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The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Kate Llewellyn's Self-Portrait of a Lemon

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Bitter breast
of the earth
I've picked this one
from a dark green laden tree
this is a cold hard
obdurate fruit
yet one swift act
releases the juice
enhancing oysters
fish and almost everything else
the acerbic aunt
of the orchard
beautiful in youth
yet growing thorny
in old age
irritating
irritable

("Lemon," Kate Llewellyn)

The poem "Lemon" was first published in Kate Llewellyn's poetry collection *Figs* (1990) and most recently in *Playing with Water: a story of a garden* (2005). Llewellyn is a popular Australian poet, diarist, and travel writer¹ whose "story of a garden" takes the form of a journal in which she records the day-to-day joys and frustrations of the gardens she planted in a suburb of Wollongong—a mining-cum-university town, squeezed between the mountains of the Great Dividing Range and Pacific Ocean on the southern coastal strip of New South Wales. Like Llewellyn's song in praise of lemons, *Playing with Water* is also a self-portrait—the story of a writer, and the story of creative process. In both the poem and the journal, a dash of lemon adds pungency to the plain water of the ordinary and the everyday—enhancing "almost everything."

Lemon is the brightness of yellow, the solidity and fit of shape in the cupped hand, the texture of knobbled skin, the fresh sweetness of smell, and the shock of sour—physical, sensual reactions to color, weight, shape, texture, smell, and taste. Like Margaret Olley's still life, "Lemons" (1964, see cover),² the verbal still life of Llewellyn's lemon poem encourages us

to reconstitute the lemon through "remembrance of things past." The lemon is the taste of memory for writer and reader/listener, and memory being constituted and stimulated as much by the cerebral as the visceral, it is perhaps a mistake to attempt separation of the two spheres of being. To hear the word lemon is, for me, to hear the chanted rhymes of childhood play (equally sour as sweet)—"Oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clements"—and to feel the pungency of exclusion and loss. The arches of the arm steeples came down to chop you off—relentlessly, no matter how hard you tried to avoid them: "Here comes a chopper to chop off your Head." The tongue both tastes and tells, and language itself is as much corporeal as it is ephemeral. You have only to speak and hear Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" to experience the sensuality of language and its capacity to stimulate both body and mind:

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
"Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck'd cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—

...
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy." (13)

My father grew fruit trees in our back yard in Yarralumla, Canberra—blood plums, prunus plums, white and yellow peaches, pears, nectarines, apricots, loganberries, raspberries, blackberries—the exotic fruits of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" that each summer were tasted in the sourness of first color, and later, our hands and faces sticky with the sweet corruption of Seamus Heaney's "Blackberry-picking," we would glut ourselves in secret:

You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking . . .

. . . our palms sticky as Bluebeard's. (5)

The hot little room at the back of the garage held shelves of wax-topped jams and tall glass jars of bottled summer whose taste, scent, and color would be released and relived throughout the cold Canberra winter months, enlivening the mutton chop, boiled cabbage, and mashed potato with peaches and cream. Oliver's cry for "More!" rang true for me. There was never enough; the fruit and syrup from the jar would be portioned meticulously between six. Such stringency makes the mouth water even now, and the mind rebukes what seemed then and now an ungenerous spirit, a scrimping and saving for a future that took uncharitably from the present moment, denying the luxury of living in the moment. This was a deferral that did not have the excitement of anticipation because my parents' dreams were not my dreams.

Childhood memories are the sweet perfume and sour taste of the lemon ("Lemon tree very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet, but the fruit of the poor lemon, is impossible to eat"), but I don't remember a lemon tree, except in the Peter, Paul, and Mary song. (I remember hearing it on the radio in the early 60s; I would have been about six or seven then.) Perhaps my father did not grow a lemon tree because the climate was unsuitable, or perhaps I just don't remember because the humble lemon was not an exotic fruit that appealed to my imagination, or perhaps because it was not a fruit that could be eaten straight from the tree: it was not a forbidden fruit. And yet the lemon is a staple of my childhood memories—Lemon Delicious, Lemon Meringue Pie, Lemon & Ginger Marmalade. The secret ingredient of my grandmother's Golden Syrup Dumplings was lemon:

1 cup SR flour, pinch of salt, small piece of butter—Rub butter into flour.

Mix to rather stiff paste with milk to consistency of rather thick batter.

Bring to boil 1 1/2 cups boiling water, 1/2 cup sugar, 1 tablespoon golden syrup, juice 1/2 lemon.

With fork—drop small lumps of mix into syrup. Boil for 20 mins. Do not lift lid while cooking.

The ingredients are very basic—flour, butter, milk, sugar, golden syrup, and lemon. They are ingredients that would

have been found in any Australian kitchen of my childhood. But despite its ordinariness and its ubiquity, it is the humble lemon that gives life to the blandness of the flour and the cloying sweetness of golden syrup.

The recipe is written in my childish hand in a now battered and yellowed recipe book. The language is simple and terse, sometimes even commanding in tone "Do not lift lid while cooking"—I can hear my grandmother's voice. The measures are imprecise—"a pinch of salt," "a small piece of butter," "a rather stiff paste," "small lumps of mix"—and when they are fractional-cup measures I recall, not the marked and numbered red plastic measuring cup that sits in the culinary clutter of my kitchen cupboard today, but the thick white tea cup of my grandmother's kitchen in Marrackville, Sydney, yesterday—an Australia of almost half a century ago.

The language of this recipe assumes a very particular kind of knowledge that can be gained only through practice—practice as in "doing" and practice as in repeated "doing"—practice as in ritual. Again, I hear my grandmother pronounce "practice makes perfect." This practice is laid down as memory—memory that is both visceral and cerebral; and it is a practice that is both individual or singular, and relational. I learnt through doing *with* my grandmother; thus I read, see, and understand so much more than the mere words themselves would suggest to the reader/listener for whom the ritual and the memory is absent. The recipe is for me a portrait of my grandmother—a still life, perhaps, but a vital one. Each time I follow the recipe and enact its commands, I still perform *with* my grandmother or even *as* my grandmother. She is, if you like, resurrected in the reading and the making and the eating of the golden syrup dumplings—a curious kind of cannibalism, perhaps, by which memory, and my historical sense of myself, is revived and reasserted. (I don't think my grandmother would appreciate alliance with a dumpling—she had a slight, natty figure and was quite a stylish dresser.) This disclaimer aside, ordinary and familiar words that take a very ordinary and familiar form like the recipe can bear a weight and carry an extraordinary affective and effective capacity far beyond what their familiarity would suggest. Familiarity, again as my grandmother was fond of declaiming, along with her many other aphorisms, does breed contempt. Which reminds me of salt. "There are indeed times," remarks Elizabeth David, "when a lemon as a seasoning seems second only in importance to salt."³

The fairytale that left an indelible impression on me as a child was the one that told of the three princesses who, when asked by their father the King "How much do you love me?" replied, from eldest to youngest, as much as I love gold, as much as I love diamonds, as much as I love salt. Of course, it was the youngest who was most beloved and most beautiful and most kind and most deserving; and thus it was that the King was most disappointed in her response (being a very mercenary and egotistical King as the fairytale Kings tend to be). He could not see any value in salt and felt himself to be insulted by association with so humble a condiment. In a fit of rage he expelled the youngest daughter from the

palace. In the immediate period of her absence, however, the King discovers the avaricious and calculating nature of his two eldest daughters and begins to rue the absence of his loving younger daughter (shades of Lear). Meanwhile, rendered unrecognizable by the dirt and rags of poverty, the youngest princess finds herself a position in the castle kitchen and, having proved herself an able and reliable cook, gains permission to prepare a special dish for the King. The dish, of course, though made with the most expensive and exotic of ingredients, is prepared without salt. When the King is angered by the lack of flavor and demands to see the cook, threatening (like the Red Queen) to "Chop off her head!" his daughter explains that the dish has been cooked without salt. It is one of those most perfect moments in storytelling—that brief moment of silent recognition (on the part of character, storyteller, and listener) before the resumption of speech. Thus the King's error of judgment, both about the value of salt and the value of his daughter's love, is recognized and, once he is seen to be suitably chastened and penitent, the youngest princess reveals herself to him as his outcast daughter and is welcomed back to the palace and her father's loving arms (to her sisters' horror and ultimate demise).

The moral of the story is, that, like salt, lemon is so ordinary and so familiar to me that I do not see it, and certainly, as a child, neglected it in favor of the more exotic varieties of fruit. I did not remember it in my father's garden and I did not remember it among the fruits of Rossetti's poem—and yet it is and *was* there in both (I phoned my father the other night to ask him), and the poem reads: "Apples and quinces, Lemons and oranges, Plump unpeck'd cherries, Melons and raspberries." Clearly, the "plump unpeck'd cherries" rendered the lemons invisible. This leads me to a discussion of significance of the lemon in Kate Llewellyn's garden and in her story of the garden, *Playing with Water*. In "Lemon" she declares:

when I move house
the first tree I plant
is a lemon
biblical
dour and versatile
I much prefer it
to those cloying salesgirls
the soft stone fruits.

(I now feel, like the King, suitably chastened for my unwholesome preference for apricot, nectarine, and peach.) For Llewellyn, the lemon is the fruit of integrity—it is what it is—and it doesn't pretend to be otherwise; but it is easily dismissed because it is not showy. It is the fruit of the everyday—fruit *ordinaire*—the *plat du jour*. "Plat du Jour" is the chapter title of Luce Giard's piece on "Doing Cooking" in the second, less celebrated and less read volume of Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life: Living and Cooking*. Here Giard observes that, for the French peasant women interviewed about their everyday culinary practice, "Like the rest of ordinary life, ordinary cuisine constituted for all

of them a zone of silence and shadow, hidden within the indefinitely repeated detail of common existence" ("*Plat du jour*," 179). Giard recounts how, as the interview progresses, the women's voices become "freer, livelier, and happier, liberated from the fear of 'not having anything good to say' or of 'not being interesting.'" It is, she observes, "a matter of pleasure found in breaking the law of public silence, a pleasure in recounting the very thing that concerns the succession of days and hours, a pleasure in recounting one's self, by thus authorizing oneself to be a woman, to take care of household tasks, and to find in them meaning, diversity, interest, and ingenuity" (179). Kate Llewellyn's project, like that of de Certeau and Giard, is to render the invisible visible: blindness is an important trope in Llewellyn's garden/book, but one whose importance is easy to overlook. On Saturday, 29 April, Kate⁴ records:

Today I sowed blue lobelia and Pacific Giant pansies. The coriander and the stocks have sprouted green on the grey soil. With what ardor I go out each morning peering through my reading glasses. Yet I miss so much. For instance, why didn't I see the new fruit coming when I sprayed the leaves? I was looking at the leaves that's why. Sometimes I see people pass by as I stand at the front window. Many do not look to the right or left. They seem blind. (63)

It is this blindness, not only to subject matter, but to genre, that Llewellyn seeks to redress—it is a kind of lazy blindness, a blindness to the beauty in the ordinary (the ordinary and the domestic that so often constitutes the life of a woman) that Llewellyn would correct. Her work suggests that "reading glasses" might be required more often than we think, and in any number of apparently unliterary practices. Reading glasses might be required to see the garden and the kitchen in a new way and to read writing about or of the kitchen and garden in a new light. Her project then, again like Giard, is to reveal the ordinary life as essentially interesting and valuable, not only for its idiosyncratic nature (no one's day-to-day is exactly like anyone else's day-to-day) but also for its commonality and communality.

For Kate Llewellyn and Luce Giard, this is a feminist project—"the authorizing of oneself to be a woman"—and thus a political one. But for Llewellyn it is also a poetic project—one that seeks to translate that "succession of days and hours," that "pleasure found in recounting one's self," into a pleasure that might also be shared by the reader or listener. Thus, perhaps unlike Giard, the project is as much aesthetic as it is political. Kate Llewellyn is first and foremost a poet, and it has always been the task of the poet (despite Pound's claim for the radical nature of the modernists) to "make it new." To succeed in her craft, the poet must generate a feeling of familiarity and "rightness" at the same time that she surprises with a freshness of expression that is revelatory: a familiar flavor must be enhanced such that the essential quality of that flavor is experienced either with greater intensity or as more complex—a greater range of

subtlety and nuance is revealed. Like the lemon's effect upon oyster and fish, Llewellyn paints herself as the acerbic aunt of the literary garden, whose pungency adds zest to the ordinary and revitalizes the scorned domesticity of the everyday—sleeping, waking, making love, gardening, cooking, washing, cleaning, walking, looking, eating, talking, writing, and reading—sometimes, poetry, sometimes letters, sometimes recipes—doing and being (all of which is brought together in the idea and the practice of telling a story).

Playing with Water, then, is a creative experiment whose chosen subject matter and form are equally important; in fact, they are irrevocably entangled. Let me take the lemon as my example yet again. The lemon, Kate asserts, is the first tree to be planted in her garden whenever she moves, and we as readers are participants in its life—in sickness and in health: it is the subject of meditative reflection in journal entries, recorded discussion with friends, poems, and recipes. But the lemon is also the first fruit planted in Llewellyn's garden-book—it is the first fruit of which she writes, and the first fruit to which she devotes a poem and that poem is no ordinary poem, but a ghazal. Perhaps of most interest to this discussion is the transformation of the ghazal from the Persian "qasida"—a eulogy written in praise of the emperor or his noblemen—to a form that, translated from the Arabic, means "talking to women." It is a form that shifted from an elite to popular culture in India, becoming the staple of the popular romantic musical film.⁵ In an Australian context, however, it is an exotic and highly structured poetic form that serves both to highlight the value Kate ascribes to the lemon and to accentuate the beauty of the ordinary and the familiar.

Ghazal 5

On this windy day, run out
gather **quick, lemons** from the tree,
Indoors, while we laugh and kiss
rain can **lick lemons** from the tree.

The fence is falling. Frugally
every week we prop it up.
The neighbour's boy, left at home
all day, bored, tempted, taking all
comes to **nick lemons** from the tree.
When I go to town to teach in suit and
heels,
the garden looks weirdly snug
blanketed in hay. And on this
lie **sick lemons** from the tree.

"This is very hard, Gwen," I say
looking for a rhyme remembering
how she clapped her hands as we found
when coming round
a wall of **brick, lemons** from the tree.

All those old recipes
for posset, flummery, syllabub and
marmalade.
The luxury of saying, "I can give you,
If you'll wait a **tick, lemons** from the tree."

Kate, the word integrity should be
your shield. If you fear your past mistakes
and their effect sometimes
you can assuage sorrow and regret
by going out to **pick lemons** from the tree.

(*Playing with Water* 13, my emphasis)⁶

What to me is particularly interesting about Llewellyn's use of the ghazal is the way it demonstrates the learning of the poet's craft within the demand of the radif, that "a portion of the first line, comprising not more than two or three words, immediately preceding the rhyme-word at the end, should rhyme with its counterpart in the second line of the opening couplet, and afterwards alternately throughout the poem" (Bhullar 1). The play with rhyme is signaled in the reference to Gwen, and the comment, "'This is very hard, Gwen,' I say/ looking for a rhyme remembering/how she clapped her hands as we found/when coming round/a wall of brick, lemons from the tree." It seems to the reader/listener that Gwen claps her hands as much for the discovery of another rhyme, difficult to remember or conjure, as for the unexpected magical sight of lemons.

Quick lemons, lick lemons, nick lemons, sick lemons,
brick lemons, tick lemons, pick lemons

quick lick nick sick brick tick pick lemons from the tree

The rhyming "lemons" are situated within the formal structure of the exotic ghazal like a skipping rhyme or even a typing exercise—reminding us that poetry making is our birthright and our play. Yet because the child's play is fitted within the larger schema of the life and art of the professional poet, it also points to the skill and the elite nature of the craft. This playing with rhyme, like a *Playing with Water*, is portrait of the poet as a young woman that, within the formal structure of the ghazal, becomes portrait of the poet as an old woman, the sage woman: "sometimes you can assuage sorrow and regret/by going to pick lemons from the tree."

"Day after day," writes Kate in the first chapter of the story of a garden, "I lugged water from the slow-running back tap to the new trees. Sometimes I felt I had gone back to childhood. Playing with water around a sandcastle, waiting for the next wave to fill the moat. It seemed much the same as this pouring of water onto the garden, which is a form of green moat around the house" (8). And in the final pages she writes,

I have been trying to think about what my garden means to me. A green walk in silence. A sleepy lizard beside the flowering plumbago, my companion. The *Ailanthus* tree sheltering the lilies, the frog pond and the clivias. The

loyal lemon tree, triumphant, laden and undemanding. Purple bougainvillea still climbing through the jacaranda beside the Turkish fig which leans towards the sun. The peace of walking round with a cup of tea soon after dawn in my dressing-gown . . . No eyes can see me here alone, triumphant in my sweet hermitage . . . (417) □

NOTES

1 Llewellyn's most recent publication is a memoir, *The Dressmaker's Daughter*, published by Random House in 2008.

2 Margaret Olley is an Australian painter, predominantly an artist of the still-life genre, whose work spans 50 years, from the 1940s–1990s.

3 Elizabeth David, "I'll be with You in the Squeezing of a Lemon," from *Wine and Food*, February/March 1969.

4 I have referred to Kate Llewellyn as "Llewellyn" where I am speaking of her as author and as "Kate" to indicate the persona she takes on in *Playing with Water*.

5 Bhullar (online) 1997; Bhullar's piece, based to some extent on work by K. C. Kanda (*Masterpieces of Urdu Ghazal—From 17th to 20th Century*) and Peter Manuel (*Cassette Culture*) is published in *Lynx*, XII:2 (1997). Other writers' work I found useful on the history of the ghazal include Agha Shahid Ali, Aijaz Ahmad, and David Caplan.

6 "Ghazal 5" is published in full with the permission of the author.

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