Lyric poetry has the power to slow time down to intense, expanded moments of seeing and feeling. Its measured breaths connect language and silence, music and poetry, the visible and invisible in an attempt to assuage the longing for answers to the deepest questions of what it means to be human. L.K. Holt’s *Man Wolf Man* is a wonderful proof of the potency of the lyric. It is an astonishing and deeply satisfying debut, its lyric grace and power, strongly evident from the first to last poem, sustaining the enquiry into the nature of human bestiality, art, beauty and love.

There is a remarkable range and reach of theme, style and form here, but the underpinning question is Shakespeare’s “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?” Beauty and terror, *eros* and *thanatos* reside together in these poems of baroque equilibrium and decorum. Obliquely the poems seek grace and redemption in the face of the unspeakable. The opening poem broaches the dualistic nature of man, the barbarism of truth in the title and the imagery:

We want not beauty  
but light for aim, or the cover of black.  
Sometimes the enemy knocks before entering. A baby is hidden in the drawer.
There is none of the portentous gravitas that many poets fall prey to when dealing with such grave themes. It tells the truth but tells it slant, as Emily Dickinson counsels.

Death and its violent disruptions are taken up in different ways in the rest of the collection, in “Slaughter House,” “The Botanist,” “Violence,” and most movingly in “Long Sonnets of Leocadia,” a sequence about Goya, the master of the abominable and grotesque. The speaker of these dramatic monologues is Goya’s housekeeper-mistress, who is rumoured to have borne him a daughter and who was erased from Goya’s will by his son. Here, in a reinvented sonnet form and in stanzas effortlessly rhymed, love and loyalty are held in tenuous balance with horror and death. Goya’s art of unflinching witness is vividly rendered: “every horror a new eyehole/ for you to focus.” Holt captures Goya’s signature subject and style in precise, fluent strokes: “You paint a purposeful silence, mouths chasmal/ to consume all sound, small complete eclipses.” The wolf motif in the opening poem looms large in the last poem of the sequence, and refers to Goya’s crayon sketch “Wolf and Man”; in its central location in the collection and in its foregrounding of the key motif, “El Otro,” which means “the other,” as the wolf is called in Spanish folklore, becomes the pivotal lyric in the collection. It depicts Goya’s art of witness, the vigilant wolf-like way he observes and turns human carnage into art. Goya himself metamorphoses into the animal that is his emblem for the human condition:

Yet when our time comes
we want nothing but to stay wanting; to be consoled
looks a lot like the end. I’m scared of dirt.
You, of the wolf who does not flee but, slowly, turns.

The sequence, like the other two sequences “Unfinished Confession” and “Glove Story, Paraphrased,” reveals a capacity for sustained engagement with the subject, and a delicate, thrilling fusion of intuition and intellect. There is an erudition that is never showy, a deep engagement with historical facts that feeds her quest for understanding and equilibrium in the face of terror. Indeed, Holt wears her learning lightly, gracefully: Galen, Donne, Shakespeare, Kristeva, Primo Levi, Althusser all cohabit harmoniously in a language and form that is intricate and sinuous. The elegy to Althusser captures his life and work in a powerful psychological snapshot, the lyric cleverly miming the postmodernist reflex of “interpellation”:

He has no history: a thorn of theory
for the biographer. He ‘epistemologically breaks’
from himself each moment of each day
and in a such break – a tiny slice of clock –
He Killed His Wife. Capitals his punishment.

The discontinuities of death faced are not merely public or historical. There are intimate familial portraits of profoundly moving elegiac note. “Grandmoth” commemorates the poet’s grandmother through a marvellous metamorphosis of image and theme. In its lyric grace and delicate handling of detail, it is an impeccable elegy worth quoting in full:

On the wall the moth has fashioned itself
two-dimensionally, self as self-portrait.

Its eye-forgeries see everything in the room:
where I see memories it sees a great feast.

They are always fleeing, like thieves, like bits of dusk
left behind, at the opening of drawer or door, their stomachs
freshly full of coat or jewel-box lining; tweed and velvet
are left a demented lace of their hungry design.

From the box where I keep her necklace
(in non-existent photos I see her neck laced
with it, I see how it hangs consolingly beside
her one lonely breast) out stole a moth

and I thought it was her: my grandmother
returning as something hungry for a time not lived.

The moth, a symbol of transitoriness, triggers the memory of the grandmother, and a fleeting moment of recognition and rebirth. The details are never loud, gently evoking the movement of thought and feeling, aided by the couplets that render the sonnet all but recognizable, another instance of Holt’s formalist leaning, which is not content with using inherited templates but turns them into startlingly fresh and coherent forms. “Half Sestina” is another example of Holt’s confidently deft handling of form; here the sestina is remodelled to convey the narrative threads between parents and child: “In sepia wraps, father is a baby I can hold anytime. / To forget my beginning and console him in love’s-end: / an oxymoron brutal; impossible by design.”

Holt handles serious themes with delicate grace and irony. There are also playful erotic moments of Metaphysical or Cavalier verve and wit. Donne is present not just in the parody “The Flea,” but also in “Pompeii” and in “Sedimentary Layers,” which, like Donne’s love poems, yokes
the serious and playful together in a carnal moment:

If a geologist were to wander in
and see us lying here
– my head on your chest but
but your legs on top of mine –
he’d certainly be a little perplexed
over whether you or I came first.

This is one of the delightful lyrics of the here and now, an instant unburdened by history and death. “Bird Ghazal” offers a train of fleeting avian transcriptions, revealing a mind as alert to innocent pleasures as it is to the sombre shades of history:

The tern – wings ink-tipped – is poised mid-thought before
a thermal, formal arc: wind’s calligraphy in the sleight of bird.

These are necessary moments of light relief. The collection returns to a more sombre note in the last poem, “Time of Houses,” a lyric sequence exploring the existential ideas of habitation and home, man’s tenancy on this earth. The sequence sifts the different meanings of “house” in relation to different stages of life and ends memorably with “Apocalypse House,” recapitulating the key motifs and images and resolving tentatively the conundrum raised by the opening poem. It is a solution that we all expect, but the way Holt broaches it is arresting, unaffected, and makes us pay attention to a common truth – that we must love one another or die:

You leave in the time of houses always assuming
you need not say more than a ration of farewell,
nor shake out the pit where your head emptied out
into pillow, not smooth out the sheet’s seismogram
of ripples, nor pack your things into boxes, your hair
from the plug, not pre-prepare in lines in my tongue
every is into was, nor unfocus your face caught
and framed into that of the stranger you were but
once, nor snuff out the synapses I light for our love,
little bonfires of love, man’s first type of home.

In its Auden-like affirmation of human love, the poem answers the questions explored in the earlier
Holt possesses a rare Mozartian grace and range: witty and light, erotic and playful, sombre, meditative and elegiac. Her mastery of form is exquisite and exemplary; she has devoured and assimilated Donne and Shakespeare, and is able to turn inherited forms into something uniquely her own. Holt has set very high standards in her debut collection, not just for herself, but for Australian poetry.

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