



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

## Fay Zwicky's Launch of *The Guardians*

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I'm very happy that Lucy asked me to launch *The Guardians*. Nothing could have given me greater pleasure at this stage of my life though I have to admit to feeling nervous about it. I can't believe seven years have passed since I launched Lucy's second collection entitled *White Clay* – a memorable and touching book that kicked off all kinds of sympathetic insights into what's commonly called the human condition. I knew it in my bones that this new book would be a humdinger – and it certainly is. Very personal poems, as diverse as they are compelling.

Lucy has a very distinguished literary CV. Her first book, *Memory Shell*, won the Mary Gilmore Award. The manuscript of her second collection, *White Clay*, won the Alec Bolton Award. She was poetry editor of the journal, *HEAT*, for many years and published two chapbooks in 2011. She has since been instrumental in keeping *Westerly* afloat. Not to forget all the time devoted to family and friends like me who take up more time than their fair share.

I know it's unfashionable to confuse morality and aesthetic but I'm going to do so anyway. I think there's a good reason why Lucy's work sticks in the mind and the heart. The great tenor, Luciano Pavarotti, put his finger on the matter years ago when he said, 'A bad man may sing a song good but you don't remember the song.' The impact of Lucy's poems, the haunting delicacy of their articulation, has a lot to do with the absence of ego. It's a poetry conceived in the soul rather than the wits. Or, to use a homely metaphor, it's the difference between reading botanical labels as opposed to actually absorbing the look and feel of a tree or a plant.

Lucy has been a valued and generous sharer of her insights garnered after much soul-searching. The very effort and patience required implies a kind of moral poise.

For those of you old enough to know what a Latin root is (and I don't mean shagging a Flamenco dancer), the name Lucy means 'bringer of light' Lucina was also the Roman goddess of the travails of women. Never was a poet more aptly named for, despite the confessional nature of so many of her poems, you never feel invaded or manipulated into feelings you might not have or responses you can't genuinely summon. I can't help but remember what Elizabeth Bishop said about confessional poetry when she complained that 'the tendency is to over do the morbidity. You just wish they'd kept some of these things to themselves.' I agree wholeheartedly: Lucy certainly spares us emotional wallow.

'Working quietly at the edges' (her own words), she invites the reader to enter her bewitched and sometimes bemused half-human world that makes the invitation irresistible. Any poet willing to confess to sharing 'leftover lamb' with the cat wins my attention and affection immediately. No fear of morbidity here...

The voice is human, distinctively female but casually so, beyond the clichés and stereotypes of gender. It's a quiet, tactful, amused voice that has special appeal in a world governed by the rhetoric of politics and advertising conducted in a language largely determined by the public appetite for visceral excitement (which some take for aesthetic enjoyment). Lucy plants her clues carefully, beginning with a quotation from Eliza-

beth Jennings. 'There are sounds and there are spaces. Human creatures could have left long ago.' This sets the scene with the suitably ambiguous placement of the full stop after 'spaces', leaving the reader to fill in the sounds and spaces. No pressure anywhere...

If art is what Yeats said it was – 'a vision of reality' – it aims to articulate something more durable and less changeable than popular catchwords, jargon, and the conventional pieties that contaminate our public spaces. It's the 'gazer's spirit' and 'a vision of reality' that may transform a good poem into something a bit more good: the accurate gaze and penetrating vision of the poet who has dug deep or been pitched into the toils of experience unprepared may reveal something private, introspective and, ultimately moral. I believe Lucy's poems often achieve this sort of epiphany and it's no mean feat.

Whenever a poet manages to find language and structures that mimic and project her feelings, she's actually chalking up a victory over oblivion. After Lucy's near-death experience with cancer, that victory is pretty remarkable and to manage it with such a stubby lyric grace is even more remarkable – just how much more can only be appreciated by those who have been to the underworld and come back to tell the tale.

Because of the many references to vegetable life, to seeds and shoots and green places, I kept being reminded of the Greek myth of Persephone and her abduction by Pluto while gathering flowers on the plain of Enna in Sicily. Her mother Demeter, goddess of fruitfulness, looked everywhere for her, threatening to withdraw fertility from the earth if she couldn't be found. Zeus, her father, then promised to restore Persephone to her mother, provided she hadn't eaten anything in Hades. But she had already eaten six pomegranate seeds and was therefore compelled to spend six months of each year with Pluto but was allowed to return to the upper world to spend the other six months with her mother.

Living a subterranean life can prove a fertile seedbed for great poetry and the age-old themes of mortality and transience loom ambiguously over the deceptively simple imagery of many of these poems. The notion of guardianship of the earth and all its creatures comes to be linked with the low-key heroism of female survival and the love of living and living creatures. This is the pervasive theme with mythical overtones in the title poem, 'The Guardians' which begins

I could not bear the empyrean capped,  
not after living so long under the ground.

These lines reminded me of Persephone, aching for the limitless sky, suddenly shrouded in darkness, and the revelation of the ticking time-bomb of her incarceration and subjection to Pluto's kingdom. Somehow the myth, the notion of Demeter's custodianship, the maternal caring for plants and animals, the trips to the underworld never completely submerged in blackness, each poem a seed in the pomegranate bursting with hope and promise of renewal even if conditional. Or to quote from 'Wayside': 'Unexpected flowerings/ locked tight in seeds.'

In another poem, 'Saint Catherine's, Abbotsbury', we get some sense of the price paid for her subjection to Pluto in the poignant confession –

How could I tell you  
what it felt like to be back and well.

'The Guardians' jumps from the dizzy heights of the empyrean down to a modest summoning of a little band of talismanic animals – a wooden duck, a black toy dog, a plastic shepherd and a piggy bank. These arrive unheralded like the real foxes, cats, dogs and mice who mooch around so many poems in these loosely connected sequences that link humans, animals and the physical world. My favourite of all is called 'The Foxes' where these curious visitants just appear without comment or explanation – a bit like Ted Hughes's 'Thought Fox' with its 'sudden sharp hot stink' – if you ask an old poet with a head like an echo-chamber full of quotes, you're bound to meet up with one or two. I'll read the last three stanzas of 'The Foxes':

We stood at the deep sash window  
and beneath us two foxes stared up.

Their gaze was not territorial  
or neutral but simply there

as the grass was there, the trees  
were there, and the old summer furniture.  
They did not hide their boredom  
and crossed back over  
into another evening.

But we stayed for a while  
as if their candour held us to the spot  
until lights started up  
– those other unknown lives –  
in the flats across.

Despite the apparent simplicity of these poems, there's great depth and complexity of imaginable experience and a sensitivity to organic form that often parallels the unpredictable steps of the creative process itself.

To conclude, I'd like to say a few things about green and its significance in this book. Despite our obedient professions of love for the sunburnt country, the wide brown land girt by sea, its salt pans and spinifex, there are some of us with aching atavistic memories for northern greenery. We yearn towards it like our parched plants at the end of the summer. This is a green book in many ways – as nourishing and ambivalent as only green can be. The book's cover picture leads you into green's ambiguity: the circling figures hopefully inclined, surrounded by a faintly sinister atmosphere due to their lack of definition. Faceless, purposeful yet aimless, led by involuntary forces as their ritualistic circling suggests, theirs is some sort of mysterious oblique progress to an enchanted place.

Green has been the colour of hope and growth from late antiquity onwards. But, growth implies change and change may intimate instability. It's an uncertain colour, even at times malevolent – think of jealousy and poison. It can encompass such a wide range of associations, many of which Lucy has incorporated into her profound and meditative poems.

I'll stop now and invite Lucy to read from this fine book. I know it's going to give much pleasure, sustenance and deep satisfaction to many green-hungry readers, 'annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade' (Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden'). I'm glad and grateful to be one of those readers and wish Lucy, her book, and Giramondo and its intrepid editor, Ivor Indyk, every success and declare *The Guardians* launched.