

Shift

by Rhian Gallagher.

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Reviewed by Terry Locke, University of Waikato

This is Rhian Gallagher's first book of poems and well deserves attention for a range of reasons some of which I'll spell out in this brief review. The cover of the book has a grainy, light sepia back view of a woman's torso and bespeaks a sensuality that is also realised in a number of the poems in this book, especially the middle section *Butterfly*, which explores the development, consummation and (perhaps) attenuation of a relationship between two women.

But it is the sense of place and how it is both evoked and drawn on structurally that is at the heart of the book's interest for me. It profits from being read alongside Alex Calder's new book, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (AUP, 2011). What's unusual about Gallagher's book, especially for a first book, is the way in which geography becomes a framing device. While this means that a number of non-quite-realised poems are included in the selection (to complete the record), there are more plus and minuses in the decision.

The book is in three sections: *Shift*, *Butterfly* and *Shore*. The poems in *Shift* are firmly anchored at the start in a New Zealand landscape before moving off-shore and taking up their abode in a Europe characterised by the shifting yet "hard lines" of national frontiers imposed on an unregarding environment. The second section, *Butterfly*, is dominated by its focus on relational intimacy, even in poems entitled by a setting. Here's "Bologna":

*What we found there...
Osterie and restaurants full
and the rain coming down, I remember;*

*and the light pressure of her hand
as we ran from the end
of one portico to the shelter of another,
the cobbles streaming.*

Unlike the more typical withdrawal and return pattern, which begins in the city, moves to the wilderness and then back to the city again, the pattern in this book moves from the relatively uncivilised environment of New Zealand, to a succession of Western urban centres and back to New Zealand again. Before we reach the end of *Butterfly*, the lure of New Zealand and what it represents as a locale begins to assert itself. In the wonderful poem "Lagoon" we find the lines:

*Lagoon is a gathering place, waters
merge; birds find their float
and hutch and settle,*

return is an instinct.

And in "Hand-drawn Map", a poem whose title cryptically sums up the theme of geography as a form of embodiment, we find the lines:

*The setting returns: kauri trees
beloved and rare, the morepork's solo.*

*The southern hemisphere blew you away
without city, without competing glows
the stars found a stage to dance on.*

By the time we arrive at *Shore*, the return has been accomplished and we are firmly back in an identifiable New Zealand setting. The *tour de force* of the third section is the title poem, "Shore", a long poem in two sections and a number of sub-sections. In the book mentioned above, Calder writes the following of Blanche Baughan,

but it could equally be applied to this poem: “the tension between here and there dissolves in a rapturous merging with the landscape and results in a reorientation of both the writer and her audience as local” (p. 10). The seashore has a long tradition in literature – think of Whitman’s “Out of the cradle endlessly rocking” – where the national frontier of the “civilised” world is replaced by a more biological or psychosocial concept of the frontier: between the organism and its environment, between fixed order and unruly disorder, past and future, and so on. All of these things are at play in this poem. What is clear is that it is being written as a major resolution of the various tensions implicit in the book as a whole:

*I tried to show you once
but how could I show you*

*wings of tomorrow
inside the lupin pod, here*

*you may shoulder a butterfly
that has come from the inland
to scatter its colour on stone,*

*touch was a shore
lapping and roaring – a shift in the tide.*

*A whole landscape made
with the stroke of a hand.*

In a single section, verbal echoes in “butterfly”, “shift” and “shore” mark the integrative work that is going on here. There are some wonderful manifestations of craft here: the concretisation of something abstract and elusive in “wings of tomorrow / inside the lupin pod” and in the contrasts set up between “shoulder” and “butterfly”, “inland” and “shore”, “lapping and roaring”.

There are some stunning poems in this book that take as their inspiration Gallagher’s family, especially her father. Here is the conclusion of “Blood Work”, a poem set in a freezing works where Gallagher’s father is working:

*When the whistle blew
we sat drinking tea from tin mugs.
I was spoken of as his girl,
strong as his strong,
that’s when it started
in the blood: this was his life.
I felt the join no knife could part
and I couldn’t see
how I’d make the journey
going away and away from.*

Regardless of the setting with its uncompromising detail we find earlier in the poem, the ending is most tender yet problematic in that it posits a union that has to be broken if the daughter is to have a life of her own. Well, as the book shows, she does. It’s a great story and it’s fine poetry.

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