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Power in slow lane

Weekend Australian, Australia

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POET'S VOICE

**SARAH
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Amid the bewildering array of so-called international celebrations carrying on weekly, you could be forgiven for not knowing Saturday, March 21, is World Poetry Day.

But, unlike International Talk Like a Pirate Day, World Emoji Day — or even, I might sacrilegiously suggest, Ice Cream for Breakfast Day — an international day in praise of poetry is an occasion worth observing.

Listening to a poet espouse the benefits of poetry is probably a bit like being on the receiving end of a hawk's soliloquy at a flea market: reasonable grounds for scepticism. So by all means, don't take my word for it: consider the science.

Neurologists at Exeter University, using functional magnetic resonance imaging, found that reading poetry activated different brain regions to prose — even the lyrical prose we find in fiction. When the research participants read poetry, it lit up the regions of the brain variously linked to emotion, memory, making sense of music, coherence building and moral decision-making.

Poetry, the study's authors concluded, induces a more introspective, reflective mental state among readers than does prose.

These findings are no accident: they are entirely aligned to poets' aims. Poets intend for their poems to move the reader. They exploit the nuances of language. They condense complex emotions and ideas into the most concise possible phrasing.

They aim for musical effects, too, through rhyme, rhythm and metre. Like a song, a poem can also be heard and understood in a single sitting. It can also be memorised exactly — and is designed to be remembered and repeated. For all these reasons, poetry has endured as one of our oldest literary forms, stretching back to antiquity, where it was sung by the Ancient Greeks accompanied by the lyre. Since, it has stubbornly clung on when so many other literary forms have fallen away.

In our era of distracted reading, poetry also offers us an antidote to the endless scrolling and skimming, and a respite from the social media morass — as well as our burgeoning inboxes.

Corporate culture has a lot to answer for, but perhaps its greatest crime is its relentless emphasis on maximising efficiency:

we are all under ever-increasing pressure to do more faster, to read text quickly and often distractedly.

Taking the time to sit and read poetry might therefore feel indulgent — insurrectionary, even. But we've got to rediscover the pleasures of analog reading if we have any hope of salvaging our attention spans.

I hope this column will do just that: to allow you to reconnect with a slower, more pleasurable form of reading, and allow you to encounter the work of a different contemporary Australian poet each week in the process.

Along the way, I'll provide a bit of guidance to those who aren't otherwise regular poetry readers. Of course, I'm aiming to recruit sceptics to my cause: I sincerely hope that some readers

who don't regularly turn to poetry may come to enjoy it through this column, too — and perhaps even discover a poet or two whose work you chase down in the wilds of our bookstores.

This week, I'm kicking off with a poem by Judith Beveridge, one of Australia's best known and most admired poets, whose recent book, **Sun Music: New and Selected Poems**, won the 2019 Prime Minister's Literary Award for poetry, and contains generous selections from most all of her prior volumes, as well as a substantial raft of new poems.

Beveridge is a forensic observer of the natural world, with a

*Some of the bats are elbowing their way
along the branches, a collection of broken
business umbrellas. Some hang like charred
pods, or look like furry oriental fruit
wrapped in silk sashes. Others are handling
the stretch of their black elastomer wings
as carefully as women checking for snags
in their stockings, ready to step out for the night.*

This cascade of vivid metaphors and similes, one after the other, is the sort of thing Beveridge does effortlessly — but the specificity of these metaphors, and the clarity with which we, as readers, are able to imagine and visualise them is the result of her masterful craftsmanship.

You'll notice that Beveridge lingers on the sensory detail and textures, focusing not only on visual qualities — the shapes of broken business umbrellas she sees in the flying foxes' silhouettes — but also on textures too: their silken wings that are silken as women's stockings, and the matted texture of their fur. The result is a kind of synaesthesia, where the senses are all engaged simultaneously.

It's easy to be dazzled by Beveridge's imagery, but underneath their immensely satisfying surfaces, her poems frequently hinge on startling revelations that detonate almost belatedly.

This week's poem, *Dusk*, is a perfect example of this.

It begins by describing a praying mantis's wobbly predation of



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a caterpillar, whose prickly fur is described spectacularly as a skein of wool beaded with dew.

As the mantis teeters into view, it's anthropomorphised in music terms: it's on the verge of shimmying or breakdancing, extending its arms like a conductor, before it strikes.

Beveridge, again, alerts us not only to the visual but also the aural: through the subtle use of consonance in her repeating hard Ks in "stalking", "micro-nicking", "black", "back", "skein" and "wicking", we hear the caterpillar nipping its way along the jasmine vine.

The joyous eclecticism of Beveridge's descriptions distracts us from what's really being described: a hunting ritual. Darkness looms in the poem's very last word, and, we suspect, carnage explodes just after the poem ends.

It's at this point we realise the caterpillar is also, perhaps, a figure for we humans, and our own oblivious chugging along our proverbial branches.

As we circle back to the poem's deceptively simple title, we see that the impending dusk becomes metaphorical: a dying of the light.

All of these meanings shift into place with Beveridge's last word, no sooner. It's the sort of brilliant trickery that only a poem can do.

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From today she will write a weekly column on Australian poets, thanks in part to sponsorship from The Copyright Agency and the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas.

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Dusk

A praying mantis is stalking a caterpillar
micro-nicking its way along the jasmine.
Close up, the caterpillar is as black
and furry as mould on a ten-day-old bread —
move back, it's a teased-out skein of wool
wicking the evening dew.
Suddenly the mantis pulls up its knees,
rests its serrated feet against its abdomen
and intensely rocks — it looks
as if it's about to shimmy, or breakdance
on spring-loaded legs. Then it stops,
waits, steadies its head, calms its quivering
body — a compass needle aligning north.
Next it holds out its arms as if it were
about to take up a baton ... The caterpillar
is shuffling, a slow boogaloo, pulling
no burden, except its unperceived death

Judith Beveridge

highly attuned musical ear and a profound gift for crystalline imagery. These lines, from her poem *Flying Foxes*, Wingham Brush, give a sense of her precise, startling images:



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