

POETRY

Poems written in "the Braille of yearning"

Robyn Rowland. *Silence & its tongues*. Melbourne: Five Islands Press, 2006. 120 pp. A\$21.95. ISBN 0-7340-3648-5.

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Quickly, urgently, the first three poems of Robyn Rowland's *Silence & its tongues* announce themes of silence, despair, and yearning that she will explore throughout the rest of the book. These themes challenge the reader to confront a part of the human psyche not easily understood and therefore too easily ignored or dismissed. In free verse that Rowland uses throughout the sixty-one poems, the first poem "Dispatch from the dome," opines, "This is where I have always lived—I knew that —/ receptor for a silence that cannot be broken,/ aloneness that cannot be spoken" (12). The second poem, "The strength of words," establishes both despair and yearning—"a thousand letters, a thousand voice./And I still wait on one" (13), while the third poem "Silence" combines silence, despair, and yearning in the final powerfully packed lines: "You do not call or write./[. . .] silence is a cold and difficult language" (14). Rowland devotes her considerable poetic talents and her unrelenting honesty to the remaining poems as she explores family history, illness, friendship, and a renewed faith in love.

The most engrossing poems are contained in Part II, "Dead Mother Poems: a selection." They are also the most challenging, even troubling, for the reader to digest. In the "Acknowledgements," Rowland confesses that the poems "explore depression," and that "learning to manage [depression] [. . .] takes work." These poems make manifest that work. This begs the question: why would anyone want to read poems that deal with depression? While readers with a low threshold for poetry that explores

depression will have little patience for this collection, I argue that there is much to value. Anyone who has struggled with the loss of a parent will empathize with Rowland's artistic renderings of conflicting emotions. The confusion and anger of "Adhesion" is a good example. "What did you do here to make one mind out of two/then leave me alone?" Rowland ends the same poem with a necessarily graphic image of cleaving one's image from the parent's: "It's sliding along my spine now—/the filleting knife" (49). "The Moment Open" describes the moment of the mother's death, and yet there is an absurd amount of color common to much of Rowland's poetry: "Pink seamist rises in a sigh/as day opens to the unblinking blaze" (58). Rowland argues that dealing with a parent's death catches one in the warp and weft of both sensory deprivation and overload. A parent's death is a defining moment in a person's life. Few parent-child relationships are without complications, and the parent's death demands a child's reckoning. Rowland's poetry is a literary rendering of one child's reckoning.

In addition, anyone who struggles with depression (or anyone who loves someone who struggles with depression) will appreciate the poet's keen artistic insights. The middle poems chronicle the poet's depression, beginning with her mother's death and ending some fifteen years later. For Rowland, depression and language (or, rather, language's incompleteness) are inexorably connected. As wordsmith, she seeks ways to confront depression's ineffable nature, a quality she attempts to name repeatedly—"forget the patois of regret,/ dumb with delight in simple things" (52) or "a language indecipherable" (73). The most interesting trope, one that combines the yearning both for the lost parent and for language striving to be heard, is the telephone. In "Mourning," the poet confesses to her dead mother that she "dial[s] your number"; she concludes "The Charge" with a similar image:

I want to ring you now and tell you this bright truth.

I phoned for six months after you died:

dialled your number still hoping for the next surprise;
longing for your voice. (70)

These telephone images are at once both dispiriting yet poignant. The human voice is cast into a virtual world, reduced to some mathematical formula, but ultimately unheard. Waiting to hear . . . anything from the disconnected line, there is a child-like optimism—maybe this time. Describing depression in poetic language is not an easy task; those who fall short will be accused of writing maudlin emotional poetry. Rowland admirably avoids that trap.

I am drawn to this collection for a number of reasons, not least because I am the target audience. When both of my parents died, I plunged into a depression that lasted several years. Relying on my training as an academic, I read numerous books and articles about depression. However, there is something quite different offered by a poet exploring depression. Depression can be explained neurologically, chemically, and sociologically, but all of them, at some visceral level, fail to capture what Rowland calls "the Dark" (80) that is depression. For the artist who trades in figurative language, depression is a poetic challenge to craft the measured metaphor, the apt analogy, the elusive image, all fleeting in the gray veil that is depression. When a poet is able to capture the language just so, the poem can provide insights that psychologists or sociologists simply cannot.

The poems' settings range from Australia to Ireland, but the truer landscape is the human heart, scarred but resilient. As Rowland concludes her homage to her mother, she ends "Out of the Labyrinth" with one final, tender admonition: "Remember, in spite of scars, it never did fail./ love" (91). Rowland's lessons, transmitted through rich poetic language, can be heard by anyone willing to listen with both head and heart.