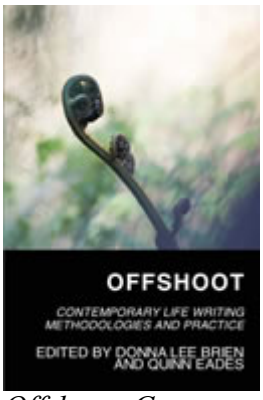
TEXT Vol 22 No 2 (October 2018)

Reviews contents

TEXT review

Fibrillations of life writing

review by Moya Costello



Offshoot: Contemporary Life Writing Methodologies and Practice
Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades (eds)
UWA Publishing, Crawley, WA 2018
ISBN 9781742589626
Pb 338pp AUD $39.99

Staying: A Memoir
Jessie Cole
Text Publishing, Melbourne VIC 2018
ISBN 9781925603507
Pb 260pp AUD 32.99

'Books talk among themselves', Umberto Eco (1984: 61) once quipped convincingly. Readers overhear those conversations, I assert. Some books sing to you (as Francesca Rendle-Short, in her performative essay on memoir in *Offshoot*, says of Maxine Beneba Clarke's *The Hate Race* [232]). *Offshoot* crackles at me. *Staying* ululates.

Offshoot crackles for two reasons. One, it is a combination of critical and creative work, and these fibrillate against each other. And two, its co-editors, Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades, are, as they themselves candidly say, 'very different individuals, with quite different scholarly and creative approaches and networks, at different stages of our careers' (xi-xii). And the editors celebrate difference, as they 'nestle' the various

contributors – poets, scholars and more – 'against each other as a means to creating a conversation' (298).

When I look for the definition of ululate online, what comes up immediately is this: 'howl or
wail as an expression of strong emotion, typically grief'. Howling and wailing are, perhaps, a little too strong for the affect of *Staying*. *Staying is* an expression of strong emotion. And the emotion *is* grief … but the affective residue of the book is also acceptance and resilience.

Jessie Cole is not a contributor to *Offshoot*, but her most recent book, *Staying*, after two novels, is a memoir. Perhaps the most comparable piece with Cole's in *Offshoot* is Zoe Thomas' '(Snippets of) Littoral Freedom: Collecting Nostalgic Remnants on the Distant Shores of Childhood'. Thomas's work features a strong place and paternal relationship. Cole's three books share a resonant triplet-ness. They are set in the Northern Rivers (although not clearly stated, with the exception of *Staying*, as such). The Northern Rivers is subtropical, and, with high heat, rainfall and good soil, its biodiversity is significant in scope. Central in the memoir is her father's descent into madness.

Cole's memoir is an extraordinary thing. In any context, anywhere on the planet, in this moment, it echoes, though personally, multi-various forms of global-public trauma (for example, Australia's lack of official reconciliation with its Indigenous peoples, Nauru, Yemen, Syria, Israel/Palestine). Devastating is the suicide of Cole's step-sister and then her father. Dreamlike and exceptional is her upbringing in the hinterland forest of Byron Bay. Courageous is her putting-pen-to-paper for this memoir. Deeply reconciling is her devotion to the land, much-beyond-concrete-cityisation:

> Returning home … was fraught… How rare it is for the dispossessed to regain their homeplace. When my family fled our home at the height of my father's madness, we never expected it to be restored to us… Returning … there was a sense of welcome in the rolling hills, the endless green expanse of forest, and the curving, bright-pebbled creek of my home. (161)

As the editors of *Offshoot* say about the genre of life writing itself, it has 'numerous innovative incarnations' (3). Brien and Quinn sharp-sightedly mention biography as inclusive of 'non-human animal stories' and objects (308). Jessica White states in her essay on the writing of Annamaria Weldon in *The Lake's Apprentice* is that it is an ecobiography of 'the myriad life forms' in Yalgorup, a Western Australian coastal national park. White defines the genre of ecobiography as 'a grafting of life and environmental writing which illuminates our embeddedness in, and dependence on, our ecosystems' (121). Equally ecobiograhical are the nonfiction poems of Jeanine Leane, 'Gatherers', and Phillip Hall, 'Brolga Clan'.

A singular characteristic of *Offshoots* is the inclusion of another form of ecobiography: exquisite plant drawings, and poetic-descriptive text, by Alice Ewing. Brien and Quinn state that the 'botanical examples … reflect and tease out some of the themes of each section' (5) – for example, the emblem for the first section on history is a lichen, 'the embodiment of age and longevity' (11).

So there's more than one piece of ecobiography in *Offshoots*. There are more than two poems and more than one fictocritical piece. Marion May Campbell's fictocritical work is triggered by her father's story, eerily echoing, in many of Campbell's phrases, Cole's memoir: 'orphaned of the father function' (280); 'traumatic orphanage' (281); 'Why did this father … court danger almost daily?' (282). It's fictocritical labour to cross genres: 'Genres can suggest traumatic wounds through their very corruption or interruption, and perhaps transform traumatised memory into productive becoming' (290). Cole's productive becoming came through writing per se: 'I found a way to sense-make through words' (256). Rendle-Short says of the term memoir that its basis is in *mer-mer*, that which we cannot grasp, and hence murmur (225) and a self, or other, barely calling.

In relation to 'numerous innovative incarnations', Dallas J. Baker's proposition is that 'queer life writing' is yet 'an unfulfilled' or 'emerging promise' (150). I'm wondering if queer life writing, in the Australian context, is missing recognition because it is increasingly done experimentally – that is, in a queer writing mode per se. *Offshoot* bears witness to this strategy through its section 'Embodiment, Experiment and Fictocritical Modes' in particular, where Marion May Campbell specifically refers to 'Queering'.

One never approaches – does one? – an anthology by reading from beginning to end, even though the reader is surely cognisant of the considered placement of each text against its predecessor and follower, and, in the case of *Offshoot*, in labelled sections (genre history, biography, writing the self, experimentation and hybridity). I usually read the intro and conclusion first. I look for familiar names. And then topics or genres of interest. So as any reviewer, or, indeed anthologist/editors would say, I cannot be *exhaustive* in my coverage of contributors.

Both books, *Offshoots* and *Staying*, have liveliness (and so they should!). They are, metaphorically, flotation devices. They are buoyant. They bear well the weight of being immersed yet alert in the *mer-mering* liquidity of change.

Works cited

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Moya Costello has become an adjunct/casual lecturer at Southern Cross University, with the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences and Business and Tourism. She has four books published: two of short creative prose and two novellas. She has many publications in literary journals and anthologies.

Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
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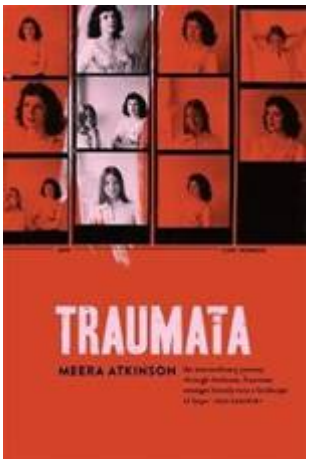
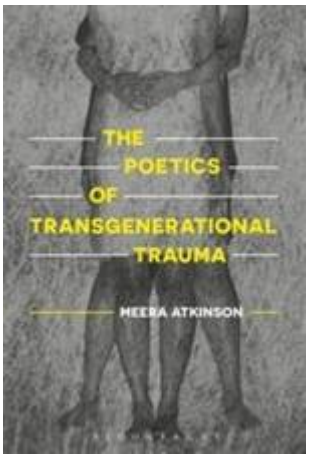
TEXT review

Writing trauma's cyclical hauntings

review by Michael Richardson



Meera Atkinson
Traumata
UQP, St Lucia QLD 2018
ISBN: 9780702259890
Pb 296pp AUD 29.95



Meera Atkinson
The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma
Bloomsbury, New York 2017
ISBN: 9781501330889
Hb 224pp AUD 161.99

Published less than a year apart, Meera Atkinson's two new books make a profound and original contribution to the study of trauma in the humanities and creative writing practice, as well as the wider public conversation about its rippling effects upon lives and across generations. *Traumata* (UQP 2018) and *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (Bloomsbury 2017) are very different works, one a creative non-fiction account of growing up and living with trauma and the other an academic inquiry into the literary poetics of trauma transmitted from one generation to another.

Yet the two books traverse similar terrain in search of answers to similar questions: how does trauma move from one body to another and across time? How is it shaped and changed by the actions of living, the structures of oppression within which it operates and the slow, arduous efforts of survivors to recover? How might language bring forth that most resistant of experiences, the traumatic?

The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma offers a compelling argument for the importance of literary testimony in grappling with what Atkinson calls the 'cyclical haunting' (22) of trauma. Developed from her PhD thesis (and here, in the interest of full disclosure, I should note that Atkinson and I completed our PhDs and published a collection of essays on trauma together), this theoretically sophisticated and politically charged work of scholarship draws on diverse fields of inquiry and lineages of thought in its close reading of literary texts. Moving adeptly between trauma studies in the psychoanalytic tradition of Cathy Caruth, affect theory in the vein of both Spinoza and Silvan Tomkins, and Jacques Derrida's writings on spectres and haunting, Atkinson makes the case for the contagious affectivity of trauma. Trauma, she argues, is not something contained within one body or another, but transmitted from one body to the next. Among her key theoretical contributions is to develop a familial and intergenerational account of how affect (understood as relational force or intensity) and trauma can become entangled with one another. In doing so, she explores 'the role of affect in trauma transmissions and the question of what it means for affect to lead the way in literary accounts of those transmissions' (10). Throughout, the feminist notion of *écriture féminine*, most closely associated with the French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous, provides a subversive and revolutionary framework for the writing of theory and critique.

The literary accounts chosen by Atkinson are diverse in interest and style. Chapter 1 takes up the challenging of revitalizing écriture femininethrough the reading of two novels, Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* and Marguerite Duras' classic work *The Lover.* Atkinson shows how 'the poetics of transgenerational trauma is aligned with the subversive impetus of (a strange-bodied) feminine and revolutionary writing' (46), while insisting that écriture feminineoffers much more besides a mode for writing trauma. In the next chapter, Alison Bechdel's remarkable graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is read alongside Cixous's fictional memoir *Hyperdream* to explore the dangerous ethics of writing familial trauma. Drawing on Spinoza's philosophy of affect and ethics, Atkinson argues that these works involve 'a particularly complex ethic that surpasses the individual account in its acknowledgment of the sensory and social potency of trauma and its transmission' (58). In the central and essential third chapter, Atkinson brings to the surface the crucial conjunction of thinkers – Spinoza, Derrida and psychoanalysts of trauma Nicholas Abraham and Mária Török – in her reading of *Carpenteria,* the monumental novel by Indigenous Australian author Alexis Wright. In this astute and tightly woven chapter, Atkinson summons the figures of spectre and phantom to draw from *Carpenteria* the cyclical traumas engendered by patriarchy and colonialism. This lays the groundwork for Chapter 4, which analyses Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy about the first world war and its traumatic legacy for soldiers and their families in order to develop the concept of cyclical haunting. This important contribution to the study of trauma emphasizes the circulation of trauma between bodies and across generations, recognising how, 'in the poetics of transgenerational trauma, micro-macro traumatic memory is written as a ghostly presence and affective feeding backward and forward'

(143). In the fifth and final chapter, Atkinson returns to the work of Alexis Wright. Here, she uses *The Swan Book* as an entry point and evocation of the capacity for trauma's cyclical hauntings to spook the non-human as much as the human. As affect theorist Gregory J Seigworth writes in his preface, Atkinson's evocative formulations, conjunctions and evocations advance 'the poetic strategies and tactics that can transform how we imagine coming out on trauma's other side' (x). In doing so, Atkinson refuses the tendency within trauma studies to be reify the unknowable, the unrepresentable and the aporetic. Instead, she argues for the necessity of writing as an experiment for living with, through and otherwise from trauma.

While *Traumata* does not abandon the academic mode entirely, it is first and foremost the remarkable story of a life unable to ever pull fully free of the wake of trauma yet lived with a tenacious commitment to writing. It is a courageous book, unflinching in its honesty and keenly observed even in the evocation of the most harrowing of events. Here, Atkinson is working in a different register [from her previous text]: the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next becomes immediate and lived. The book begins in the moment of writing, the author startled awake in the midst of a storm, but quickly slips into the interlocking, fragmentary narration of past events, reflections on recovery, and hard-edged critiques of an inherently traumatizing patriarchy, which 'infiltrates our beings and shapes our lives – first from the outside in, then from the inside out' (3). Throughout, Atkinson traces the knotting together of violence, trauma, oppression and constraint that patriarchy engenders for men and women alike. Beyond the particularities of Atkinson's own remarkable story and her critical engagements with the literature of trauma and recovery, the great contribution of *Traumata* to public discourse is its call to arms regarding the deep, intractable entanglement of patriarchy and trauma. Whether describing her rape in a Bondi hotel, or her slide into addiction, or the violence visited on her mother by men, Atkinson insists on the inseparability of personal and collective trauma, and of both from history, culture and politics.

If *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* is significant in its development of new theories and practices of writing about trauma, one of *Traumata*'s crucial contributions is its sustained engagement with literatures on trauma and recovery, from the seminal work of Judith Herman to the influential self-help teachings of James Bradshaw in the 1980s. The book moves elegantly between modes, interspersing descriptions of events from Atkinson's life with reflections on the value and limitations of the approaches of various writers, scholars and therapists. It is the lived experience with which they resonate that makes these critical engagements count. Evoked in direct and at times even sparse language, the traumas that Atkinson lives with are recounted only to return, brought forth in fragments or extended narrations which resurface later and obtain new meaning or provide the entry into some other, apparently unrelated trauma. Newly arrived in New York when the planes strike the towers, Atkinson's stable, almost placid existence as a married woman is rendered suddenly disjunctive. Her CPSTD (Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) reveals itself yet again, as the traumata of an abusive childhood and youth coheres with that of her mother and her grandmother, and becomes unbearable, doubly so as it is caught within the sense of imposture that a foreigner could be so overcome by 9/11. Throughout the book, the assembling of fragments such as these works to show how 'new trauma sticks to old trauma like Velcro' (102).

Towards the end of *Traumata*, Atkinson returns to the question that underpins the inquiries driving both books: 'are we powerless over the toxic effects of a history of patriarchy, powerless of the addictions we distract and medicate ourselves with, powerless over traumata and its symptomology?' (256). As both books make clear throughout, the answer is both yes and no, and inseparable from the practice of writing. This, then, is what binds together these two very different yet equally urgent books. *Trauma* and *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* demand that we attend to the bodies of language and the language of bodies, that the transformation of trauma becomes possible – even if fleeting, incomplete or always in need of renewal. 'Becoming transformed,' writes Atkinson at the close of her academic monograph, 'one way or another, aids both personal and political revolution and restitution, and that is the most expansive and liberating traumatic becoming of all' (199).

Michael Richardson is a Senior Lecturer in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales, Australia. His transdisciplinary research investigates the intersection of affect and power in media, aesthetics and political culture. He is the author of Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma and Affect in Literature *(Bloomsbury 2016), co-editor of* Traumatic Affect *(CSP 2013) and a number of book chapters and journal articles that address trauma, witnessing, affect and politics. Among other things, he is currently working on a project about drones and witnessing.*

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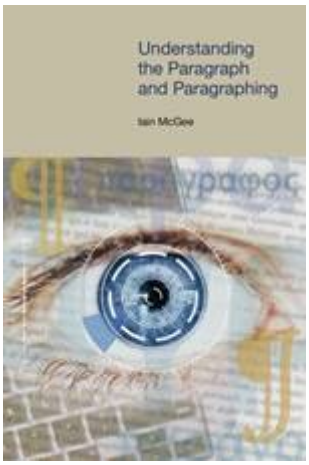
TEXT review

The secret life of paragraphs

review by Amber Gwynne



Iain McGee
Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing
Equinox Publishing, Sheffield UK S0114 / Bristol CT 06010-06011
ISBN: 9781781792872
Pb 438pp £60.00 / $75.00

Anyone familiar with the vagaries of teaching university-level writing will be no stranger to the sometimes baffling conundrum of 'effective' paragraphing. Even if we no longer expound the virtues of the five-paragraph essay or expect students to apply paragraph-writing formulae – such as the well-known PETER (point-evidence-technique-explain-reflect) or the more simply but unfortunately named PEE (point-evidence-explain) – in our writing curricula and assessment, we nonetheless assume that a 'paragraph' means something more than merely a series of sentences. Assessment rubrics frequently contain criteria relating to paragraph structure, development, and unity; in critical writing tasks, we encourage students to strive for coherence and cohesion at the paragraph level.

As Iain McGee points out, however, these implicit assumptions may do more to hinder than to help learner writers. In the introduction to his recently published monograph, *Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing*, McGee poses a series of provocative questions: Does our pervasive insistence upon the paragraph as a unified unit accurately capture the form and function of paragraphing in contemporary writing? Or has pigeonholing the paragraph led to prescriptivist writing pedagogies that ultimately evade rather than emphasise the paragraph's potential as an aid to writing and reading?

McGee is head of the Faculty of English Language Studies at Majan University College in Muscat. Motivated by his own 'curiosity to understand the paragraph and paragraphing', a 'frustration in teaching paragraphing', and a 'dissatisfaction with the educational materials he was using' (ix), his extensive literature review condenses centuries of research

into the nature and purpose of the paragraph into one comprehensive volume, seeking to problematise accepted definitions of the paragraph and to explore its form and function as both product and process.

Having established the focus and intention of the text in Chapter 1, McGee strives in the following three chapters to cast light on the history of paragraphing as a convention closely tied to changing modes of writing and reading, from its genesis in Greek and Latin texts to commentary and education in the late 19th century through to the 1960s – and beyond. By introducing readers to the central early theorists in the field, including Alexander Bain and Barrett Wendell, McGee effectively accounts for the enduring legacy of several competing models of the paragraph. He suggests that these shifting conceptualisations of the paragraph – whether as 'a flexible authorial interpretational tool' (53) in medieval writing, or its more persistent formulation as a discrete unit of text that can be theorised – have remained largely insensitive to natural variation both across genres and within individual texts of a genre, the expectations and activities of various readers, and the implications of discourse awareness.

In the second half of the book, McGee collates and critiques research relating to paragraphing as 'a discourse-managing tool' (Chapter 5), cohesion and the paragraph (Chapter 6), and the psychological effects of paragraphing on readers and writers (Chapters 7 and 8). This material, drawn from diverse research approaches including text-segmenting tasks and keystroke and eye-movement studies, makes clear that paragraph organisation and breaking decisions represent a complex negotiation between a variety of aesthetic, prosodic, formal, semantic, and pragmatic considerations. While other written units are more easily structurally defined – an independent clause, for example, comprises a subject and a predicate – paragraphs 'refuse to be straitjacketed' (344). Instead, McGee offers three complementary definitions of the paragraph: the text-oriented definition focuses on the paragraph as a cohesive textual unit, both within and across other paragraphs in a text; the reader-oriented definition is sensitive to, and mediated by, the reader's expectations of paragraph structure and indentation decisions (strongly dependent on genre); and, lastly, the writer-oriented definition more fully accounts for paragraphing in the writing process, as a trace of provisional drafting decisions and more deliberate structural and rhetorical goals. This revised taxonomy is intended to capture the paragraph's nuanced and unpredictable potential rather than a static or definitive product.

Although McGee foregrounds the pedagogical focus of the text in the preface and preliminary chapters, a sustained reading reveals a stronger reliance on, and implications for, corpus and computational linguistics. In fact, while McGee also stresses that his text should be taken as a whole and read systematically from beginning to end, it is only in this second half that writing educators may find more relevant takeaways to apply to their own writing and editing processes and the ways that they talk about and teach paragraphing, particularly to school leavers. Chapter 6 ('Cohesion and the Paragraph') includes a section explicitly entitled 'Educational Issues', and Chapter 7 a section entitled 'Pedagogical Applications', which suggests that focusing on the formal entity of the paragraph, and insisting on its 'tight organization', may have 'an unfortunate, unforeseen side-effect in drawing student writers' attention away from working through the semantic dimensions and richness of their writing – the actual content and the message to be conveyed' (292). Chapter 9, 'Wrapping up the Paragraph', culminates in an extended summary in which the author proposes 'a descriptivist pedagogy of

paragraphing'. Rather than perpetuating a pedagogy that students may resent for revolving around 'highly predictable and possibly redundantly transparent textual organization' (292), McGee urges educators to highlight seven key areas in the writing classroom. These include genre sensitivity when discussing paragraphing and attention to a specific paragraph's existence, purpose, or role within a wider text. As McGee explains, 'the importance of locating the paragraph and paragraphing within genre convention and discourse-community norm and purposes of designing, signposting, and organizing text cannot be overstated' (354).

I should mention, if it is not already obvious, that *Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing* is a predominantly and unapologetically descriptivist text: McGee openly questions scholars and educators who make value judgments about prototypically 'effective' or 'sophisticated' paragraphs and makes little reference to the ways in which inexperienced or struggling writers should go about structuring and segmenting paragraphs in their own writing. The absence of more prescriptive content may seem a frustrating omission to readers expecting something else, but it is due, in large part, to the breadth and limitations of the literature review and the author's deliberate emphasis on significant variation across genres and text types. For the same reason – few studies considered in the review have focused on creative or narrative texts – creative writing educators may struggle to locate useful practical advice for the students in their cohorts.

McGee has ultimately achieved his aim of writing a book that might 'help writing instructors discuss paragraphs and paragraphing intelligently with their students' (ix) by encouraging readers and writers alike to hold traditional models of the paragraph lightly, focusing less on the *what* and *how* of making paragraphing decisions and more on the *why*. However, as a treatise that demands considerable familiarity with linguistic terminology and concepts and a significant investment of time and money, this book may hold only limited appeal for practitioners in creative writing disciplines.

Amber Gwynne is a lecturer in corporate and academic writing at The University of Queensland, where she recently completed a PhD examining how readers with a history of depression choose and use self-help books. She is particularly interested in the place and value of grammatical knowledge in writing education, also working as a developer and moderator on edX's popular Write101x *MOOC.*

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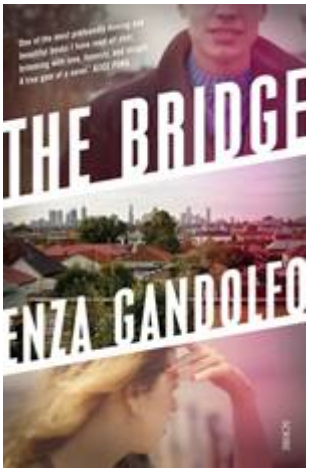
TEXT review

Coming to terms with culpability and grief in the face of catastrophe

review by Julienne van Loon



Enza Gandolfo
The Bridge
Scribe, Melbourne 2018
ISBN: 9781925713015
Pb 384pp AUD32.99

Enza Gandolfo's second novel has been many years in the making, but it has been well worth the wait. This is an ambitious, multi-generational story from a skilled writer. Diving into the almost four-hundred-page novel, I was promptly absorbed by its carefully layered plot, its significant cast of troubled characters, and Gandolfo's strong loyalty to a representation of recent local history that takes in the union movement, post-war European migration to the city of Melbourne, and the very real struggles of raising a family, both with and without the support of extended family.

The novel opens with scenes of suburban Footscray circa 1970, taking in the expansive open air workplace of the West Gate Bridge under construction, its riggers and other labourers toiling together on an ambitious civil project that has about it a sense of the heroic, flecked through with hopes of progress, growth, and prosperity. We are drawn quickly into the world of Antonello, a rigger, and his wife, a school teacher, newly married and deeply in love, and a new-migrant community in which everyone lives and works within the same small footprint. Anotello is also a talented illustrator, and his regular hobby of sketching scenes along the banks of the Yarra hints at a character capable of subtle and artful perception. When disaster strikes and the Westgate construction site collapses, killing and injuring many of its workers, the children and teachers at the school are within earshot, and Gandolfo's deeply affecting portrayal of a scene in which the family members wait many hours on the fringes of the large-scale accident for their loved ones to appear from the

wreckage is a *tour-de-force*: an early downpayment on the full emotional weight of the novel as a whole.

Footscray is a lovingly drawn and important character in this book. Gandolfo's evocation of place reminded me of Tony Birch's representation of Collingwood and the inner north of Melbourne in *Ghost River* (Birch 2015), set in part at a similar time. Both novelists, in showing us the city's very recent but no longer entirely visible past, gift us with a form of knowledge difficult to unearth via other forms of narrative. Both also contribute to the long-standing Australian tradition of working class, social-realist fiction. Here are layered, complex, and intelligent representations of a diverse array of characters, deeply shaped by the neighbourhoods from which they have emerged.

Gandolfo, like Birch, shows us something of what it is to carve out a working class life in and through the inner-suburbs of one of Australia's most vibrant and multi-cultural cities. Gandolfo's Footscray is not a beautiful place to live. Her description of residential living in the semi-industrial cityscape, as seen through the eyes of struggling single-parent, Mandy, in the closing pages of the novel strikes me as particularly poignant:

> There were times when Mandy was so besieged by their street, by the stench of petroleum, of the car fumes, of the rattle and roar of the traffic, that her body seemed to dissolve. "On some days," Mandy said, "living here, I feel like I'm drowning."… The [industrial] tanks were their neighbours… On the worst days, the tanks, dirty grey and black … were monstrous and menacing, formidable, as they peered over the cyclone fence, leaning all of their heavy weight towards the house. But there were times, especially in the soft light of a winter's morning, or on days when the wind blew east and the scent of the garden permeated the air, when, even for Mandy, the sight of them was home. (340)

Antonello, one of the book's most interesting characters, grows from young man into elderly patriarch over the course of the novel. A reluctant survivor, he is irrevocably changed by the tragedy of the West Gate Bridge accident in which several of his closest workmates were killed. After the event, he withdraws emotionally from everybody he loves and gives up his art practice, too. It is only in old age, forty years later, when confronted by the book's second major tragedy, that he begins to recognise the mistakes he has made through failing to forgive himself for surviving. '"Don't shut down," he advises his adult son, in the face of his new, hard-won wisdom. "If you shut down, everything will get worse"' (346). Antonello is an intriguing and complex portrait of human grief, from a mature writer who understands, compassionately, something of what is at stake for a masculine hero in the face of formidable failure.

A second key tragedy occurs in *The Bridge*, set in precisely the same neighbourhood, almost forty years later, in 2009. This incident changes things markedly for eighteen-year-old Jo, her mother Mandy, and their hastily appointed legal-aid lawyer Sarah. For me, in contrast to Antonello and his self-imposed isolation, these three women are like a strong braid. They are often uncomfortable in one another's company, and yet there is a collective strength to their bond, even in the face of one another's anger, criticisms, absences or betrayals. Gandolfo illustrates in and through each

of these women both the burden and the consequence of anxiety and self-hatred, and something of the manner in which women's friendships can turn, for good or bad, on the most subtle of actions. There is something about each of these women that has them cast out of the mainstream, and judged harshly for it. They need all their wits and inner resources to pull through. But they will pull through: Gandolfo makes sure of it. These are women with courage, skillfully represented and powerfully present for the reader.

The novel takes readers through some difficult emotional terrain, and Gandolfo presents each and every conflict with characteristic generosity, enabled in part by the technique of multiple implied narrators. She has constructed a compelling plot, but also dwells carefully on the complexities and contradictions created by that plot, compelling us to face our own assumptions and prejudices about the choices people make in circumstances limited both by structural disempowerment and by privately-held anxieties and regrets.

Gandolfo will be known to many *TEXT* readers as a former editor of this journal, and she wrote much of *The Bridge* while teaching full time in the writing program at Victoria University. I hope we'll see more of her work as a novelist in the years to come.

Work cited

Birch, T 2015 *Ghost River*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia QLD return to text

Julienne van Loon is an award-winning novelist. Since 2015, she has held the position of Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow with non/fictionLab at RMIT University. She is co-editor at TEXT *and an Honorary Fellow in Writing at the University of Iowa. Julienne's first non-fiction book,* The Thinking Woman*, is forthcoming with New South in 2019.*

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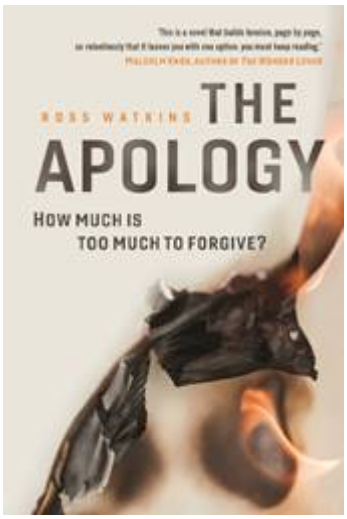
TEXT review

The limits of forgiveness

review by Rachael Mead



Ross Watkins
The Apology
UQP, Brisbane QLD 4067
ISBN: 9780702260193
Pb 248pp AUD $29.95

The dangerous potential of leaping to conclusions is the backbone of Ross Watkins' ambitious and deceptively clever debut novel for adults, *The Apology*. Using a cool, clear style, Watkins has created a suspenseful narrative in which the reader's expectations are slowly chiseled away as the plot explodes anticipated versions of reality. The novel begins with a brief, untitled and anonymously voiced first page. This opening describes the titular apology and drip-feeds enough context so that, before the narrative even begins, we, as readers, have made various assumptions. The wily ambiguity of this introductory text is only evident as the plot accelerates towards the climax and the reader recognises their initial interpretations to have been dangerously simplistic.

The central dilemma is quickly introduced within the following pages, setting up a brisk narrative pace that is maintained throughout. Adrian Pomeroy, an English teacher at an elite boys' high school in Sydney, finds himself implicated in a socially devastating and potentially career-ending allegation. With his professional and personal life in turmoil and police involvement imminent, he turns to his brother Noel for help, who is a police detective in Perth. It is this embroiling of Adrian's wider family in the drama that is key to the novel's social reach and weight. The involvement of a broad selection of relatives allows Watkins to construct a portrait of a contemporary, working-class Australian family, then crack it open to reveal both the underlying dysfunction and thin façade of cultural obligation barely holding it together.

Much of the thematic heavy-lifting undertaken by this novel is achieved through the clever interplay of structure and voice. The novel comprises six sections, with each broken into chapters voiced from the perspectives of various characters. In a similar structural style to Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap*, each character's voice not only moves the plot forward, but more significantly, also illuminates their idiosyncratic perspective on the family dynamic and events as they unfold.

Three key characters whose voices are integral to the narrative recur in every section: Adrian, Noel and Alex (the student responsible for the allegation). Through these voices, Watkins tackles a plethora of issues surrounding Australian masculinity. The only chapters not written from explicitly male perspectives are those in the voice of Wendy (Noel's wife), Glenda (Adrian and Noel's mother) and Nguyet (Adrian's Vietnamese wife). Riley (Noel and Wendy's transgender son) is also given a voice. Watkins handles the book's marginal voices with surprising ease and a sense of authentic empathy. He has clearly undertaken significant research and his rendering of female migrant and transgender voices felt empathetic and deeply considered. All these voices work together as a diverse chorus, illustrating how masculinity is constructed and functions in a working-class Australian family.

Adrian's marriage to Nguyet is already in trouble even before the social fallout from the allegation, due to his father's lack of acceptance of his Vietnamese wife and their son and unresolved cultural differences about family size. Noel is a character plagued by long-repressed guilt and is enmeshed in a racist, sexist and homophobic work culture. The toxic consequences of this play out in a variety of ways, detrimentally impacting both his marriage to Wendy and his relationship with their transgender teenager Riley. Noel's frustration and pent-up emotion finds an outlet in a growing proclivity for arson. Alex (or Akker as he prefers to be called) is a conflicted teenager, vulnerable to the toxic heteronormative culture of his high school environment and struggling with his burgeoning sexual identity.

Beneath this complicated façade of functional family life, there is a question being asked about the consequences of repressed guilt and whether the passage of time erodes or compounds feelings of culpability. Watkins explores this issue chiefly from a masculine stand-point, digging into the predominantly male impulse to answer physical or emotional injury with violence. Yet in the process he is also probing the nature of forgiveness and whether some harm may be beyond pardon. This is a challenging question and one that could be easily evaded in a work already addressing so many [other] problematic facets of modern Australian life. Watkins faces this final dilemma head on, breaking the concept of forgiveness away from polar opposition to vengeance or retribution, considering it instead as less a binary than a complex and long-term process.

The breadth of issues addressed in this work is impressive: sexual, physical and psychological abuse, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, alcoholism and dementia surround a cunningly constructed cast of characters in whose lives these issues are constantly at play. Using a clear, spare style and clever structure, Watkins has created a compelling and believable cast of individuals and a story that offers critical insights into Australian masculinity, heteronormative culture and the power dynamics at play within families.

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
Reviews editors: Pablo Muslera & Amelia Walker
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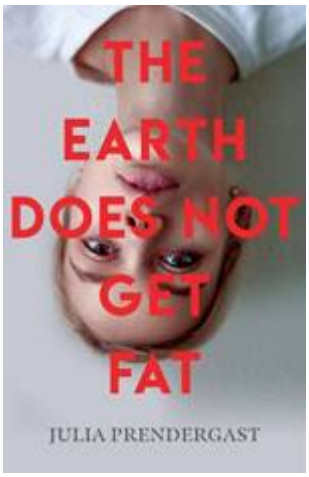
TEXT review

Off days in the real world

review by Tim Tomlinson



Julia Prendergast
The Earth Does Not Get Fat
UWAP 2018, Crawley WA
ISBN: 9781742589572
Pb 192pp AUD24.99

About writing fiction, Flannery O'Connor said, 'You can do anything you can get away with. But,' she added, 'nobody has ever gotten away with much' (O'Connor 1969: 64). By that I understand O'Connor to mean that slavish devotion to the 'rules' will not serve the writer, but a healthy respect for them will. A couple of fundamental rules include: a) use a consistent narrative voice, and b) be more concerned with what happens next than with what happened before. (In that regard, another O'Connor – Frank – said that the short story begins where everything but the action has already taken place, see O'Connor 2004.) In the novel *The Earth Does Not Get Fat*, Julia Prendergast eschews these basic tenets. How does she get away with it?

The Earth Does Not Get Fat is divided into fourteen chapters that feature three major voices (a fourth voice, Geoff's, appears in the form of a letter in one chapter only). The voices belong to Chelsea, a teenage girl, Annie, her afflicted mother, and Pelts, an old intimate of Annie's.

Five of the first six chapters are Chelsea's and in these Prendergast comes closest to the Frank O'Connor dictum: everything but the action has already taken place. Questions based on present-action conflict arise early in these chapters. The narratives that follow work towards answers. In this sense, the first three, in particular, function as short stories. In 'Colour me grey', Chelsea must move her pill-and-booze sodden mother from the sofa she's passed out on to her bed: will she manage? In 'Sundowning', Chelsea needs to deflect the do-gooder outreach of a meddlesome teacher: will she succeed? In 'Sawdust', Chelsea needs to attract the attentions of a sexy arborist who's trimming a neighbour's tree (and then distract his

attention from her wreck of a mother and grandfather): will she gratify an appetite and avoid humiliation? In these stories-as-chapters, Prendergast is at her best: the suspense is tangible, the narration restrained, the pathos searing, the language razor sharp. ‘Sometimes Mum is already sinking when I get home from school’ (1) begins ‘Colour me grey’, When the legs of her unconscious mother hit the floorboards, they ‘thud … like old potatoes’ (1), The sensory precision is spot-on. The overweight teacher in ‘Sundowning’ is ‘as rude as her doughnut ankles’ (10) are unsightly. And in ‘Sawdust’, Chelsea observes that ‘even in nature one thing is another’.

Geoff, a schoolmate with his own set of problems, provides the first shift in the novel’s voice. In the form of a letter, Geoff explains to Chelsea why she fascinates him. It’s a moving account that sets up the next narrative development while fleshing out the book’s characterization of Chelsea, whose own voice has been concerned more with the management of present-action problems than the provision of a full self-portrait.

Shortly after Geoff’s appearance, the novel takes a turn. First, the voice of Pelts appears, and Chelsea becomes a peripheral observer and, like the reader, a listener. Pelts is an old intimate of Chelsea’s mother; he knows how and why she became the current mess that Chelsea cleans up after every day. Here’s where the narrative momentum encounters a problem: Pelts narrates what has already taken place, and past history becomes more important than present conflict and future resolution. When a writer takes this kind of a risk, she better pay off in some other way, because, as Flannery O’Connor tells us, ‘nobody has ever gotten away with much’ (O’Connor 1969: 64).

What carries the Pelts chapters is not the drive forward into crisis-climax, but the music of the voice deployed to unpack the past. And what a voice! Slang, jargon, dialect, and laugh-out-loud narration that recalls Sam Shepard’s half-drunk fully-aged cowboys stumbling through the American west. At this point, the reader might find herself reaching for an urban dictionary – if definitions are necessary for speech that functions on the level of notes in a score. Because Pelts isn’t explaining; he’s scatting, riffing, vamping. But he’s more than just the music of his voice. He’s also an exponent of a world view, and that view is suffused with a sympathetic, hard-earned compassion: ‘In the real world, and that’s where I live, everyone has an off day’ (82).

It’s one off day in particular that preoccupies the novel’s final third, where Annie’s voice takes over. Like Pelts, her accounts involve the past, and they begin with a kind of tour-de-force dramatic hilarity that I haven’t seen since the Women’s War Council in Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever*. In ‘Bygones’, Annie recalls the day she attended a reunion of old girlfriends, all of whom live two or three rungs above Annie on the socioeconomic ladder. The fun and games ensue when one of the bygone friends announces a sex quiz whose questions she reads from a sheet of paper. ‘Stand up’, Gen says to the ladies in attendance, ‘if you’ve taken it up the arse’ (110). And off we go. One can imagine the nervous confusion that follows with questions that probe for same-sex experiences and/or close encounters of the S&M variety. The quiz functions as anthropology as well as character development, and it’s another exercise of Prendergast’s enormous gifts with dialect, and with the balance between comedy and drama. As a raconteur, Annie equals Pelts in both vision and colour: ‘My exercise is my work because my life is non-recreational’, she says, and, ‘Alcohol is the root of all evil and all that. Cheers!’ (115).

In the end, Julia Prendergast's *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* is about words, phrases, expressions, and their etymologies. Each chapter title is accompanied by a definition that functions as epigraph. 'Sawdust', 'Driftwood', 'Mercy', 'Sowing the wind', precede passages that echo their meanings. Some of the characters do bad things – we understand why. Some of them suffer bad things – we wince at their suffering. Because in this real world the neglect, the indifference, or the exploitation of the 'mainstream', as Chelsea calls it (we might call it the free market, or capitalism), guarantees an overabundance of off days. And on off days, one can almost hear Prendergast saying, *You can do anything you can get away with, but…*

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Tim Tomlinson is a co-founder of New York Writers Workshop, and co-author of its popular text, The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He is also the author of* Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire *(poems) and* This is Not Happening to You *(short fiction), both published by Winter Goose. He is a Professor in NYU's Global Liberal Studies.*

TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
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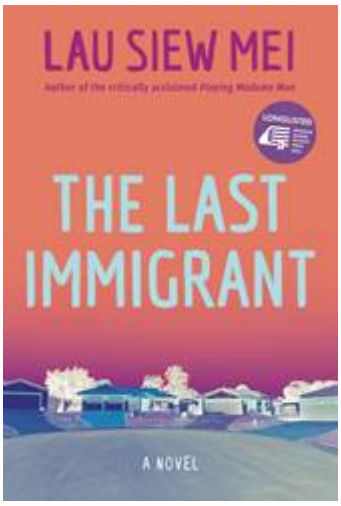
TEXT review

Suburban and national anxiety

review by Donna Lee Brien



Lau Siew Mei
The Last Immigrant
Epigram Books, Singapore 2018
ISBN: 9789814785129
Pb 280pp SGD24.90

Lau Siew Mei's novel *The Last Immigrant* revolves around the residents of a small six-house cul-de-sac in Brisbane, Australia. The main protagonist is Ismael, an immigrant from Singapore, who works in the Brisbane office of the federal government department that deals with approving asylum seekers' claims for protection and residency. Like many representations of suburban life in fiction, the pace of life in this Brisbane street seems calm and unruffled but, inside the homes, the inhabitants' lives are not only dramatic but – in this case – also interlinked in unexpected ways. Stressed at work, Ismael's home life is increasingly unsettling – as readers learn that his neighbour has committed suicide, his wife is diagnosed with a serious illness and his daughter plans to move overseas. Despite the rational way that these events and situations can be described and even explained, an eerie sense of creeping malevolence underpins this story as it unfolds. This escalates when Ismael's cat, Imelda – a surprisingly key figure in this narrative – is nowhere to be found.

A compelling feature of this novel is the powerful portrayal of the soul-crushingness of Ismael's highly bureaucratic administrative work, and the heartbreaking petty politics and personal enmities of the workplace. These are vividly played out against the life and death implications of the decisions about refugee claims made therein. While obviously alluding to Australia's enduringly intractable immigration issues through its plot and the work of its central character, this novel also draws considerable power from its understandings of Brisbane as a locality, and the vivid portrayal of the suburban lifestyle. In this, *The Last Immigrant* joins a wide range of much-loved and influential fiction and autobiographical literature set in

Brisbane and, particularly, in the Brisbane suburbs. This includes works such as David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975) and *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985), Andrew McGahan's *Praise* (1992) and Sally Breen's *The Casuals* (2011). These volumes, and I include *The Last Immigrant* here, capture not only the seductive attractiveness of the bright warm days, lush plant-field yards and closeness to the bush of many Brisbane homes, but also the sometimes-attendant sense of sticky claustrophobia and lonely isolation of sub-tropical suburbia. This is not unique to Brisbane – Eddie Tay has included Lau in a series of Singaporean and Malaysian writers whose literary works 'articulate a pervasive anxiety accompanying the sense of disorientation that attends to the notion of home' (Tay 2007: 2-3), alluding to 'home' in its broadest sense. In *The Last Immigrant*, a vivid contrast is made between the immigrant's dilemma around the idea of finding a home and the established locals' sense of belonging in the Brisbane suburbs.

Born in Singapore and currently living in Brisbane, with experience as a journalist, and a number of short stories and poems published (AustLit 2018), Lau is best known as a novelist for her first book, *Playing Madame Mao* (Lau 2000), which Singapore novelist Hwee Hwee Tan, writing in *Time* magazine, described as 'one of the best novels ever written about Singapore' (Tan 2002). Like *Playing Madam Mao*, *The Last Immigrant* weaves together the personal and the political, and the realistic with the mythical and mystical, in order to underscore how the minutiae of everyday life and relationships are never untouched by the ramifications of larger events and systems. These novels also share an idea that there are dangerous forces at work in all our lives. Both these novels, together with Lau's second novel for adults, *The Dispeller of Worries* (Lau 2009) mobilise a narrative structure that comprises intricate plotting, and the interweaving of a number of storylines and themes. These range from the internal contemplation of personal fears to love affairs at various stages of development or disintegration, crimes and national politics. Sim Wai Chew has written that 'the rejection of linear modes' is a 'hallmark' of Lau's writing (Sim 2009: 119), and this mode of interwoven and fragmented storytelling – together with a hint of magic realism – is also apparent in *The Last Immigrant,* although here it is more muted than in Lau's previous novels.

With its themes of (anti-)immigration and xenophobia, teenage alienation, death, grief and the difficulties of negotiating social, interracial and religious relationships in, and outside, the family home, community and nation, *The Last Immigrant* presents a worldview in which the characters experience difficulty in making real connections. Challenging the rhetoric of multicultural assimilation and inclusivity, Lau's perspective is not, however, all gloomy, also highlighting the real strengths that can be displayed by individuals under pressure. In an interview following the book's release, Lau indeed stated that one of its aims was to illustrate that

> the pain of rejection in whatever form can be transformative. Being "different" or "other" or "unwanted by others" isn't going to destroy you. The only thing that destroys you is when you start internalising it and reject yourself. (in Toh 2018)

This and other important messages of tolerance and the centrality of a sense of belonging for identity formation are central in *The Last Immigrant.* Longlisted for the Epigram Books fiction prize, *The Last Immigrant* is a beautifully written, imaginatively conceived, intriguing and, in its resonances with the current political climate, an undoubtedly important novel.

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au

TEXT review

Dirty realism redux

review by Barrie Sherwood

Tim Tomlinson
This Is Not Happening to You
Winter Goose Publishing, North Hampton NH 2017
ISBN: 9781941058725
Pb 194pp USD12.99

That we live in an age when you can purchase fiction published by small presses on the other side of the world is a wonderful thing; the twenty- or thirty-dollar risk you take is that the work turns out to be purely local in interest, that topicality was the reason it was published, that the 'what' and 'where' were more important factors in the decision to publish than the 'how'. *This is Not Happening to You* is a collection of short stories by Tim Tomlinson, a New York fiction writer and Professor of Writing. It is published by Winter Goose Publishing of New Hampshire and it will cost you $26.20 from the Book Depository AU. Potential buyers can rest assured, it is not a book of purely local, New England interest.

There are nineteen stories in the collection and I dislike generalizing when talking about literature. If the word count for this review has been set at about a thousand, an equal treatment of each of the stories would equate to about fifty-three words per story. Which would be a challenge, especially if each of these mini-reviews were to avoid recounting the plot. There's not much for it but to admire the general sheen on all these stories – matt black or, better, *stainless* – and single out a story or two for extra attention.

That sheen. I've seen prose described as 'sharp' and 'razor-sharp' and 'incisive' and 'acidic'; I'd go so far as to say that reading Tomlinson's prose is like licking something bitter from a very sharp knife. I feel something, though I'm really not sure how much pleasure I take in it. If you're looking for an uplifting, funny, or *even-in-the-slightest-bit sentimental* book, this is not for you.

The term dirty realism (Buford 1983) is thirty-five years old and has an almost quaint ring to it now, detached by time and fairly localized; it wouldn't do justice to *This is Not Happening to You* to include it under dirty realism's ratty and stained banner (made of a bedsheet, one imagines). With a half-dozen exceptions, these stories have a similar focus on the quotidian doings of the morally, romantically, or financially down-and-out, and are similarly seamy, but they advance into what might be termed 'nasty realism', so hard and savage are the characters. To be clear, none of the stories are any nastier in content than, for example, Raymond Carver's 'Popular Mechanics' (1974) or 'Tell the Women we're Going' (1974) (Carver 1989), though they are somewhat less tragic. That lack of tragedy is due to the almost pathological cool the characters display. There's no way under their skin unless it is by violence. Finishing Tomlinson's book, it was a strange thing to be looking back at it for characters with whom to empathize: I felt as one of those early, scandalized readers of *Madame Bovary* (1856) might have felt, complaining of the desolation, pessimism, and lack of even one character the reader could love.

Yes, there are characters with weaknesses in Tomlinson's book, many of them, but when a compensatory response to that weakness takes the form of exaggerated, incommensurate violence, it's hard to take any glee in the witnessing of it. 'Trap' is one example of two such stories (the other being 'The Perfect Throw'). It's the story of an overweight and bullied boy who devises a method of trapping and killing a cardinal (the bird), ostensibly to enact on another being a form of the violence he has been subjected to himself. He displays meticulous care and ingenuity in the crafting of his trap, and the minute description of its construction brought to mind Nicholson Baker and Philippe Delerm, for whom an almost instinctual interest in the way things work is allied to a tenderness towards those things and their modes of operation or usage, all too soon to be left behind by progress, the seasons, ageing, life… (It's the haziness of *mono no aware* brought into sharp, contemporary focus.) But in 'Trap' this meticulousness is directed by evil; we watch the boy construct his trap with the same tension we watch a villain in a Hollywood film craft a bomb or a virus. It is not a pleasant read, but there is value, I suppose, in such imaginative investment into the mind of a methodical killer. (The story can't help but call to mind images of Columbine, Sandy Hook and Utoya.)

Wondering where the empathy was to be found in 'Trap' and in the entire collection made me feel like a naïve reader. And the grudging acceptance of that naivete encouraged the adoption of a different viewpoint. A broader mode of appreciation. These are hard stories with a metallic sheen, models of concision, of synecdochic characterization, of rapid-fire, richly polysemous dialogue. But the greater value of the collection (for anyone who is not studying the craft of fiction) is in the saddening reminder that literature is powerless to reach some people. They are immune to words, their will is immutable, a short story will not bring them into the fold. If there were some sentimental ray of light visible here, it would only be comforting the converted who have already purchased this remarkable book.

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Barrie Sherwood is Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is the author of two novels, The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa *(DC Books, Canada) and* Escape from Amsterdam *(Granta Books, UK) as well as works of short fiction and non-fiction in various magazines.*

TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
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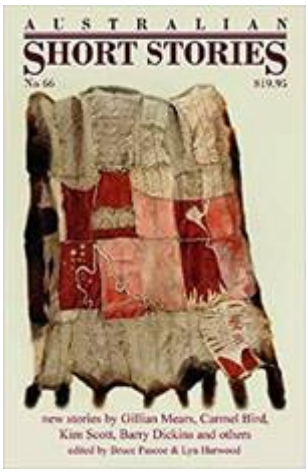
TEXT review

A long time between drinks

review by Luke Johnson



Australian Short Stories No 66
Bruce Pascoe and Lyn Harwood (eds)
Pascoe Publishing, Gipsy Point VIC
ISBN: 9780947087012
Pb 99pp AUD19.95

In a 1987 interview with Kevin Brophy and Nolan Tyrrell for *Going Down Swinging*, Bruce Pascoe explained his reason for starting *Australian Short Stories* magazine five years earlier:

> As a writer of short stories I was disappointed with what was happening to my stories when they were published. Apart from the few stories I got published in *The Sun* and *The Sydney Sun-Herald*, I wasn't getting any readers… I started *Australian Short Stories* because I was offended by the rates of pay, offended by the lack of readership, and felt that the intelligence of the readership was still there. (Pascoe quoted in Going Down Swinging 1987)

For short story writers living in Australia in 2018, the disappointing situation Pascoe describes is more or less unrecognisable – *newspapers accepting submissions for short fiction, indeed!*

But if the founding editor's gripe with the publishing industry still holds currency (or rather, *because* his gripe still holds currency), then so (with a little tweaking) does Brophy and Tyrrell's opening question: 'Why did you establish *Australian Short Stories*?', which, thirty-six years on, becomes something along the lines of: 'Why, after a seventeen-year hiatus, have you decided to re-establish *Australian Short Stories*?'

After all, do we, the intelligent readership (self-appointed this time round), need another short story publication when we can't check our emails without being reminded that it's Subscribathon Month yet again down

there at [insert struggling lit mag] headquarters? Or, if the fiscal overtures are offensive in this instance too, then, let me try a different approach: How does *Australian Short Stories No 66* set itself apart from the other literary magazines on offer in Australia in 2018?

Perhaps Pascoe and co-editing spouse Lyn Harwood pre-empted this question: 'Story is the bedrock of all cultures,' they write in their editorial; and the 'Australian story [is] the oldest story on earth' (5). Thankfully this is one area where attitudes have genuinely improved over the past few decades; awareness of Indigenous Australia's place in human history is no longer restricted to the traditional custodians of the land themselves, but has been ratified by scientists who just last year dated human habitation of Northern Australia to some 65,000 years ago (Clarkson et al 2017). Needless to say, you don't occupy a place for three score and five millennia without developing an intimate understanding of it in the process. Thus, the stories of Aboriginal Australia, as Tony Birch notes elsewhere, are precisely the stories that matter most in this time of impending geological disaster: 'Indigenous communities maintain a wealth of knowledge of ecological systems invaluable to the development of our collective understanding of the historical underpinnings of the current phase of climate change' (Birch 2017).

It is fitting, then, that the first volume of *Australian Short Stories* to emerge since 'climate change' became a short hand way of saying 'we've really screwed things up this time' should begin with acknowledgment not only of country but of the wisdom that comes from the oldest relationship on earth. Daniel Browning's opening meditation does just this, stressing that in the Aboriginal context, country has a particular meaning: 'It's a site. It's also a place that exists in our minds. It's real and it's metaphysical… Country is embodied, it's lived. Country describes a relationship as much as a place' (7). This sets the tone nicely for the seventeen works that follow: stories, anecdotes and prose poems that all engage, in some way or another, with Australia – not Australia the nation state, but Australia the country, where people forge interpersonal and spiritual relationships with each other as well as the physical and metaphysical spaces they inhabit.

Kim Scott's story of a white fumigator coming into an Aboriginal home to take care of a hive of unwanted bees draws menace from colonial acts of violence that remain subtextual in both this story and the majority of history books. The expertise with which Scott crafts his characters through strong idiomatic language is all you would expect from a Miles Franklin-winning author and stands as one of the more memorable additions.

Barry Dickins' 'A Love Letter to Jesus Christ' also relies heavily on idiom, using it as something of a balancing pole to tread the tightrope between sentiment and satire. Passages of poignancy, such as, 'I live in a cheap one bedroom flat and the man next door hates me and refuses to let his children look at me because I am not one of his race. But I have no tribe', are slightly undercut by more contrived efforts to produce profundity through a Forrest-Gump-like naivety: 'A few years ago we had a female Prime Minister, did you know about that fact, Christ Almighty?... Anyway she was backstabbed by her own party because she was born a girl and the boys wanted boys to be the PM'. Nevertheless, I was moved by the resilience and struggle of Dickins' character (just as I was by Forrest) and list this as another highlight.

Julia Prendergast does an exceptional job of capturing the interplay between tenderness and brutality in 'Slow Time' and 'Ghost Moth'. As was made apparent by her recent novel, *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* (2018), Prendergast is clearly a writer attuned to, and okay with, the contradictory nature of human behaviour and, for this reason, is a welcome antidote to the mindless polemicists (from both the right and left) who insist on putting a hashtag in front of every phrase they coin.

Not all the works are quite as successful. Carmel Bird's story about, well, a bird begins with a Nabokovian address from one Spix's Macaw to another – 'Lola, My Lovely!' – but fails in its onto-narratological goal of convincing the reader that they could possibly be listening to anything other than the voice of a brightly feathered prosaist. Also slightly tedious is Harwood and Pascoe's interest in 'the very start of a person's life in literature', which manifests in their decision to include works from two precocious primary-schoolers. I have nothing against children writing stories (provided their house chores are completed, of course), but this is an indulgence that would have been better suited to Facebook, where it's more or less *de rigueur* to force the achievements of your children (or, in this case, someone else's children) on your hapless readership.

I suppose that while I'm insulting the efforts of children, I should make a real pedant of myself and say that there are quite a lot of editing errors and inconsistencies in this publication too, the most glaring of which threatens to reduce Maureen O'Keefe's 'Stranger in th [sic] Night' to some sort of half-baked Oulipo experiment. While a misspelt title doesn't nullify all that follows (in fact, it's just a header title), it does take the sheen off the author's polishing job and so, in this regard, is a bit unfortunate. A similar point could be made regarding the artworks that appear sporadically throughout; I'm not sure what happened at the printery, but they make ultrasound look like a high-definition medium.

Quibbles aside, it is of genuine significance that volume 66 of *Australian Short Stories* includes a previously unpublished story by the late and very great Gillian Mears. As the editorial reveals, the story was discovered on the author's computer after her death and its inclusion here makes for a touching tribute from the editor who published Mears' first ever story back in 1983. In fact, this alone would be a suitable enough answer to the question of why, after a seventeen-year hiatus, Pascoe and Harwood should have decided to re-establish *Australian Short Stories*.

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Luke Johnson lectures in Creative Writing and Critical Theory at the University of Wollongong. His short stories have appeared in such places as Griffith Review, Island, Westerly, Overland, Going Down Swinging, The Lifted Brow, Mascara Literary Review *and* TEXT, *and have been listed for or won such prizes as the Josephine Ulrick Award, Elizabeth Jolley Award* and *AAWP Chapter One Award. He is treasurer of the Australian Short Story Festival.*

TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
Reviews editors: Pablo Muslera & Amelia Walker
textreviews@unisa.edu.au

TEXT review

Serious fun

review by Ian Gibbins

Owen Bullock
Work & Play
Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2017
ISBN: 9780648087878
Pb 88pp AUD12.95

The term 'prose poetry' would seem to be an oxymoron, yet the form has been around a long time. Perhaps most notably, Baudelaire's *Petits Poèmes en Prose* (1869) set the form firmly in the modernist poet's range of technical options for exploring language and what it can do. In general, line breaks matter in poetry, and lines comprise the most obvious compositional or structural units of poems. Indeed, for most traditional forms of English poetry, rhyme and meter are inextricably linked to lines, as in iambic pentameters, for example. In free verse, line breaks structure language in ways that can enhance, replace, or even run counter to an underlying framework of grammar and punctuation. Line breaks obviously affect the appearance of a poem on the page and they can strongly influence how a poem is read aloud.

In a prose poem, none of this structural interplay exists, or if it does, it is subsumed within the blocks of text. A fine example of the latter can be found in Karthika Naïr's *Until the Lions* (2016) where subtle rhymes and rhythmic repeats occur within large sections of what superficially seems to be prose. In the absence of line breaks, one could argue that there are even greater demands on the poet to create an interplay between language and images not normally found in a block of prose. Despite, or perhaps because of, these challenges, prose poetry continues to find popularity alongside flash fiction and other short form writing, with several publications, such as *Unbroken Journal* (Wisely & Good 2018) both showcasing the style and stretching its limits.

The *Prose Poetry Project* was created by International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra in 2014 with the aim of enabling participants to engage in practice-led research into prose poetry and to write prose poetry collegially and collaboratively (see Atherton et al 2016). The outcomes of this project have been published by Canberra's *Recent Works Press* in a series of volumes including *tract* (The Prose Poetry Project 2017), *PULSE* (The Prose Poetry Project 2016) and *SEAM* (The Prose Poetry Project 2015). In each of these collections, the pieces are

untitled and unattributed within the main text sequence. Thus each prose poem stands simultaneously alone and in contrast with the works around it. One of the contributors to Prose Poetry Project is Owen Bullock, and by his own acknowledgement, his latest collection *Work & Play* has evolved from his involvement there.

Work & Play is organised into two sections: the first contains prose poems, the second containing somewhat older lineated poems. The two sections are bridged, appropriately by *Broga, Bega,* a haibun which is a Japanese form that alternates short sections of prose with haiku.Like many of the poems in this collection, *Broga, Bega* combines linguistic playfulness with deeply felt sense of family and country.

> We're going to Bega.
>
> Broga Bega Broga Bega Broga Broga Broga Bega.
>
> We're staying at Barbara's house.
>
> sunset -
> swathes of orange lichen
> discarded by angels.
>
> Slow. Beside the drive, a wallaby with a bushy tail.
>
> the crackle
> of walu -
> we've arrived
>
> A dwelling full of silence. Socked feet find the meditation room. (9)

The opening sequence of 34 prose poems covers broad ground. As in the Poetry Prose Project collections, many are untitled. Several are very short, 50-60 words. While one or two read more as aphoristic observations, mostly they act as autobiographical snapshots, even when the focus is on someone else, for example, *Bubble*:

> Why don't you talk about the river you skimmed on, the child's lips disappearing in the distance, imminent rock, water you merged with, balancing, what sound was called between you, how you fought the rapids, how the stuttering made you birth inside another, float together, anchored twice, spilling each, bubbles. (10)

Some pieces are strangely dreamlike, with the form subtly altered, such as this untitled piece that (almost) lacks punctuation:

> the pig the lips the skin the eventual gravestone with you rubbing on it I shouldn't say but keep colouring what goes into the sky a flamingo I haven't seen but watched pelicans trawl and flesh, fetch and eat I don't know if I could put that black shirt on him (11)

Others tend more to anecdote, couched in conversational style, such as *Coaching tips*:

> The first thing we did with the new coach was learn how to juggle. Fucking stupid. But keeping three balls in the air gives you a lot of confidence when you drop back to one. We all had to kick with both feet. The forwards as well as back did half-back drills. He made us agree there was no point carrying flab; we got rid of it.

> We gave up beer. Stopped talking about luck. Finally, we beat the All Blacks. (12)

The second part of the collection is a sequence of 22 lineated poems. They also vary in style. In complete contrast to the prose poems, some play with lineation, word spacing and indents to good effect, such as this excerpt from *lips du*:

> *The Matrix was a doco*
>
> *alright then, I'll come*
>
> *I won't reveal your font secrets*
>
> *he gave a soft no*
>
> *poetry? I'm so glad the University is doing something as useless as that*
>
> *he's dead with black eyes like a fish*

(13)

The title poem, 'work & play', is a sequence of haiku that alludes to a series of small, but elegantly described, urban events. It begins:

> dawn
> a magpie sings
> the eyes open
>
> #love
> this morning's
> graffiti (14)

Bullock is an accomplished and widely published poet, this being his ninth collection. He is interested in the writing process itself and that interest sometimes appears explicitly in these poems. But the best work here eloquently transforms theory into practice, as in the fine sequence 'building blocks':

> *3. blue*
>
> efficient, coded
> jeaned with boots or sneakers
>
> sea & sky
> (death when the sea breaks cover)
>
> to carry one you need a card
> stamped and signed
> a uniform starched
>
> I own you
> 'you stay in this family'
>
> blood

bled to the challenge
it detests (15)

Work & Play is just that: a beguiling mixture that combines language and technique to tell private stories of lives and environments in ways we all can appreciate.

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
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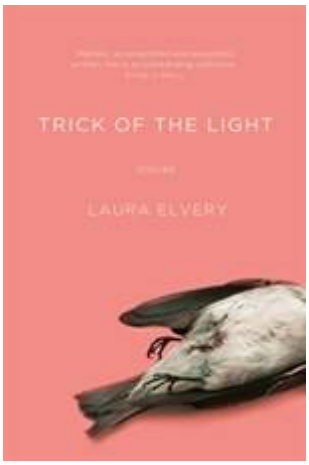
TEXT review

With the confidence of a magician

review by Kate Cantrell



Laura Elvery
Trick of the Light
University of Queensland Press 2018, Brisbane
ISBN: 9780702260063
Pb 272pp AUD22.95

A trick is an action or scheme that is designed to deceive, but a trick of the light is something more benevolent, closer as it is to an optical illusion or an architectural charm. A trick can take the form of a prank or a hoax, but a trick of the light isn't planned. If you trick someone, you deliberately outwit them. But if you encounter a trick of the light, what you see is not a gimmick but a distinct impression: an effect caused by the way the light falls on a thing and makes that thing, which doesn't exist, appear to be real.

A sort of paradox.

Laura Elvery's short story collection *Trick of the Light* (2018) is full of these effects.

In the stand-out piece, *Mountains Grow Like Trees*, Beth, a conservation scientist with an interest in pygmy possums, borrows her friends' mountain cabin to work on a grant for a preservation project in Kosciuszko Park. Stressed and alone, with an unrelenting headache that threatens her vision, she is visited by a teenage girl who claims, at first, to be the daughter of the cabin owners: a happily married couple named Jeremy and Mel. '"Okay, that's not true," the girl admits. "You guessed the truth, though, right?"' (55). The truth, which is slippery and always just beyond our grasp, is that the girl is, by her own account, Jeremy's girlfriend. '"We had sex," she boasts, "at a hotel around the corner from the servo"' (55). Beth is initially appalled by the girl's 'backward snobbery' (59) but soon feels affection for the girl when she says, '"Yes, please," in such a way … that Beth was sure she'd never had much in her life' (59). Meanwhile, the

distorting effect of Beth's headache persists, and in its 'starry expansion' (55), we remain uncertain, even at the story's end, if the girl is telling the truth. 'People can say what they like,' Elvery writes, 'and they still won't know the truth, even if they believe it' (228). Truth, in this sense, is merely one edge of a multi-faceted jewel; what we see depends on the way the light falls.

In another of the collection's highlights, *The Republic,* a young woman, Cora, returns home to London for the trial of a man who is accused of murdering her best friend, Kit. '"The man is sure to get life," her father says. "No loopholes. Witnesses and everything… Straightforward"' (88). But for Cora, whose life is now 'far, far emptier' (87), and for Kit, who was 'nipped and chased and baited' (84), nothing about life, or death, is straightforward. Even The Republic*,* a fictionalised land that Kit imagines, is a complex foreshadowing of the liminal space that he comes to inhabit after his death and before he is metaphorically put to rest. His conviction that people can form their own countries is a self-fulfilling prophecy that is realised, not during his life, but through his death. When he dies, Kit becomes The Republic because he is his own land. '"Kit knew things that were true," Cora says. "The image of The Republic was right there, behind his eyes"' (82). Cora, at times, is envious of Kit's imagination, but she is also frightened by the fantasies that he projects. When the school turns The Republic into a play of the same name, Cora's initial elation turns into 'a trembling nervousness' (85) when she realises that the boundary between reality and fantasy has been crossed. In the final act of the play – and of his life – Kit stands on stage, under 'the blazing lights' (85), with his flag raised to the audience's applause, and the next morning, he disappears. Whether he foresees his death isn't clear, but at some point, he slips down a trap door, never to return.

In all of Elvery's stories, there is a breach in the fabric of space-time, a rupture in the 'natural' order of things. These rifts destabilise the text and displace the characters, many of whom appear like illusions, but whose depth and complexity makes them real. In *Foundling,* a middle-aged man named Martin resists his social invisibility by connecting with other survivors of childhood abuse. His story is collective – 'he is one of those poor boys' (94) – but singular too, entwined as it is with his memories of a furtive attempt to resurrect a dead bird. 'It'll never stay a secret,' he says (95). In another story, we meet Gary Simmonds: a thanatophobe who is obsessed with cryonics and who secretly attends life extension meetings without his wife's knowledge. '"The idea is to keep on living," Gary says. "To just take a pause, while your body is kept alive"' (185).

Thematically, Elvery's preoccupation with death materialises as explicit musings about alternative ways to die, and as both figurative and literal attempts at preventing death or at least transcending its effects. Martin, for example, refuses to believe that his baby bird is dead. Even as it 'flops sideways … like a wet balloon' (90), he imagines the bird 'high above him, soft and fed and warm with its mother' (95). Similarly, Gary's fear of ageing culminates in his estrangement from his family, but like all of Elvery's characters, he remains true to himself. He meanders on, with his own idiosyncratic way of seeing, but he acts consistently, according to the fixed determinacy of his character. Even as his marriage breaks down, and his wife leaves him, he remains adamant that '"we are close to a *cure* for ageing … scientists already know how to keep bodies alive after death"' (184).

As a collection, *Trick of the Light* representsitself as an account of the

fears and fantasies of everyday people searching for meaning. But Elvery's debut is more than this. With the confidence of a magician, Elvery gifts us complex renderings of growing up, growing old, and growing out of shape. Her characters are everyday people, but they are always on the verge of metamorphosis. They are scientists on the brink of discovery, or teens on the cusp of adulthood; they are souls in the midst of reincarnation, bodies on the line between illness and health. At times, they even find themselves in the relational space between human and non-human, or as in *Fledermaus,* between girl and bat. These characters are, in all regards, everyday people, but their lives are distorted – sometimes by delusion, sometimes by obsession, but usually by a trick of the light. In this way, Elvery's stories are moments of illumination: swift realisations or brief epiphanies that, due to their intensity, cannot last. However, like all good stories, they linger long after reading.

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
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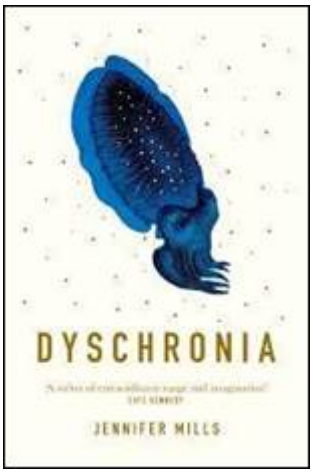
TEXT review

Remembering the future

review by HC Gildfind



Jennifer Mills
Dyschronia
Picador (Pan Macmillan), Sydney NSW 2018
ISBN: 9781760552206
Pb 357pp AUD 29.99

If the literary technique of 'defamiliarisation' is the usual means through which writers jolt people into seeing the world anew, how does a dystopian novelist shock us into seeing the environmental extremities of today, when 'extremes' are increasingly the norm? Furthermore, how can such a writer hope to contribute something original to our long tradition of dystopian fiction, and its rapidly growing sub-genre of 'Cli-Fi' [1]? Jennifer Mills has taken on these challenges with her new novel, *Dyschronia*. This striking title refers to the novel's structural and thematic preoccupation with temporal disorder, while cleverly alluding to both the novel's genre and to the feeling of 'dysphoria' experienced by its protagonist, Sam (66) – that deep sense of 'unease' which provokes, and should be provoked by, dystopian stories.

The central image of this novel is that of a sea which has nightmarishly 'recoiled' (14) to the horizon, leaving a slurry of rotting death in its wake. An ambiguous 'we' voices one narrative thread throughout the novel, a pronoun choice that automatically includes, and thus implicates, readers. 'We' can hardly believe what has happened: 'How can we see what we can't imagine?' (13). This question highlights a central aim of the book, which is to *make* us see what we *must* imagine. By linking real horrors from today – such as 'floating trash islands' where birds 'feed bits of plastic to their young' (179) – to imagined horrors of the future, Mills makes the latter seem terrifyingly possible.

The townies refuse to acknowledge the enormity of what has happened, or their role in it. They say: 'It's nature's way … it's all part of a cycle' (40). Their blind faith in the very technological and economic forces that have

created this disaster remains: they try and 'monetise' their new 'ghost town' (136) with their computers, while awaiting their share of profits from the asphalt company that has ruined their lives. The townies are somewhat aware of their culpability: 'For our generation, the course of life seemed tilted towards growth. The boom was infinite, like the ocean' (30). No wonder, then, that the ocean should be repelled by them and their illogical, fantastical, selfish assumptions. Ultimately, though, their complicity hardly seems 'chosen' in a world ruled by all-powerful, dehumanised and dehumanising corporations. By the end of the novel even the idea of 'destiny' has been hijacked by corporate culture: it is no longer 'a word', or 'a promise' – it's 'a brand' (351).

Mills largely avoids the clichés that plague the dystopian genre by understanding that abstract ideas and picturesque images can only engage readers via concrete characters, human stories and exquisite writing. The novel's overtly abstract elements thus exist to contextualise Sam's narrative. Sam, and her mother Ivy – wonderfully described as 'skinny and hunted… [like] the last thylacine' (4) – are ambivalence personified. Their evolving relationship to themselves and each other is utterly convincing, giving real flesh and blood to Mills' fictional world.

Sam's story is told in the past, present and future tenses. These shifts can be confusing, but as the reader progresses they realise that this jolting is purposeful, for it makes us share Sam's experience of living in 'doubled time' (128). Sam recalls how, as a child, she developed migraines which gave her glimpses into the future. Her prophecies are ambiguous, and Mills' detailed, dense writing makes us feel the terrible claustrophobia of both Sam's bodily pain and her entrapment in the strange temporal space created by her sickeningly 'useless power' to half-see the future (284). Through Sam's illness, Mills thus cleverly evokes the very nature of today's anxieties about the environment. Like Sam, we glimpse catastrophe without knowing if such a future is fated. Like Sam, we wonder whether questions of fate are even relevant: shouldn't we *try* to change things for the better – irrespective of what we think we 'know'?

Mills seems to hint that Sam has an ambiguous racial identity. Unlike Ivy, Sam doesn't have 'Proper blonde hair and white skin' (22): they are 'each other's mirror, one dark, the other light' (337). Sam also notes a man whose skin is 'even browner than her own' (65). She and Ivy live on the edge of the community, avoided by the townies unless they want something, in which case Sam suddenly becomes their 'little oracle' (208). Sam's non-linear experience of time is completely alien to that of the dominant white culture's: something to be feared, when it isn't being revered. Sam's differences thus result in her being 'Othered' and marginalised by the townies which, in the most general sense, reflects the experience of colonised peoples globally. Through her figure, the crimes of her dystopia may therefore be linked to the much older, colonial crimes against her land and its original inhabitants – crimes that are alluded to by three women visitors, who ask the townsfolk, 'Don't you know whose country you're on?' (148).

Ed appears out of nowhere. He's ostensibly planning to turn the detritus of the asphalt plant into a money-making theme park. Ed trusts Sam's prophetic abilities, joking that she might have a future in 'futures'. He explains how, in futures trading, you 'never actually hold the stock; you get out before the contract's up. It's like buying a promise' (142). Sam senses the fundamental immorality of this, thinking it seems to break the 'law of promises' (142). As Sam matures she becomes increasingly

suspicious of Ed. She notices how he has 'made himself essential' (226) and wonders why he is 'so convinced' by his own 'version of reality' (253). When she has sex with Ed's 'son', who is later associated with yet another corporation, Sam just wants to be left 'alone with her own body, complete in herself' (250). Sam also notices how Ivy automatically accommodates them, and feels that the two men have 'colonised' (302) their home. Through these male figures, Mills again seems to link colonialism – and patriarchy – with catastrophic capitalism.

Mills is an elegant, skilful and thoughtful writer, but the real triumph of this particular book lies in the precision of its formal structure. It is a temporal jigsaw that both evokes – and comments upon – its thematic content, manifesting Sam's ultimate understanding that: 'Time turns like soil, not wheels, soil, not water, soil' (350). If time folds eternally into itself like this, then *Dyschronia* warns us that we are all connected, and thus always soiled by the consequences of each other's actions. Whether we face this fact – or deny it – is up to us.

Notes

[1] Cli-Fi refers to 'A genre of fiction that deals with the impacts of climate change and global warming' (see https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cli-fi). return to text

HC Gildfind (hcgildfind.com) is the author of the short story collection The Worry Front *published by Margaret River Press*.

TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
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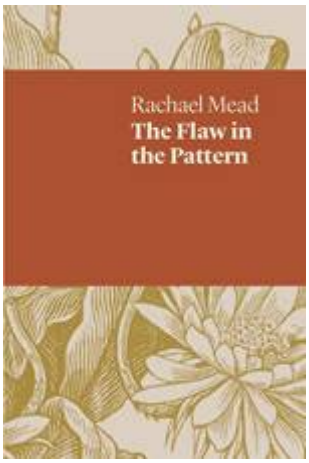
TEXT review

Those flourishing boundaries

review by Rose Lucas



Rachael Mead
The Flaw in the Pattern
UWAP, Crawley,WA 2018
ISBN: 9781742589602
Pb 96pp AUD22.99

Rachael Mead's new poetry collection *The Flaw in the Pattern* continues her important work of watching and speaking through the focal point of the self in the world – in particular, the natural world of place and light and senses and the tracking of our human movement through it. This is the work of a highly skilled and perceptive poet taking charge of her craft: separately these poems offer a range of engaging and challenging windows onto human experience; together they provide a fast-flowing meditation not only on a life in process but the reflective and shaping business of poetry itself. Highly ommended in the Dorothy Hewitt Award for an unpublished manuscript, this collection is now part of UWAP's ever-expanding poetry series.

The poems are focalised around different journeys, as well as physical and emotional spaces. The first series of seven poems traces the hiking days on the Overland Trek in Tasmania. 'We tread the silvered vertebrae of the track / one foot after the other, learning the bleakness / of repetition' (12), she writes, bringing together a fierce attention to the slippery beauty of the world around her and the 'endurance' (60) of our human movement, the force that impels us to engage, to keep going. The going is not always easy, and the physical journey mirrors the broader journeys of life: 'The beauty of this land burns down my house, leaving me/with necessity on my back … the past and future just luggage waiting at the end of the track' (14).
On the one hand, this poetic of attenuation brings us into the clarity of the moment – what can be carefully observed, the ways in which the slide of the metaphor might help us better understand ourselves in relation to the specificity of time and place. On another level, this micro moment – the

only one which the self can inhabit – is also an aberration in the much longer game of planet and universe. As Mead notes in the 'list' poem 'The flaw in the pattern: 13 thoughts on wilderness- Day 4':

> 13. This is the home of a new genus of silence, a place
> where travel is tectonic grid, weather is never trivial and the
> present is the flaw in the pattern. (15)

This sense of a vastness, in which the individual is barely legible, is echoed in each of the clusters of poems around travel and place: the cold which 'is trying to kill you' (82) in Antarctica; the Southern Ocean in which the speaker is 'nothing more than weed-wrapped bone the sea/has finished with' (76); and the 'rising dark' in Rarotonga which comes to 'drown' (53) the fragile life built up in the daylight. In the 'Kati Thanda – Lake Eyre Cycle', the poet and her husband drive north out of the known terrain of the city, 'heading for [an] emptiness' (30) which is nevertheless full of significance if one knows where to look. The art of poetry is to take us to that element which is perceivable, explicable within the limited frame of our human perspective – the edge, the ripple in vastness which differentiates and allows us to see into the seams and sub-strata of what is beyond us:

> But our eyes love edges, all else
> too vast to hold our attention.
> We seek those flourishing boundaries
> where everything breaks cover,
> relishing the fleeting spotlight. (30)

Of course, while travelling elsewhere can certainly serve to open up such a perceptual edge and highlight self in relation to the larger, elemental aspects of time and place, these insights can also occur within the fabric of the known and the domestic. In 'Homebody', the poet accretes linkages between self and world, from 'My hair, the untameable statement of eucalypt claiming sky,' to 'My heart, a brown kelpie, gently breathing, asleep' (21). Or 'Homemade thanksgiving,' in which a trip to the kettle sees her break into the movement of dance: 'No eyes on me but the tiny blue wrens' / …where I'm just another creature/flinging itself through this day, / glowing like autumn on the vine' (27).

The domestic world can also be a place of anxiety and paralysis for the poet. In 'The dog, the blackbird and the anxious mind,' the speaker blurs with the blackbird, on the brink of being overwhelmed by the world 'brimming with its own life': 'I can't leave it alone, going over and over this world, / looking out through eyes ringed with gold' (54). One way out of this depressive stasis, the poet discovers, is to 'put myself in the path of wildness' (59) – to find a structure that allows movement to somewhere uncharted. The sequence of poems, 'Parthenogenesis,' which describes an experience of not knowing her biological father, her mother's experience of having a child out of wedlock and precipitously choosing a new marriage, perhaps gives some insight into a darkness which 'lies beneath the skin' – a heaviness to be endured and recurringly negotiated.

There are a number of very strong poems in the collection. The sequence 'Smoke signalled death threats' (87) sees the everydayness of human life struggling to endure the frightening elemental power of bushfire. 'Powerless' (57), which won the NALAG Grieve award in 2017, pits couplets gently against each other to draw out the relationship between a literal loss of electricity with a neighbour's death – an 'erasure' which

forces us to recognise that the 'world is not what we want.' In lines reminiscent of Gwen Harwood's elegiac 'Mother who gave me life' (Harwood 2003), Mead acknowledges a complex galaxy of loss, grief, powerlessness as well as acceptance:

> …My heart folds
> and folds itself down into a tiny yet infinitely
>
> dense thing: a grain of sand, a mote of dust,
> a faraway star we know full well is dead. (57)

Mead's poetry is the antithesis of decorative or sentimental; it perceives darkness and how vulnerable we are within our human skins. However, it also offers the motif of an acceptance to be found through the careful skills of observation, and so often within the context of the 'wild' – be that the natural world or the world of new ideas. Such 'grace' is both an anchor and a guide in the white water of human experience:

> I don't know many things more full of grace
> than the tumbled stones of this creek bed,
> a mosaic of weather and time, pressure
> and release, all washed with light. (68)

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Harwood, G 2003 'Mother who gave me life', *Collected Poems 1943-1995*, eds G Kratzmann & A Hodinott, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia QLD return to text

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
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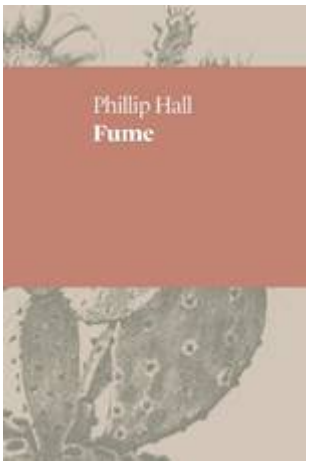
TEXT review

Inhaling trauma

review by Kit MacFarlane



Phillip Hall
Fume
UWA Publishing, Perth WA 6009
ISBN: 9781742589695
Pb 104pp AUD $22.99

In his introduction to *Fume*, a collection of poetry primarily written on Country in Borroloola, Phillip Hall describes his struggle to accept the challenge of Gudanji elder Nana Miller 'to embrace enough humility to accept that not all complications were easily navigable' (18). Hall presents himself as having been at times 'a missionary and a misfit' (16) and an idealist (15); 'interactions with spirits and magic' offer 'a potent challenge to my secular humanism' (96), and his poem 'Discharge' seems to bluntly lay out some (old) underlying drives:

> craving worth I believed
> my trade was sport
> and camps to reengage and disrupt
> through reward, but a partnership
> of mine trust and office-bound leaders wanted
> another cheeky dog:
>
> prejudiced, I wanted
> much from vocation, transgressing
> boundaries, rubbing
> myself out: (74)

Whether or not Hall himself meets Nana Miller's challenge of humility is not for this reviewer to say, but *Fume*'s collection of poems (with some accompanying commentary) clearly demonstrates the poet's determined attempt to respect and create *with* and alongside the First Australians he lived and worked with, and later joined as family, seeking and being granted permission for much of the language he uses and the stories he

tells. The poems are peppered with dedications and a poem like ‘hand (pay) back (out)’ (64), a gutting poem of colonial slaughter and ‘Native Title crows’ (65), was written after a request by Nana Miller. Indeed, some of *Fume*’s strongest content comes from the group poems of Diwurruwurru (Yanyuwa/Garrwa for “message stick” (98), a name Hall uses with permission), a First Australians storytelling group begun in 2012, which appears along with Hall’s commentary at the end of the volume.

Hall’s focus on respect throughout *Fume*, and his anger at the racism that exists so bluntly in and around the community, places him a long way from the young boy he describes as living in the Blue Mountains of NSW, fantasising of being ‘a lost Aboriginal, defiant, living in Eden … with almost no sense of the cruel barbs of colonialism’s crooked paths’ (13). While *Fume* shows a poet seeking ‘to honour the First Australians and the Northern Territory’s Gulf of Carpentaria and to interrogate colonialism’s twisted and violent paths’ (20), it’s also a personal journey: ‘I also try to write myself back to health’ (20).

The trauma of colonialism underlies much of Hall’s work:the ‘eyewitness accounts of massacres’ show a ‘trauma, like seismic tremors, repressed still’ (16). Hall’s work presents trauma as ever-present and near-tangible – finding ‘living amongst so much remote and repressed trauma a dangerous thing’ (17) – and as unavoidable as Australia’s air: ‘I just couldn’t help breathing in trauma’ (20). ‘Discharge’ seems to reflect on his early role as ‘a perfect / fool for trauma’s inhalation’ (74). Hall’s writing may be part of writing himself ‘back to health’ (20), but it’s far from self-focused, taking aim at the ongoing impacts of colonialism as in ‘Talking English’:

> The Gulf’s ancient tongues are hobbled
> by inherited trauma, gene-crackers
>
> sadistically scabrous and burgeoning
> in the remembered fluency of wire-tipped
>
> stockwhips and all those manhandled
> civilisers of a splendid frontier’s orders. (57)

Evocations of people and community are vividly summoned but often feel inevitably disrupted by the cruelty of ongoing colonial trauma, as in the shattered nights in ‘Borroloola Blue’ (26) and ‘Lullaby’ (36-37), and the gutting final lines of ‘Royalty’, that disrupt the beautiful portrayal of a gathering at ‘...Jayipa / a catfish hole lined / with paperbark and river gum / and those gleaming quartzite outcrops’ (68).

Not only a general presence, the immediacy of racism is firmly targeted, with Hall addressing the Intervention as ‘a bipartisan policy of disempowering our First Nations’ (90) and mining companies’ and government’s ‘cynical abuse of native title law’ (95). As the colonial slaughter in ‘hand (pay) back (out)’ concludes: ‘and *hey presto, justice now* – a shitfaced palimpset / over their / bottom lines.’ (65). Some of this trauma flows out bluntly in ‘Fizzer’:

> *...too many young ones passing away*
> *by suicide, the bashing*
> *on grog an ice an sniffing, the boils*
> *needing lancing, the stresses of shit-box*

never enough housing, the racist barbs
and indifference of too many remote
incentive miscarriages. It's all ambush-
hinged me undone... (76)

A poem like 'Build-up' also highlights the political voice of the First Australians Hall knew, addressing the hypocrisy of Australia's Stop the Boats asylum seeker policy by summoning First Australians' long history of intercultural communication and exchange:

The bardibardi call time
on mununga slogans of 'stop the boats';
…
for centuries these boat people cultivated
tamarind trees in a highlight
of northern fruits spoilt
in another latecomer's scorched earth:

so, with the bardibardi, we integrated
secondary programs: mapping
Macassan heritage sites and Australian detention centres,
writing petitions and emails, researching
and tabulating figures
on massacres and stolen land, resistance,
Eddie Mabo and 'Land Rights Now':
(52)

This idea reappears in the 'bush ballad 'Fallen', noting that 'For centuries exotic trade flourished / Out where the slain would lie' (54).

Hall's interest in language sees it also linked to ongoing colonial trauma that is yet to be addressed, as in 'Talking English':

...dragged

to heel by Martini-Henry carbines
that at this crucial moment were talking
English. (57)

But language also offers an opportunity in *Fume*, with 'Aboriginal English' described as 'a consequence of colonialism' but also 'a glorious linguistic invention that testifies, powerfully, to cultural resilience and pride' (88). It is this resilience and pride that Hall hopes to highlight in the storytelling group Diwurruwurru, and he excitedly describes the process of working as a group to 'pronounce and spell Aboriginal English and Language words', which are not standardised here (88). In 'Concourse' he writes, 'true god, we really are an arterial kaleidoscope / of silt-laden language' (30).

As *Fume* progresses and the impact of Hall's own trauma becomes clear, it's important to note that Hall never equates his own personal trauma with that of First Australians. Hall's clear positioning of himself in relation to the First Australians he writes with, and about, makes it obvious that he has no interest in taking the place of Aboriginal voices; but it's important to note that *Fume*'s concerns are, of course, not unique and that numerous First Australian poets have addressed these issues through their work. Hall's writing captures the personal perspective of someone who doesn't identify as a First Australian in a specific time, place and circumstance,

but that shouldn't divert attention – and nor does it intend to – from the range and diversity of poetry produced by First Australians.

Hall does not present us with the 'Eden' he fantasised about as a child but, along with its political anger and its encounters with a near-tangible trauma, *Fume* nevertheless rewards its reader with vivid character portraits and evocative glimpses of Country in and around Borroloola.

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TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
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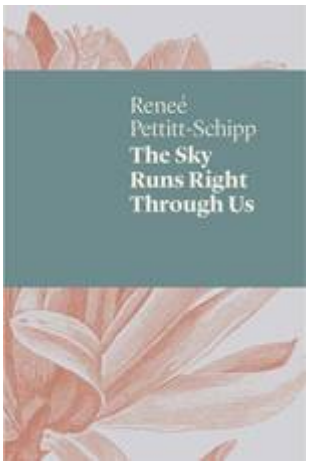
TEXT review

Traversing humanness through contrasts

review by Jessica Abramovic



Reneé Pettitt-Schipp
The Sky Runs Right Through Us
UWA publishing, Perth WA
ISBN: 9781742589596
Pb 122pp, AUD $22.99

I approach this review not as a poetry expert, a poetry writer, or even (particularly) a poetry reader. Instead, I come to this review of Reneé Pettitt-Schipp's book, *The Sky Runs Right Through Us,* through the eyes of a development practitioner. And perhaps also, an ashamed Australian.

This review focuses not on stanzas or pacing, but rather on the experiences to which the reader is unwittingly subjected. Pettitt-Schipp's poetry – her story – covers her experience as a teacher on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, mentoring asylum seekers, then her reintroduction into Australian society and the reverse culture shock that went along with it.

You cannot, and you will not, get through this book without being transported to the Islands; to experience the life of both a detainee and an ashamed Australian teacher. You also will not leave this book without feeling as though you have had the experience the author lived herself. It is not for the fainthearted; it is certainly a must-read for the pro-indefinite detention centre preachers. Pettitt-Schipp will take you into the detention centre and then deeper, into the classroom. She describes what it feels like to work with traumatised and grateful people, and perfectly captures the raw emotions that many Australians feel (embarrassed, horrified, sickened).

I first met Pettitt-Schipp at the 2017 Poetry on the Move festival, where she read at the National Portrait Gallery as part of panel titled *Measures of Expatriation: Poetry and Displacement*. I was moved by the stories behind

her poems, which she described in detail, and with sorrow. Most of all though, I was floored by her display of thongs-become-art.

The thongs, Pettitt-Schipp explained, were used by the students of her classes as material onto which they could write short poems. Thongs, after all, were easy to come by as they often washed up on shore. As an English teacher on the Islands, Pettitt-Schipp was able to engage with creative arts therapy practices to assist her students – the asylum seekers – overcome their trauma.

Of all the thong poems she displayed, decorated with words painted by her students, I was most affected by this:

> My mother in Vietnam
> Harvesting rice
> On her own
> I miss
> Her face

It is this poem, or rather, the teacher behind this poem, that also goes to the heart of Pettitt-Schipp's book. She is a teacher, and her ability to continue working with traumatised asylum seekers and still record and interrogate her experiences on the Islands is a central and well-executed theme. Each poem is crafted through a dangerous yet alluring mixture of emotions: devastation, love, and wonderment. These poems are, in their own way, each an island of themselves that we can visit, where we can meet asylum seekers whom we all want to help and teach, and simply want to get to know.

It is through Pettitt-Schipp's writing that the reader draws closer to the asylum seekers, and begins to hope that some of the characters – the real people Pettitt-Schipp teaches – will appear again. Her rendition of them is so lifelike that at times it feels as though it is not poetry at all but, rather, hard journalism. Early on in the book, we are introduced to a poem titled *Me. You. Us.,* which depicts the experience of teaching twenty-seven young Afghan men. I found the following excerpt a mirror of how I imagine I would have felt, had I been Pettitt-Schipp, spending time with my students:

> I witness the wounds crudely stitched
> that run up Mohammed's arm
> until they disappear beneath
> his shirt sleeve.
> I inhale the warmth of Mussa
> his scent of cigarettes, spice and sweat.
>
> The music teacher arrives
> with drums, CDs and a whiteboard marker.
> Together the students sing,
> 'I am, you are, we are, Australian.'
> I turn and quickly leave the room. (20)

This excerpt strongly demonstrates the shame many Australians (and international citizens) feel over Australia's detention policies, while simultaneously showing the humanity of each asylum seeker. This is the truth that the media and politicians often shy away from. This book – political journalism as much as it is poetry – offers more of an insight into the true damage of the Australian government's detention policies than any media article I have read; and this, combined with Pettitt-Schipp's ability

to humanise every person she comes into contact with on the Islands, rendered me speechless.

Another strong element of the book is that it goes beyond life on the Islands, and into Pettitt-Schipp's life back home, in Australia. The effect of contrasting her life as a teacher on the Islands teaching asylum seekers, and her life as a human with complex, familiar, and new relationships cannot be understated. Here she compares her life in Australia with the stark reality of that on the Islands; here we meet a person with deep history, tracing memories of her family home and pet axolotls, becoming a new mother and admiring her daughter: swathed in white towel like a pure prophet, and breathing in the righteous life of Australian fauna and flora: the flowers; the honeyeaters, wagtails and mopokes.

Without the second half of the book, tracing Pettitt-Schipp's life back on the mainland, the full effect of her experiences as a teacher of asylum seekers could have been lost. The mainland poems also work as a reminder that life on the Islands was vibrant and exciting, even while it was filled with redundancy, shock, and despair. It is the delicate balance that Pettitt-Schipp has struck with the two halves of her book that makes it so strong, so compelling, so human.

After reading *The Sky Runs Right Through Us* I feel more connected to those around me, more aware of their struggles and their joy, and more at home on the mainland than ever before. Alas, I am also left feeling more ashamed of Australia's offshore detainee policies, and wondering, 'What does Reneé have in store for us next?'

Jessica Abramovic is a Communications Specialist and Deakin University student. Her latest work focused on Burmese refugees and psychological recovery through cultural re-enactment, and she volunteers for Girls on Bikes, a free learn-to-ride program for migrant and refugee women.

TEXT
Vol 22 No 2 October 2018
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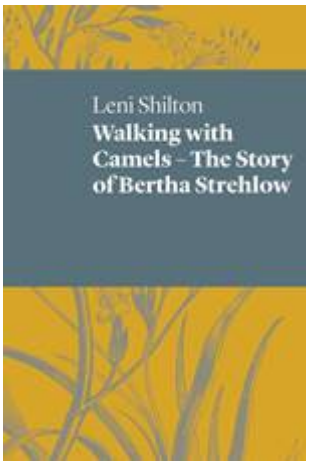
TEXT review

From silence into song

review by Sarah Pearce



Leni Shilton
Walking with Camels – The Story of Bertha Strehlow
UWA Publishing, Crawley WA 2018
ISBN: 9781742589701
Pb 150pp AUD22.99

Walking with Camels – The Story of Bertha Strehlow by Leni Shilton is a gorgeous, subtle rendering of the both brutal and starkly beautiful Australian desert, and those relationships that exist and are formed within this landscape. Shilton's verse novel charts Bertha Strehlow's transformation from a naïve and shaking girl, determined to follow the man she loves into unknown territory against the advice of loved ones, into a woman possessed, damaged and strengthened by the desert. Shilton's rigorous research, bolstered by found poems and historical and biographical notes, grounds the poems in a moving reality, filled equally with suffering and joy.

The poems that depict Bertha's time in the desert are spare and simple, filled with tiny details of everyday life, such as the way the 'creatures scratch the canvas / and the wind brushes the tent walls' and 'ice coats the basin, the kettle / and my swag / as the cold creeps in' (46). In 'The train', visceral details of the harsh new environment are juxtaposed with a tender moment between lovers:

> The windows jam with dust,
> crawl with flies
> my throat clots with hot air,
>
> but my new husband and I
> gaze out the clouded window,
> hold hands,
> and when no one looks
> he kisses me. (17)

Shilton's depiction of the vast landscape, with its towering magnitude, emerges as counterpoint to the simple minutiae of daily life. Poems such as 'The Silence' and 'Poetry Reading' evoke the vast brutality and emptiness of the Australian desert, and Bertha's pervasive feelings of isolation and smallness. The map Bertha follows forms 'a pattern of unfamiliar marks / across vast spaces' (14), and 'All our walking / in 'undiscovered country' / becomes discovery of / emptiness, / silence' (36). Bertha herself appears a tiny figure, but one that continually creates her narrative against and through this landscape.

One of the narrative threads upon which this novel hangs is that of the romance between Bertha and Ted. Shilton's carefully crafted vignettes of the two capture their passion, 'hands, faces / given up to the heat' (22), as well as their difference, demonstrated when reading poetry to each other:

> I want to read words of love,
> but his poetry fills the air
> with its threats of hollow men
> marching through death dreams. (34)

In 'Traces', one of the final poems, before Ted has left her, Bertha asks:

> When will I look up
> and think only of me
> – of my children.
>
> Wake in the morning
> not dreaming of the desert,
>
> when does the red
> stop falling from
> the pockets and hems
> of my clothes,
>
> when does it
> finally wash from my body? (104)

Shilton crafts the desert as indelible, marking and capturing Bertha forever, even through the process of dissolving their relationship. Naturally, Ted himself and their shared experiences also prove to be somewhat indelible.

Music dances softly through this verse novel, as explicit subject and implicit thread; it draws the points of past and present close together, links husband and wife and later eviscerates the space of loss. Two poems are titled 'Gramophone' – the first describes a dance between Ted and Bertha, his murmurs of 'coloured dreams' that drew her away from everything she knew (27), and the second, the final poem of the collection, details Bertha's savage loss and grief in the desert and as the consequence of her separation from Ted. There were 'four babies lost to the desert / three who stayed' and Bertha's sad yet sanguine voice explains that though 'she prayed our children, the adventure / would hold him to me', 'his dream took in more than desert' (112). Following Ted's betrayal and departure, Bertha must ask her son to turn off the gramophone, because the memories it dredges up, of 'songs of Central Australia' and of a time 'when I thought his love / and God's love was all that was needed', are too painful for her to bear. Though Bertha has survived the desert, she never escapes it; Shilton inscribes this enduring grief in the simplest of phrases – much like

the dust and the flies in the desert, Bertha's grief and loss are an inseparable element of her life's landscape.

As much as the novel is an exploration of Bertha's experiences and initiation into the Australian desert, and the relationship between herself and Ted, it also forms a meditation on silence: the kinds of silence which confront Bertha in the desert and eventually come to hold her, and the kind of silence enacted by her role as wife to a famous and driven linguist. Silence, in the beginning, is 'aching' and 'pulses / with expectation and destruction' (36). It is a force, a state, that holds Bertha apart from others, and from the land itself:

> No one understands me
> in the silence
> of the bush
> with no one to talk to
> and no one who will listen. (39)

Silence also mediates the growing distance between husband and wife. Some time after her first miscarriage, Bertha waits at the waterhole for Ted to return and asks:

> If I call, will he hear me?
> But my strangled throat
> twists in its tube. (72)

And a little later, the devastating admission that:

> I pull sounds
> from your words –
> but there is nothing,
> just the space between
> holding some unknown
> truth to climb into. (108)

The miscarriage itself marks a turning point in Bertha's life; faced with mortality, and surviving to birth again, Bertha gains a fierce strength. Shilton uses 'I speak from under the earth', the only prose poem in the novel and a stark slab of text, to mark this transformation, in addition to the absolute and immovable nature of the experience. The words here bubble over, like a tidal wave filling the horizon, and bespeak her new connection with the sky, the wind, the birds, dingoes, ants and stars, but most of all with the desert itself, which 'is its own animal, alone and desperate' (65). Ted and Bertha's relationship in fact seems to wane as Bertha's intimacy with the desert waxes.

What Shilton is able to do through this elegant and spare rendering of Bertha Strehlow's life is to give her a voice: to represent Ted and the desert and her illness and her strength through Bertha's eyes, and to place her in the very centre of the poetic narrative. Shilton transforms Bertha's historical voice, 'a whisper / barely heard' (72), into the ringing literary chant of a woman who strips alone at the waterhole to finally:

> …sing like I'm the only one in church
> and my voice echoes back to me
> from the rocks
> clear and loud'. (86)

Dr Sarah Pearce is an emerging performer, poet, writer and academic from Adelaide, South Australia. Her work has appeared in Aeternum, Outskirts, Meniscus *and* Writing from Below*, and she has occupied residencies at the Adelaide City Library and FELTspace gallery. She writes about embodiment, love and those ways in which we relationship with each other.*

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