

Marjorie Lewis-Jones reviews *brush* by Joanne Burns

Burns' brush bristles and the sparks fly

Joanne Burns taught me a lot about writing during my time at university and with her recent poetry collection, *brush*, my education continues. What I relish in her work, old and new, is its humour and playfulness, its gimlet-eyed perception and its voltaic surge.

In Burns' spirit of inventiveness, I've chosen several definitions of the word 'brush' as subheadings for this post. I'm hoping this lighter (brush-like?) approach will help you revel in these poems — as revelry is what they invite, deserve and inspire.

1. Brush: The bushy tail of an animal, especially of a fox

You can't write poems as alive as these without animal instinct and muscular craft. *brush* pulses with cleverness and cunning but

I never felt Burns was trying to outfox me. I love the work's wild and surreal streak that sharpens its claws on everyday contexts and so artfully eviscerates.

In 'trunk' the protagonist sees one of 'pinochet's torture ships' in Woolloomooloo then travels home on roads that are 'dry and watchful'.

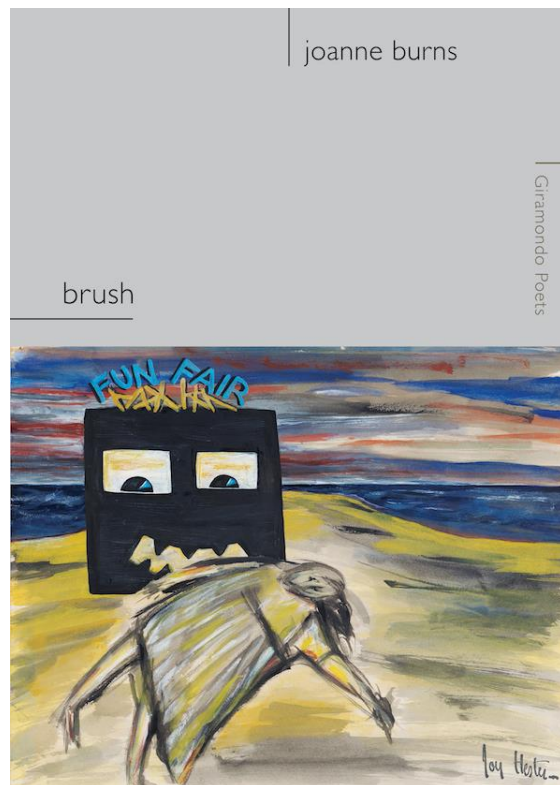
'the painted coffee table fills with worms / the arm of the chair grows new fabric the earth / still darker than the shiver of night, and the fridge has / frozen the salad.'

2. Brush: The art or skill of a painter of pictures

The 'brushwork' in these poems is that of an expert and my favourite pieces are also some of the most visually rich and filmic.

In 'delivery', after a child's name has been 'tumbled down the hill' several times (presumably called by her mother), she takes home 'the gossip of the streets swift from the corner store: / sitting on bags of dark potatoes with a sharpened ear / while waiting to buy the cigarettes and cheddar.'

The poem movingly conveys the child's view of her experiences as well as the older woman's 'tissues of nostalgia' relating to these same encounters. Burns' closing stroke packs a punch: 'you / could only pretend to be a child so many times.'



In ‘a later page’ a child visits the dentist and then is sick with the measles. The poem’s introduction says it is ‘not quite after Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room”’. This piece brilliantly evokes a past era and captures the derision felt by an ailing child — a derision that returns to needle her, as an adult, ‘collapsing years’.

The girl first feels this sting of mockery as she looks at *The Saturday Book* and encounters ‘...that sudden endless / moment on a later page: a group of people at the races, / Edwardian / i think, laughing laughing at the camera but i believed entirely / that they laughed at me weak and maybe measly in my mother’s / bed.’

3. Brush: To move or skim with a slight contact

Just as the hair on an animal’s spine may rise but not settle back quickly, Burns’ words rise off the page and continue to bristle after a poem has ended. In other words, each of these poems corrals your mind, flashes its distinct electricity, creates the thrill of static and leaves ions shivering in its wake as it departs. Moved with *slight* contact? Yes, but in the same way the slightest pressure of a fingertip can shift a world.

In ‘literate’, for example, ‘hair floats down towards the floor in a / morning’s sunlight. time for a moment, like a / surprise cadence striking the throat.’ Later, in the same poem, we find, ‘the more you brush the more they fall, is there a / stubborn beauty to be observed. In this eloquent decline.’

In ‘road’ the protagonist says, ‘of / course you remind me of someone anyone with windy / eyes would do’. She also says, ‘i have never before seen myself as a window’ having previously come to the realisation that ‘the people looked through me’.

4. Brush: A conductor maintaining electric contact between stationary and moving parts

Burns’ style is distinguished by unusual pairings and concatenations that can initially jolt but then thrum lushly in their tongue-and-groove. This ‘current’ revives words that, in lesser hands, could easily disperse their heat. Burns’ humour is similarly conductive — sparking odd and distinctive bedfellows.

In ‘chain’, for example, the ‘triple AAA rated air’ has the capacity to revive pores ‘like a yacht in a sunset clause’. In ‘in the mood’ a will prays ‘for its own execution’. In ‘dues’ a ‘flock of people’ waiting at the registry of births deaths and marriages is thought perhaps to be taking ‘a specialty tour of rites of passage’. And in ‘the great sleep forward’ the reader is urged to ‘think like a pond / or a puddle’, ponder how many ‘sleeps till death’ and to ‘snuggle down in your / percale qualms’. Sweet!

5. Brush: Other thoughts and definitions

I love how Burns seems so open to collisions — her telekinesis crashing out the freshest meanings. These thought/word mash-ups get readers’ minds to move, too, taking us to places we haven’t been to before and helping our synapses to shift and sizzle. While I’m not talking here about literal places, I should tell you that the six sections in *brush* do relate to a place or subject. For example, *bluff* explores the vagaries of the share market, *delivery* depicts a Bondi

childhood and *wooing the owl (or the great sleep forward)* takes readers into the world of sleep, dreams and insomnia. Burns also says several poems in *brush* are ‘poems of place, with autobiographical perspectives’. The poem ‘comb’ is one of these and opens with the kickass lines, ‘bondi was always big as / tomorrow, or something wider / more thrilling than time – ... it was big enough for everyone to think it was theirs.’

Cultural commentator and septuagenarian poet, Clive James, wrote in his most recent book [Poetry Notebook 2006-2014](#) that, ‘Fifty years later I’m still trying to figure out just how the propulsive energy that drives a line of poetry joins up with the binding energy that holds a poem together.’ I think Burns has cracked this conundrum — though I’m sure she’d never crow about it. To my mind she is one of Australia’s most original poets and her distinctive voice, impressive oeuvre and lack of arrogance are key reasons I continue to enjoy, study and learn from her work.

On a different tack entirely, I’m also very happy that the 1946 watercolour by Australian artist Joy Hester was chosen for the cover of *brush* as it fits the tone and style of the collection so entirely.

Other definitions of the word brush include (but are not limited to) an instrument containing bristles; the pubic hair of a female; and a dense growth of bushes. Trust me when I tell you that the riches in this collection equal and surpass its clever moniker and the full diversity of its definitions.

Trust me, too, when I tell you *brush* detonates, disturbs, dares and delights.

Don’t miss its flying sparks.

Brush

Joanne Burns

[Giramondo Publishing](#) RRP \$24

Joanne Burns’ recent books are footnotes of a hammock, an illustrated history of diaries *and* amphora.



Marjorie Lewis-Jones is a Sydney writer and editor whose stories, poetry and author profiles have been published by Spineless Wonders, ABC Radio National, Picaro Press, Poetry Australia, THRESHOLDS international short story forum, in UTS anthologies and read on radio.

In 2014, she won the Carmel Bird Award and the Lane Cove Literary Award. She also runs the literary blog, *a bigger brighter world*.