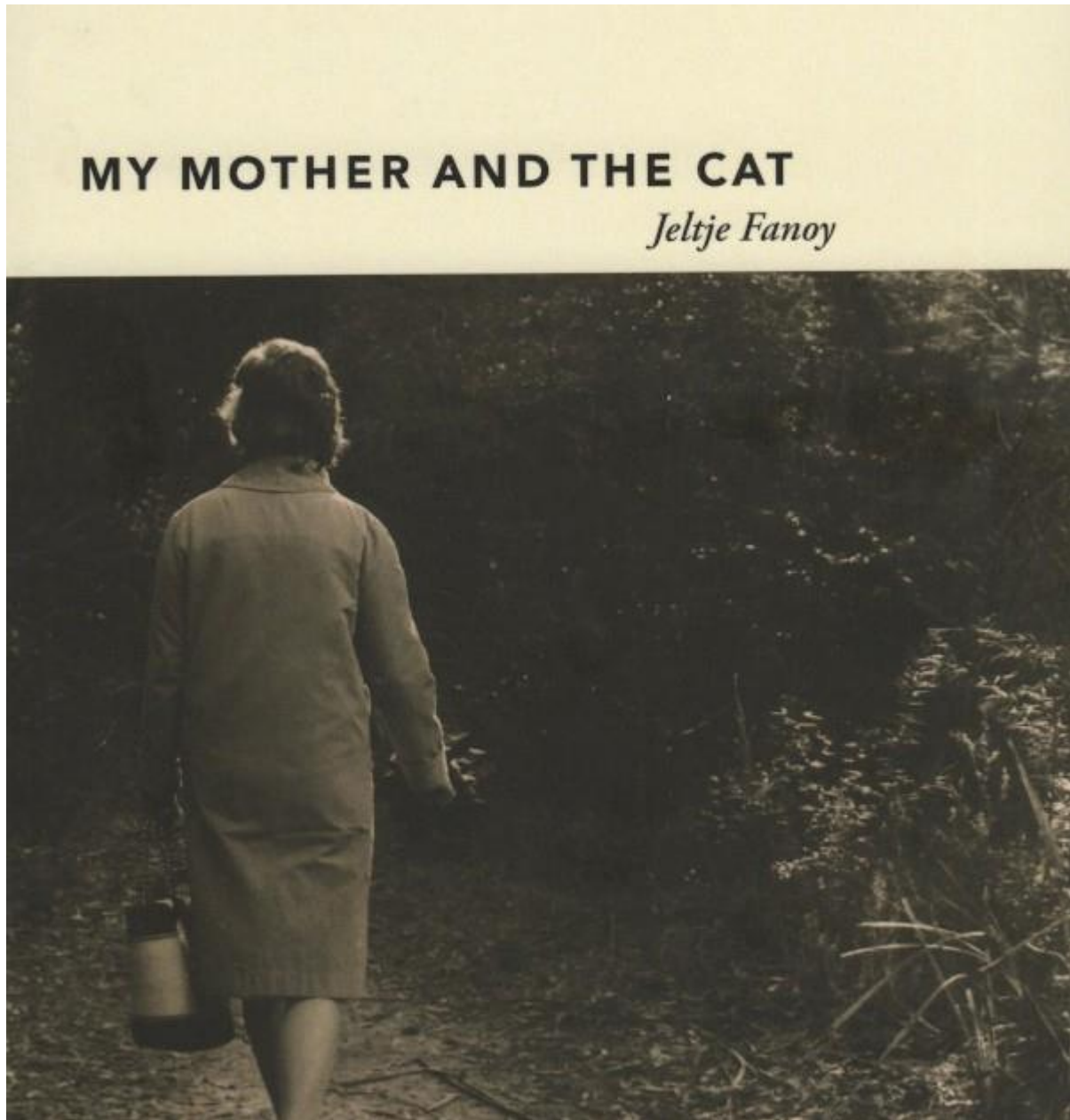


Rochford Street Review

Thoughtfully rendered and carefully placed: Angela Costi launches ‘My Mother and The Cat’ by Jeltje Fanoy



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***My Mother and the Cat* by Jeltje Fanoy, Melbourne Poets Union 2020, was launched at the Open Studio, Northcote by Angela Costi on 10 March 2021**

I want to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the lands and waterways, and pay my respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. I also pay my respect to all First Nations' people who are in attendance. I confirm I am on unceded land – this is, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

This acknowledgment of Traditional Owners of Country has deep significance in the context of launching Jeltje Fanoy's latest poetry collection, *My Mother and The Cat*. From the beginning of Jeltje's long journey as a revered poet, she has demonstrated an unwavering alliance and advocacy for First Nations' people. Her first collection, *Living in Aboriginal Australia*, published in 1988, announced a poet who was compelled to dissect their migrant status within the larger lens of colonialism and neoliberalism.

Her second collection, *Catching Worms*, published in 1993, continued her political focus by offering micro-moments that spoke of injustice, such as finding in an op-shop:

a carved wooden lizard
from the Pitjantjatjara people

Catching Worms was the collection that introduced me to Jeltje. I was new to the Melbourne poetry scene and Jeltje with her generous spirit had written an encouraging note on my copy of her collection. I read and re-read this collection and was in awe of Jeltje's ability to employ deceptively simple words towards a radical reframing of culture and inheritance. This was transformative and pioneering poetry as it re-examined the relationship between settler and migrant, and expected a re-ordering of loyalty, kinship and gratitude from Europeans who were here because of wars and associated horror.

By the time I met Jeltje, she had proven her invaluable contribution to Melbourne poetry. Her and πo, through collective effort press, worked tirelessly throughout the 70s and 80s to redress the imbalance against working-class poetry, migrant and cross-cultural poetry, political, anarchic and concrete poetry.

Poetry-making for Jeltje was never about a privileged practice. Her collaborations were dedicated to advancing social justice and many were long-lasting. She is a founding member of the Melbourne Poets Union (MPU). In a sense, we've come full circle, as MPU is the publisher of *My Mother and The Cat*, Jeltje's sixth collection. Thanks to Dr Tina Giannoukos, MPU is establishing itself as an impressive and inclusive publishing press.

Although Jeltje is renowned for integrating her voice with sound into a unique relationship with metre and rhythm (with accompaniment by Sjaak de Jong and other established sound poets), it's Jeltje as translingual poet that is being highlighted here. The 24 poems comprising *My Mother and the Cat* are mostly in English, yet the various languages of Jeltje's heritage underpin the poems. Dutch, Indonesian, and the liminal language of Dutch-Indonesian, augment the narratives, reflections and epiphanies throughout. 'Friesian traders' exemplifies her distinct language, with its finely crafted portraits of her mother and father, contrasting their supply of words as produce, as offerings to their new world:

My mother lived up
to our pagan name, *jeltje*,
alluding to prosperity, and
with her infallible memory

must have appeared dazzling,
inimitable, to the best of them

My father, although
more of a gardener,
did his best to oblige
his new friends, took to
translating, transliterating
old, rustic sayings,
sprinkled them throughout
his annual reports
to Boards of Directors,
was sought after
as a speaker
of quaint, almost
mystical dimensions,
his Dutch proverbs, like
arrows, pointing to certainties,
predictable, home-grown truths

The Indonesian word for place, *tempat*, is used in the title of two outstanding poems in which Jeltje creates vivid portraits of her family. In ‘Mother’s (creative) tempat’ an intricate study of differences and alliances between mother and father provides resonance for us who have survived post-war parenting. It’s first four lines provide the sturdy steps towards the apprehensive atmosphere and final reveal of her father’s war experience and associated PTSD:

She surrounded the wounded but courageous
love of her life with objects, and more objects
than you can imagine but which sometimes he
wanted to leave behind, and he’d pace the house

In ‘Lindfield tempat (1980s)’, Jeltje conjures her grandfather:

in luminous sub-tropical blue,
a big strong Friesian man

in the shape of a huge butterfly,
to my parents’ suburban backyard

Then dashes any sense of nostalgia as the “Tireless talk” and “frequent outpourings” about her grandfather became “flotsam” comprised “of anxious, lingering disappointments”.

These poems can be likened to photos found in an album daring to disclose the deeper meaning of a mother restraining her smile, a father avoiding the camera’s eye, a child clutching a *baboe’s* hand. Various characters within a family’s ambit emerge and subside like memory embedded in stories told by one voice, retold by another, and absorbed by the poet as child:

how we got through/ the post-war years

looking at us
they saw a future

gathered up
things,

pre-loved,

from the past
the potted outlines

our vitamin pills

The spine of this metaphorical album is the relationship with mother. From the *Prelude* to the final poem, 'Loud BBQ aprons', the relationship between mother and daughter is presented in all its complexities. What is refreshing is the analysis and rigour applied to this relationship, showing an evolving dynamic, the various shades of emotion and meaning, and coming to rest with the point made by Edward Hirsch in his book *Poet's Choice*: "Poetry has a deep maternal source in a language that fundamentally voices itself through us".

my mother,
irritable and sad,

out of the
continuous present,

invested only
in the future perfect,

scrapped the
simple present,

so she would not,
and I was not,

instead, by myself
in a room upstairs, ...

– *With a future,*
possibly, without me

What Jeltje is exploring is not only the various roles we are programmed to have as we interact with the foundation of our existence, our mother, but she goes further into revealing the unconscious authority mothers have over our language, our bodies, our inclinations, our dreams:

For years there'd been this dream of
her mother and her, travelling
together, on a long-distance flight

– *Dream*

This is the beginning of Jeltje's Dream poem, and like all the poems in this tenderly and concisely crafted collection, it uses language without adornment and with particular arrangement to become extraordinary and energising. Thanks to Jeltje, "tea towels aren't dumb" with their heritage patterns and birthland hallmarks, flapping together on the clothesline, they show us the discourse Australia, and indeed the world, needs to have. In the sound poem, 'My Mother and the Cat', the recalcitrant cat and the "Cheer-squad news" compete with her mother putting food on the table – this continual, repetitive chaos is arguably magnified world-wide. Jeltje's poetry continues to offer the microscopic to widen our socio-political thinking.

Each poem is thoughtfully rendered and carefully placed, enabling the theme to be expansive. This is generous poetry, as it gifts you something new each time you visit. With this in mind, I am honoured to officially launch *My Mother and the Cat* and recommend it to your prime *tempat* on your bookshelf.

– Angela Costi



Angela Costi is the author of five poetry collections, including *Honey&Salt* (Five Islands Press, 2007), *Lost in Mid-Verse* (Owl Publishing, 2014) and *An Embroidery of Old Maps and New* (Spinifex Press, 2021). Funding from the City of Melbourne enabled her to produce four video poems, which are published in Issue 29 of *Rochford Street Review*. Some of her poetry, essays and reviews can be found in recent issues of *Hecate*, *Burrow*, *Antipodes*, *The Journal of Working-Class Studies*, *APJ*, *Right Now* (*Human Rights in Australia*) and *Cordite*. Angela can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/AngelaCostiPoetics/>

For details on how to buy a copy of *My Mother and the Cat* go to <http://www.melbournepoetsunion.com.au/>