Liana Joy Christensen *Wild Familiars* Tone River Press, Fremantle 2006 ISBN 0-9775403-0-8

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The oxymoron contained in the title of this debut collection of work is an indication of the tensions that the poems work around and through. That which is wild is outside the home: undomesticated, undisciplined, uncontrollable and unknown. On the other hand, the familiar is literally part of the family, known, close and intimate. Today, humankind is in possession of more knowledge and understanding of the environment, the plant and animal life of the planet, the functioning of ecosystems and so on than at any time in history. But, it is equally clear that collectively we have never been less at home in our environment – less 'familiar' with natural processes and cycles. The age of scientific discovery and exploration can also be interpreted in terms of the human encroachment on 'wilderness', which continues apace in both symbolic and real ways. Thus, as much as 'the wild' has become 'familiar', or turned into a kind of home, that which ought to be familiar – a sustainable and sustaining way of being at home, recognising our place in a family incorporating humanity as well as all that is more than human – is anything but. In a word, we are bewildered.

The impulse in these poems is accordingly to resist the continuing subjection of the wild to domestication, whether through scientific discourse, or cultivation and use. It is also to seek familiarity with the wild, but in such a way as to preserve its wildness. 'The Bats of Wombat State Forest', for instance, responds to the title of a scientific report. The poem at once admits a taste for this 'astringent knowledge', while seeking to supplement the report's 'sober' accumulation of data:

> I can't be the only one whose antennae,
> vibrate at the title
> who likes to get a little drunk on
> the effervescence of childlike delight
> who wonders about the dark forest
> and the sonar songlines
> bounced back and forth
> between the dense earthbound wombats

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and the flittering airborne bats?

If the contrast between scientific fact and poetic fancy is drawn somewhat too sharply here, other poems present more subtle plays on the same theme. With a nod to Foucault's anecdote about taxonomy at the opening of *The Order of Things*, 'Taxonomic Dreaming', gives a few novel answers, tongue in cheek, to the perennial philosophical question about the 'uniqueness' of human being. Another poem, 'Mitosis' (the process of the division of cells) traces the dispute between science and religion over the last two centuries – gently mocking the pretensions of each side through the figure of the chimpanzees, bemused but indifferent to the human debate over their place in a hierarchy of being. 'The other St. Francis' reports on a visit to the final resting place of the saint in Goa, a kind of ecological pilgrimage which goes awry with the discovery that it is the missionary zealot Xavier, and not the animal loving Assisi, who is interred there. This leads to a reflection not only on the pieties of orthodox religion, but also on the pieties of eco-consciousness revealed in an 'academic's' rejection of St. Francis (seen as a 'sentimental, sissyish, soap opera kind of saint') as patron saint of ecological understanding.

The point is well made, but reflexively, it brings to light an inherent risk in such poetry. It is a risk which the American poet, Charles Wright, captured succinctly: 'mercy upon us, those who have learned to preach but not to pray.' Many of these poems do end in a lesson – 'we must sustain to be sustained'; 'we suggest you do the same'; 'Plato be damned / there is much to be gained / from patient waiting in caves' – but as the last of these examples hints, the lessons are leavened with humour. As Christensen puts it in 'The Romantics': 'if you are going to travel by camel / it is just as well to possess the ability to laugh.' Nonetheless, reading the collection over again, I found myself hoping for more poems which resist the impulse to tell the reader what's what. Poems like 'the Embrace', an 'enigmatic' response to the image by Kati Thamo featured on the book's cover, give reason to be hopeful. All the same, more of Christensen's playful reflections on the vital connection between the familiar and the wild would be just as welcome.