

Shadows at the Gate. By Robyn Rowland. Five Islands Press. pp.100. \$18.95

Reviewed by Geoff Page **The Canberra Times**
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Robyn Rowland's fourth book, **Shadows at the Gate**, is redolent with emotion and Ireland — which can often be the same thing. The emotions here have various sources, mainly love and death, but also attachment to place and a growing sense of identity.

Rowland, unlike many more cautious poets, is not afraid to risk the personal. Intensity is what she is after and you don't normally get that by pulling your punches — though, of course, understatement and restraint can sometimes be equally effective. Indeed, Rowland's poems can be so personal that the reader is half-inclined to intervene, to give, for example, that double-crossing Irish monk she fell in love with (and writes about at length) a 'piece of one's mind'.

In the poem called 'The path most travelled' Rowland talks of how her lover saw the "crucifix (as) a gleaming promise / after the years of wavering, / after love woven in the skin" and laments his "returning to carve (his) place / back among (his) brotherhood / corseted in whalebone ritual." At the end of the poem, though, back home with her two young sons, Rowland is consoled by the "small grubby hands held out to us, // and the joke's on you." There's no doubt this section (part II) is partly written as therapy but the pain still hurts — like chalk scratched down a blackboard. She does use a few phrases that might seem excessive, such as "wet with longing's passion", but the whole sequence of poems is not easily forgotten — or recovered from.

Other parts of the book deal not only with the vulnerability felt after cancer (or from living with osteoporosis) but also with the fragility we have all felt, one way or another, since September 11, 2001. The latter is dealt with mainly indirectly, by invoking small family felicities as a way "to hold back the advance of fear."

One of the most memorable poems in the book — and still dealing with vulnerability — is "Coming of age", the definitive "grandfather" poem, in which Rowland notes on her father's departure: "They're not like lovers ... They're not like children ... They're not like friends ..." "No," she says, "these are the fathers of the middle-aged ... They come now to give their time, / listening to our lives where advice is useless / and they know it." She lists all the small but helpful things they do and then talks of "the sad tug of their leaving" and of how, after they've gone, her cheeks, carry "the soft tears of rain inside."

The final section, "Connemara Songs", and quite a few of the other poems, seem both a daybook and a celebration of the eight months Rowland and her two young sons spent in the west of Ireland in 2001/2002. The poet obviously identifies with her Irish roots and regrets that she doesn't have the Gaelic to do both her feelings and the landscape justice. Nevertheless, she does evoke the hardness of the people's lives, the weather, the coasts, the estuaries and "this thread of land into the Atlantic" more than lyrically. But, after all this, Rowland still realises that, as far as Connemara is concerned, "I am merely vagrant here, a traveller, / who cannot lock myself into her heart / for she never knew my name." ("Satin Days").

It's interesting, in this context then, that Michael Coady from Ireland has declared, on the back cover, that these are poems of "love and loss, anchorage and dislocation, hurt and healing" and that the book "sings of tenderness and courage, in the face of 'time's corrosive kiss'". Now why can't Australian reviewers write like that?