

ANTHOLOGY

**Etchings 4: The Art of Conversation**

Ed., Sabina Hopfer
Ilara Press, \$28.95
Reviewer *Thuy On*

THIS IS *ETCHINGS'* FIRST themed edition. Themes are always risky with anthologies — sometimes you suspect that contributors clumsily fashion their work to accommodate the editor's demands. But on the whole, this tri-annual publication (fiction, non-fiction, photography, art, poetry) works well, with its latest edition devoted to "the art of conversation". Not only does *Etchings 4* explore the various strands of vital and exuberant exchange of thoughts, it also canvasses pregnant pauses, cross-wires and other failures of communication.

In his usual elegant style, Robert Dessaix places civilised talk in historical context and explains how good conversation is like fire spreading horizontally, "although those catching fire may not be equal in wealth, understanding or social status, they must feel as if, for the duration of the conversation, they are on the same plane". Meanwhile, action researcher-performer Astra Howard uses public spaces for her experimental discussions with the passing traffic while Peter Davis muses that reflecting upon photographs is to "converse with time itself".

The fiction component is particularly strong, especially Glenys Osborne's *Mermaid Footwear*, about an ageing couple's unspoken but deeply felt desire to once again sip at the fountain of youth, and Romy Sai Zunde's *Oyster the Amazing*, where a gifted storyteller transforms language into a form of beauty.