

“Act Cute alchemises the body personal into the political – revealing the blurred lines of play and power, desire and distance, meet cutes and lonely aesthetics; the exquisite contradictions we carry, refracting the ordinary into a collection of poems that is startling, luminous, and deeply alive.”
– Sara M. Saleh

ACT CUTE

“It is a rare book of poetry that makes you feel you are being reconstituted as you assemble its words into lines. Perhaps because of its focus on character in all forms, but particularly from the perspective of the actor and theatre-maker, this book scripts for us different ways of being in the world. While not disregarding the important political work this book does, it is also takes minor affects and cultural products seriously. There is no-one who writes about ‘B’ grade culture as seriously and wonder-full-y as Andrew Sutherland.”
– Caitlin Maling

cute (adj.): *clever, sharp, smart, pretty;*
a shortening of *acute*.

acute (adj.): *sharp, pointed, penetrating;*
originally of fevers and diseases, *coming quickly to a crisis*.

“Haunted by an image of failure that the experience itself seems to generate,
the aesthetic of cuteness thus seems paradoxically coupled
with an inability to carry out its own agenda.”

Sianne Ngai

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About the poems

The publisher of this collection is located on Walyalup on Whadjuk Noongar Bibbulmun boodja. The majority of these poems were drafted and collected together on both Whadjuk Noongar Bibbulmun land and the lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation. Sovereignty has never been ceded, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

Around the ten-year mark from training to be an actor in an institutional drama school setting, I started to feel considerable anger surface about the experience; about the methods of training, the questions of gender performance that had resettled in my body, and the things I felt were ‘promised’ me, or that I’d promised myself, that I would not fulfill. This seems very petty, on reflection, but nostalgia can do that: the power we give to pasts, to things that might have happened and things that didn’t happen, can become so fixed that even if we are the only person who can view that reality, it nevertheless operates as a reality. When I think of this time, training as an actor in my late teens and early twenties is inseparably linked to the development of queerness and the operation of desire, as a queer body entering adulthood; to questions of settler-colonial identity, as a white body residing in Singapore; and to the HIV diagnosis that then forced my departure from Singapore. These poems attempt to address the forces of nostalgia that now shape my body, in both their propulsive and their most stifling forms.

At the same time, two of the people most important to me, from the beginnings of drama school to present, were married in February 2023 and January 2024, respectively. This felt important to honour and to address. These relationships became an invisible spine by which to try to trace what I referred to as the ‘ten-year gap’ between the version of myself entering the

training institution and the persona writing the poems. I became interested in the codes of romantic drama: the meet-cutes, the monologues, the last-minute airport declarations of love, the sense that forgiveness of the romantic other should function as a kind of narrative *deus ex machina*; and use these as a loose structuring principle in which to contain this relationship with the self through (narrative) time.

In naming and addressing the ‘personal’, it also becomes important to push toward the persona’s function within the institutions, systems, narrative conventions and sets of governance that shape and propel the actor/artist body. These institutional settings and canonical entities are violent and limiting, and have nevertheless organised the processes by which I make and collaborate in art; they have been the means by which I have found any scope of connection, articulation, or resistance, and this is a tension carried beneath every criticism. These poems address these wider systems, with varying degrees of success or failure, as the actor rehearsing within them.

While writing this very self-facing book, I must acknowledge that my focus turned to the ethnic cleansing and genocide enacted in occupied Palestine by the state of Israel, and now, as I write this introduction, to the invasion of Lebanon. What does it mean to write about the petty, the personal, and the cute in an imperialist reality that is incontrovertibly not? It feels like a typically white Australian response, to ask *what does this have to do with me?* as a form of distancing or dismissal, but the question bears serious asking. Making art in the colony also means encountering the white settler-colonial body from its own position. Complicity, in all its forms, must be recognised and moved with. To that end, making art is one thing; but it is not paying the rent, and it is not protest, direct financial aid, boycott, divestment or sanction.

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Teeth begin their long erosion
home. The smile shifts out of
perfect position. Extractive futures:

so many years of imprecision. Feels
harder and harder to take stock of
the weeks, the one week to the month

becomes the next. Sidelined
by the edges of words: proximity
to the feeling, and not the thing itself.

Moisturise the face until a pre-
historic slug. You are your own
creation, and that can't be forgiven.

This second try it's time to try
to write the book without re-
membering *time*,

desire,

viral,

act.

Without, *this was possible*.

Without the words for *eute*.

Try me. I've got nothing left

to lose, and even more to lose.

ACT ONE
{Audition Sides}

联 (I)

Found standing on
the beach at four a.m., I tell you *I think*
there's something between you and me.
Something in the shore-night: that we
will be, we be-tween we. We are so

new. To knowing; signals; staying up
drunk, the length of east coast beach,
to ~~aeting~~ school, the institution

all ~~desiring~~

& the lack. You've been here a year, found
-ation starter; fire-met-legs, the wushu prince
Penang; weeping emo, straight boy; future
lead; obvious star. The beach. You let me

down gently &

I trust this is not real. Convict to this, not-real.
How we never know another until we do.

first ~~time~~ I came to Singapore
I bawled my eyes out every night
but then I did have a gf then
a little pathetic really

At four a.m. hunched against a labyrinth wall be
-side the club, Marina Bay Sands basement two,
I cry like I have never cried before. Has no one

ever learnt to cry like this before? The heat

the heart

the lunging pair. The muscle and the sweat.
Under light; that long-found kiss. Of course
it wasn't mine / so love / so new.

Chanel pushes back my shoulders to the maze
 she tells the centre guards *he's not too drunk*
he's just upset it's okay Andrew stop & I ack-

nowledge as I cry it's like another
 set of eyes looking in, or down,
 the narrow ceiling of my tears.

Two criers behind crying.
 The suspicion this is real –
 as in, makes me a better actor
 at least this makes me great, no –

best

in show. If I could just hand in this moment,
 each & every ~~time~~. If I could have a hand in
 this moment. & then I went home.

I'm sorry for that ~~time~~-short after.
 You still had to be the best. I had
 Xanax, open wounds, permission
 to incohere. A found character.

I'm going to bed m8
see you tomorrow
have a good night
sweet dreams

It was painful for us to play lovers
 in a first-year show, except I wrote
 the scene for us to act. When our senior said
 our chemistry was incredible, I felt vindicated
 & angry & in pain, but more because I could
 than because I had to be. Or when it hit me
 that after all I couldn't learn to cry on cue.

Actually, I don't think our teachers ever believed
 I could carve out a full & believing human being.
 Not anywhere. There was always something lost.
 Some romance of reality absent.

Some masculinity in the canon.
 Some heterosexuality in humanity.

To imagine a world from out of your body
 everyone else has to believe that it's there.

The ~~desiring~~ & the lack.

I love you in a way that is more than
 the story of a teenager with a crush &

the audience must

take it on faith that what follows is a
 truer romance than a coastline or a maze.

Hard to recognise. Harder still to romance
 are scenes found, & after. A truer romance

is a moment doesn't recognise itself; a truer
 moment cannot even be a moment after all.

The Lake House (2006) Romance/Fantasy 1h45m

Lately I have found myself staring out the back panel doors of my apartment. Out towards the pool, which I never enter, which is not a lake but a pool, and all the chlorine and families pool implies. I have been staring; for lost minutes, for two hours at a ~~time~~, just like the cat that howls and bashes with his paws against the pane. *Something is out there*, my cat seems to be saying, over-burdened, three a.m. *Potential's coming by*. The light goes in, or it slips out, the light that is the dawn that is the rock that smashes through the panels of the house that is the apartment for the pool that is the lake that is the mailbox for the ~~time~~ around the house. Keanu walks that ~~time~~-dependent dog. *Light is specific*, the architect father says, then dies; and the light, it bears repeating. The light, the light, the light. In this film, Keanu's coded white. His toothpaste-brother looks like me; adds little to the plot. On the other side of the doors, Sandra writes a letter to be forwarded on to god. Reeves is never coming by, Sandra. Something here expires, replying to a road. ~~Time~~ is barking up the wrong tree. The houselight built to save itself; *you've got mail!* nobody says. Two years behind, I stare back at myself.