

The Incomplete Poems

David Howard

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Reviewed by Patricia Prime

David Howard's remarkable new book *The Incomplete Poems* is full of strange, unnerving poems that hang in the memory like a myth or song. These are poems of love and disappointment, of raw desire; poems that recognize artists, books and friends; poems that tell of a lover or child and poems that tell of loss. Moving through a variety of scenes and emotions, the speaker is confronted with images as the poems travel to the past or through the speaker's thoughts, to return back to the present. The collection is constructed as a sequence of titled, numbered and dated poems; the title reminding us that Howard's poems are a work-in-progress, and thus are 'incomplete'.

The lyrical nature of the poems supports this movement and Howard's use of unusual syntax, typography, stanza and line breaks develops into a rhythm that is at once disarming and calming, not unlike life itself. There's delight in both voice and eye in tracing the phrases as they gather and swirl about and with the sudden jolt of being swept away by clusters of images, as in these lines from 'Revisiting Church Square': *In January we blew / dandelions: our words covered the garden, / disturbing the bees. By February we / hid our Christian names in poppy heads: I wanted to God I wanted to // open your pod.*

In poem 14 'An Extempore Tragedy', Howard writes,

*Grandmother's arthritic
fingers tear the moquette on her armchair.
Framed by fading light and the holland blind holds
condensate from potatoes
eroded by the water they boil in. Mouse turd
caulks the floorboards she creaks over
to the stove to remove
the dinner I'd sooner miss.*

These are lines that are at once understandable but upon closer inspection produce a vivid picture of his grandmother. The phrase, 'the dinner I'd sooner miss' is the operative one here and the line breaks take what might be straightforward expressions and force them into a vibrant state; it is a style that holds throughout the collection.

Drawing on sources as various as music, literature, art and memory, *The Incomplete Poems* examines varieties of love, faith, hope and illusion, to suggest an unusual possibility: that when the search for what we are expected to find ends in failure, we can begin the hard and disciplined quest for what it is we actually want. Here, for example, Howard writes about the girl next door: *The girl next door, her eyes / colonise your body / with borrowed light, with foreign / affairs: little bits of nowhere / making you taking you // over.* (p. 80). Nevertheless, Howard reveals a keen sense of humour in many of his poems. Take, for example, these lines from 'After the wink-and-elbow, the unthrown kiss': *the fact of the matter is the fact of the matter doesn't matter / much.* Or these from 'Beyond what is said to what is': *Our neighbour loses the sun. / Dad warms his hands on the red of a rooster's comb.*

With phrases and images from the life of loved ones, Howard creates a contrast between the unbelievable nature of death and its absolute reality, a feeling that rings true to the experience. Phrases such as *the suicide's apologetic / smile* (p. 9) and *How / your body's / a reminiscence* (p. 158) show how the small details of a person's life become strange as one ponders death. In poem 99 'The Held Air' about his father, to whom the book is dedicated, he writes, *Your memory is a splinter working itself / out of wherever 'under' is. I guess / neither surface nor depth are measurable // without you.* (p. 160).

Full of risk and wonder, *The Incomplete Poems* shows the range of Howard's abilities, but also strikes out for new territory. He remains consistently one of our finest living lyric poets and each of these astonishing poems is clear and memorable. They are achingly wonderful poems on the quest for the numinous, celebrating love and coming to terms with grief, and the mysterious that is always just beyond our reach. Every poem tells a story that is both complex and precise. There is never any doubt that the characters and situations are authentic, and inhabit a real world, one that is full of passion and emotion. The feeling of circling around these moments in time is emphasized by the structure of the book, with all of the poems being numbered and thus part of an ongoing life.