevertheless, Kotsilidis continually refuses to give prospective readers any “bones,” interpretive keys, or definitive truths; instead, her poems seem to suggest that in poetry, as in science, there are only gradations of understanding, only approximations of truths: metaphors and hypotheses alike must be refined, must evolve, must be broken and cast aside. One might argue that, on the whole, *Hypotheticals* is successful precisely because it forces its readers to consider that even its most perplexing or strained metaphors may, in fact, be “stiff conceits we outwardly scoff at, / but unwittingly grasp” (“Timescale Chauvinism” 86).

Kotsilidis invites her readers to “navigate by gut” (“Flukes” 64), and those willing to succumb to her linguistic charms or take “the cerebral corvette” (“Tips For Remembering Who You Are” 67) for a spin are invariably rewarded. Perhaps her strongest poems, ironically, are the ones in which she “isolate[s] districts of tenderness” (“Sound Check” 29), the ones in which she explicitly seeks to rediscover “the human voice” (“Solubles” 17) in nature and in scientific discourse. But *Hypotheticals* is not simply a reaction against the limitations of science, for that would be no accomplishment at all; much more impressively, Kotsilidis’s four-part poetic experiment systematically rejects the easy comforts of an unquestioned and unquestioning belief in science as the answer to all human ills, past and present, attempting instead to find new ways to measure “the wattage of loss, decibel / of break, the blathering drain” (“Origins” 10).