



**Phantom of the Apple by John Kay**

**Reviewed by Denis Joe February 2011**

One of the greatest challenges for any poet is finding a form which they are comfortable with; one in which they can compose freely and without a feeling of "sameness". It is also a challenge for the reader/listener who is faced with the prospect of becoming too familiar with a work too quickly and could easily get bored.

The history of poetry is full of collections in forms. Sonnets are usually the poem of choice. But there have been other forms used.

In more modern times there has been Robert Bly's ghazals and Fred D'Aguiar's Elegies (which are overly pretentious - as well as feeling journalistic rather than poetic - but serve to illustrate the difficulties that using one form can impose) and also British poet Don Patterson's incredibly lazy series of Rilke's Orpheus Sonnets.

If we exclude the magnum opii of Pound, Reznikoff, Zukovsky, and others, very few poets, since Rilke, have proved adept at maintaining the stamina and the reader's interest in the 'serial' approach. That is until this publication.

John Kay began using a form of six-couplet verses over the past five years. Previously his work showed the influence of writers such as Bukowski. Bukowski was not a poet that I could feel anything for. His poems seemed more like self-advertising, but he did take poetry beyond the vernacular and introduced a level of banality not seen in art before. Most of the poets who were influenced by him took up the baton and created something really exceptional. Fred Voss and Jefferson Carter spring to mind. But over the years John's work has moved away from the Southern California scene. He had physically removed himself as well, and the difference showed in his second collection, *Everything is OK* (out of print) which suggests the influence of poets such as Apollinaire and Rilke.

Another aspect that seems to have informed Kay's move towards a more concise and disciplined approach is his artistic photography work which captures the essence of a city through images of torn and weather-beaten posters (the book cover is one such example).

Whilst it is true that there are many poems written in couplets, using 12 lines, John has made the form his own.

The opening poem, ironically titled, *The Last Minute*, could serve as an acknowledgement

(though the book already has one), but it also serves as a statement of intent, almost like a confession. The matter-of-factness approach of the narrative could have come from any of the great noir novels; one could easily imagine Bogart reciting this to Bacall:

I've been asked to write  
a poem based on the last

minute of life, as if I have  
some special knowledge.

For myself, I would write  
a love letter to those who

have shared life with me,  
including those who have

allowed me to hate them.  
Let this be my love letter

to you—and you decide if  
you were loved or hated.

And Kay does what we should expect of any great art practitioner: he raises the banal to a higher plane, making it ethereal; suggestive of Apollinaire's Zone.

This dark-enlightenment pervades the poems of Phantom of the Apple, but it is not the poetry of fatalism. Kay uses his surname in some of the poems to suggest a sense of powerlessness that one gets from reading Kafka, but there is a strong element of laughing in the face of adversity. That sense is not simply found in each individual poem, but in the words and how they are used for their sound as well as their meaning. The title poem contains the line 'I find my obituary in the Tribune.' This is just one example of Kay's approach. The poem would have failed if, say, Herald replaced Tribune, as 'Tribune' has the sombre sound to it that reflects on the word 'obituary'.

One of the other great strengths to be found in Kay's poetry is enjambment. Although he uses grammar - and a poem such as Blood Poetry is one sentence - the line stops are perfect and the pauses seem so natural; enough to consider the music of the piece.

It is impossible to find a favourite amongst this collection. My Voice is a poem that stands out though. Not only does it show a complete mastery of the form, it also carries with it a declamatory excellence that reminds me of the power of Whitman.

I have a hypochondriacal drama  
every few days, holding my chest,

feeling the deep ache of my heart,  
thinking I'm dying, sometimes wishing

I would—just to be done with it,  
but I don't, and a voice goes off

in my head—but one day you will,  
and you will feel the same pain,

and you will think it's just another  
false alarm. I trust this voice.

It keeps me on the brink—in my  
own corner. It writes these poems.

Few poets today can realistically be seen as 'Great'. Many are excellent practitioners of their craft, but what greatness requires is more than just technical ability, it requires to see beyond what already exists. That is not to say that the poet/artist should be a soothsayer, what it means is that the lessons of the past (and present) have been learned and it is time to move on.

There is an overall feeling of acceptance in many of the narratives of these poems, but to see Phantom of the Apple as a collection of incident reports is to deprive yourself of the overall experience. If there is one thing 'traditional' about Kay's work, it is that it is firmly placed in the American practise of going against tradition. That dialectic has served American poets from Whitman's free approach (that is 'free' both in structure and in content) onwards. Now and then a poet comes along who can even confront what is already challenged and in a time, such as ours, of low expectations, make us aware that there are still new standards of excellence to be reached; there is still much to be said and, more importantly, still many new ways to say it.

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