

# Launch of *The Mountains Couldn't Walk Away* by Andrea Demetriou

THE BOOK WAS LAUNCHED ON THE 29th APRIL BY:  
Tim Colebatch – Angelo Loukakis - John Mangos - Jeannie Lewis.

*Below is an extract from  
Angelo Loukaki's speech*

The poems in *The Mountains That Couldn't Walk Away* are strong. They are moving. They stay with you after you've read them. They are also deceptive poems – I say deceptive, because they have what might be termed a simple surface over complex depths. The poet, Andrea, has no use for literary abstractions, but she does have a considerable aesthetic sense. She knows how to make her poems sing. They are bardic, lyrical in their own way.

Though her language is clean and spare, she finds ways of weaving word and image and thought to create more than one dimension of feeling and more than one possible locus of emphasis. This is absolutely a correct approach for anyone who seeks to render in poetry the hard stuff of life.

This is how the poets of civilisation, her literary ancestors and forebears, did it before her – and I would say how it must still be done today. You could argue that there is a political dimension or desire in her poems, but that is just one, important, aspect of her work. Rather than political, she is more certainly in the lineage of Cavafy, above all the Cavafy of loss, of civic virtues destroyed. The concerns of Elytis, too, are there to be seen in Andrea's work: like many others writing the Greek experience, she is in the tradition of Axion Esti.

Andrea Demetriou has much to say about loss. She has experienced it. She is the child torn from its mother – and by mother I mean more than birthmother – she is the child who has lost her home.

In the poem 'Lies', p.22, she writes (read whole section from book),

'Lies... yet this song I used to play for grandpa'

'I'll sing along cheekily and say "Grandpa this is for you!"...'

'I'll go there again to sing for him.'

But loss, the poet suggests, can take many forms and so can the consequences. What happens when there is no longer a 'there', or a 'him'? Are we left only to fantasy, to the work of imagination to provide diversion or peace or relief? Are we to keep travelling back in time to the places once known? Perhaps we might, and sing an old song, but with the nothing more

to hope for than:

'The walls that heard it then might still remember it'

This is a powerful kind of yearning, a poignant kind of despair. And in which the imagination of the child, the workings of that imagination, are beautifully created.

As I wrote this launch speech, and read a poem such as this, the writer in me reminded that it is a danger to isolate those elements in a poem, or poetry, that you yourself find personally sympathetic or meaningful, then elevate them above all other considerations. But this is multivalent poetry, the kind that is a prism able to reflect different colours in different directions – that allows you to focus on one element or theme or idea at one moment, then another at another moment.

Loss is a fabric here, a torn fabric. The causes and origins of this loss, its place in the poet's psyche feel permanent and can't be let go of. At the same time there is something else.

There is, between the cracks and hurts of these poems, a serious sense of love. The terms of love, the nature of love.

In 'A Modest Goddess' (p.14) we read...

p. 15 'I cannot re-abandon her  
No matter how she might be...'

'I'm stuck like the snail on my shutter'

'I'm glued like an oyster on a rock'.

This is absolutely what the

great humanist philosopher Erich Fromm meant when he wrote of love as the deepest kind of ethical 'work'. This, much more than romantic infatuation, much more than eros, is what love could and should be. Fromm of course wrote in the context of the tragedies of the second world war, of wounding human conflict – the kind of context that is everywhere inside and around Andrea's poems here.

.....

The whole of *The Mountains Couldn't Walk Away* is very much about this kind of attachment. This is such a deep human need. Because I have not experienced it, I cannot imagine what it feels like, not exactly anyway, to have your place in this sense, taken away from you. But I know the feelings I experience when I am in Crete and I can see at least partly through Andrea's eyes and feel her responses to Cyprus when I think of the dry and beautiful bones of these islands, the dazzling skies, the waters of a harbour at night. Her poems make it just that much more possible.

Andrea's poems brought me to, reminded me of, the magnetism, the drawing power of place. They force you to ask yourself what happens when there is nothing left, nothing there, for your affections, your psyche, to attach to – your soul to call home. 'Where is home, Odyssea...? Where is home...?' is the most profound kind of

lament.

And then, when all is taken away, you are condemned to look for the last fleeting images of place, try to keep them there in the front of your imagination if nothing else.

.....

So, you read these poems, and the prism turns in another direction, and you find yourself asking other kinds of questions. Why should these things happen? Why an invasion and dispossession, such as the one in Cyprus in 1974? Here you leave the world of the poems briefly, but it's right that you do, because the poems also ask you to do that. Not in any mechanical way, but because, as I say, these are poems about civilisation and its terms, as much as they are poems of loss and of love.

Well, you turn away from the page and there are other thoughts, explanations, reasons, analysis. It's not my place to add amateur interpretations to what others have studied more carefully and have said more effectively and specifically on the matter of the invasion of Cyprus.

But I will say this, roughly quoting the Melbourne historian David Day, and knowing it is of little comfort to those who have directly suffered here – but, the true history of the world is the history of attempted or actual conquest – the colonisation of one place and its people by those from elsewhere. This never changes down the centuries; but it is that much more terrible when it happens to you and yours.

As to causal factors, beyond the political and territorial, I would say also that there is also

a generational factor in such events. The generation of those who knew what it was to be colonised or oppressed themselves, pass on, and are replaced by those who don't know, but who are filled rather with the ugliest impulses, who see only their passions and desires, the possibility of personal benefit. The memories and experiences of their own forebears are not available to them, nor do they have direct experience of what it is like to lose your home and identity.

Although the invasion of Cyprus is much more than this, it is also the triumph of forgetting over memory. An idea well understood to 20th century European writers, thinking of Milan Kundera in particular. From the invasion of India by the English, to the tragedies of Poland and Czechoslovakia, and Cyprus and Kosovo, we see the absolute failure of the primary imagination – that is, to put yourself in another's shoes. That is why we return to the best kind of art and poetry, to seek civilisation, to be reminded of its terms...

....

The story has not ended yet, dear Andrea. Not for you. Not for the Greek people of Cyprus, not for anyone who cares. And there are millions, as you know, who still do. The poem hasn't ended...

So, ladies and gentleman, I will end by saying that Andrea Demetriou has written a splendid and powerful suite of poems. They are poems that matter. She deserves every success with them. Please join me in congratulating her on her achievement...



Tim Colebatch, economics editor of *The Age*, said the ultimate fate of Cyprus was still to be decided. Historically, every country used to invade its neighbours if it had the military power to conquer them. But since the mid-20th century, countries that invaded others have been unable to have their conquests accepted, by those conquered, or by the world. "Countries used to belong to their rulers, and to ordinary people, it was less important who was in charge", Mr Colebatch said. "But now we have democracy, and strong national identities. Countries belong to their people, and the people don't accept losing them. Israel, he said, was a classic example. After 63 years, the Jewish state is as far as ever from being accepted by the Palestinians it displaced. A former Australian Ambassador to Israel, Peter Rodgers, argues that eventually the Jews will abandon Israel to the Palestinians, because the Palestinians have nowhere else to go and will never stop fighting to get their land back. The same could happen in Cyprus, Mr Colebatch said. It will all depend on whether future generations of Greek Cypriots feel the same outrage and commitment to get back their land as the outrage recorded in Andrea Demetriou's poems.