

Canberra Times, January 6th 2007

Silence & its Tongues. By Robyn Rowland. Five Islands Press.
pp120. \$19.95

Reviewer: Geoff Page

In her new collection, **Silence & its Tongues**, as in her two preceding books, **Fiery Waters** and **Shadows at the Gate**, Robyn Rowland reveals her emotions with convincing, if sometimes disconcerting, directness.

While some poets resort to mythical figures and various personae to suggest their feelings, Rowland goes straight to the real details of the issue and lets them stand for themselves. As with her earlier books, there are several poems here about love seized and love frustrated but at the core of **Silence & its Tongues** is the poet's mother who died from cancer in 1990, a disease Rowland herself has also had to battle.

In a central sequence of poems, 'The Filleting', Rowland deals with the frustrations of her mother, an intelligent woman doomed by the expectations of her time to a less than fulfilling job which, in turn, she was forced to give up anyway on the birth of her children. Her problems, of course, ran deeper than any socio-economic analysis and, to a considerable extent, the poems here embody universal tensions between mother and daughter.

Fortunately, several factors prevent Rowland's highly confessional poetry from being either maudlin or embarrassing. One is the complexity of the situation and the people involved, the sense that the poems are not simply a 'paying out' of people who might have behaved better in the circumstances. And then there is also the universality of the predicament. There are very few families, I suspect, even among the happiest, where these sorts of tensions are not found.

A third stop to any misadventure by such an outspoken poet in our taciturn, not to say dour, culture is the quality of Rowland's writing itself. It's a flexible free verse that is well able to manage all that the poet needs to put into it. The poems work by significant detail but also, at times, by uncomfortably direct statement — as at the end of 'Ausculpta' where the poet, talking of her much-favoured younger brother, says to her mother retrospectively: 'He wasn't there much at the end. / Maybe he thought you wouldn't notice. / Maybe he was used to that. / He only had to do one thing anyway, / and he was an angel. / One visit made it all ok; / one phone call, one gesture of attention. / One thing from him; never enough from me'.

Rowland doesn't see this everyday language of family tensions as inadequate. She is able to intensify it, by giving it a more-than-usual rhythmic emphasis and a vivid pictorial yet symbolic immediacy. 'The drawers in my father's house are empty', she says at the beginning of the poem just referred to.

Despite the book's focus on her mother, Rowland also ranges more widely. As mentioned already, there are several sensual-but-anguished love poems, in this case dedicated explicitly to the problematic lover himself. There are also a number of landscape poems set in the Blue Mountains of NSW and others that go back to the landscapes of Ireland which have played a large part in Rowland's recent work.

There are several others, too, which allude to the psychological distress caused by depression and breast cancer. Indeed, there are even a couple of poems about the mixed pleasures of fishing but it is the poems about Rowland's mother for which **Silence & its Tongues** will be remembered.