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Rachel Tobin



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Say It Naked

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If there is a soul, *Say It Naked* might be its biopsy and tonic. The poetry here is an uncovering, but also a piecing together — and Rachel Tobin knows that in order to suture a wound, one needs to first glean its location. The tetraptych — four parts of sensuality and breath and beating heart — bears the sensitivity and concinnous weighting of an artist. Indeed, Tobin's own figure-work bookends each section. Bodies, naked and vulnerable, stalk the pages like signposts to the poetry's raw centre. *Look*, they seem to say. *Look*. The figure-work, while elegant and true to the poetry, is not requisite. These poems know how to speak for themselves.

This is remarkable, because these poems were from a period of time during which Tobin lost her physical voice. Yet there is nothing taciturn here. Tobin talks with a clear candour about the milestones and markers of a life.

Tobin's poetic world oscillates between binaries. It is generous and pithy; it is imaginative and honest; it is a wayfaring and the home turf. There is a core strength to its vulnerability. The world is embodied; the human subject is an artefact of the natural world. Tobin's poetry is at its fiercest where the poems are not pointedly about season or nature; and yet where they are precisely that — but through the lens of grief, love and human error.

Her poem 'Ashes', which won the New Zealand Poetry Society International Competition in 2012, is one such instance of this adroit filtration, with a profound sense of whenua, as it is touched by familial loss. This is a sestina — a form notoriously tricky but, in this instance,

ostensibly effortless. It has not lost oomph to form. It has an ancestral pull, an earthiness that holds the generations: 'where your father's and your father's father's passing / are marked by stone and wild grasses of a salt-stained room'.

There is a witchery of nouns, in this poem and in others — exotic and familiar. There are coal hods and fire koans and windicators and Iroquoian lullabies. The words, stitched together, have a buttery quality. They are luxuriant on the tongue, and I want to frame each one and set it on my mantelpiece. On occasion Tobin breaks her lines hard and fast, but the music is not cast adrift. The line breaks bring some kind of respite from the fullness.

In 'Our father', the lines are pruned in such a way that the poem is spindly, and the meaning stamped out in a more marked manner. Every break is considered and each line gifts some kind of image. The poem is 'after Grahame Sydney', and this shows in its pictorial intensity:

His old crib
digs its elbows
into the hill's breast

The personification here is not mere poetic plaything. Rather, it speaks to the worldview at the heart of the collection — a sort of conceptualisation of the boundaries between human and Earth as nebulous. A sense of *tat tvam asi* or 'thou art that' pervades the work. The person is embedded in their environment and vice versa. This grounding makes the expressly ecological works all the harder-hitting. 'On behalf of . . .' is one such poem, and concerns climate change, mining, fracking and acidification:

I heard today the shells of molluscs
making a living there are dissolving

I heard today trees are learning
to take up more carbon dioxide

The content here is expansive, but is no less proximate in feeling. That said, the cluster of poems that comprise the third section, *behind the pose*, are sometimes lacking the raw grunt and grit of the other sections. In their quest to strip away pretence and arrive at some truth, they feel more premeditated, more affected.

Poems like 'What's left' show the poet at her most potent. This is an inventory of absence, but there is something resolute here. This is about death, about the dissonance that comes with difficult relationships, but also about the way small things butt in on dying, and the way the world soldiers on irrespective. The poem sets about establishing an ambiguous bond, a drug regimen, a decay and a sketch of the man at its heart. It leaves us with this:

A cat flap gapes in a forgotten cottage.
A door squeaks.
A letterbox stands strong against a city wind.
A thousand windows open, just right.
A woman with five children
grows strong in self-forgetting.

Rachel Tobin's first collection is wise and strong and full-frontal stark-naked. It is beautifully balanced, and it knows the best way to a reader's heart is not by any circuitous route. The book itself is an exquisite artefact with an artistry that makes for a stunning aesthetic. Tobin may have lost her voice, but she never lost her ability for verbal clout and sensitivity.