
Jessica Alice reviews Robyn Rowland

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Silence & its tongues by Robyn Rowland
Five Islands Press, 2006

Striving to decipher the vast desolation of silence is – as Robyn Rowland has us so emphatically expect – at least. Her latest collection of poems, *Silence & its tongues*, expresses this not only as a 'cold' language, but also the boundless possibilities of voice, tone and dialect. Here Rowland provides a heart-breaking examination of the self within silence, including perspectives as a lover ('I think of your voice during love, unvoiced, guttural, the space/ her mother leaves behind her?') and mother ('My fearful clinging kept him ten months in:

The inescapable binding of family weighs heavy, and builds to a powerful unravelment of the 'rasping' of grief. Rowland treats these moving themes with remarkable honesty and insight; delving into what lies deeper than flesh, and keeps us in a constant state of task with all due passion of a poet, combined with the scientific scrutiny owing from a lifetime of professional accomplishment (Rowland is a member of the Order of Australia for her work around women's health). Rowland succeeds chiefly in articulating that, which by definition is the 'unspoken', in 'Dispatch from the dome', the first poem of the collection, creates eerie lucidity with the dreamlike nature of soundlessness. The poet's own mindscape through the rhythmic, lyrical quality of Rowland's writing; reflective of her Irish heritage, reminiscent of the 'unspoken'.

coloured birds bright in flight
absent the squabble of song;
now a desert at night, its dry road
so very long across the naked plain

The initial, internal rhyme (bright/flight, night) ensures an easy transition to this place. The mood is undeniably melancholic, as if we have suddenly ventured into a dark, uncharted territory. The source of this dismal light is felt through the yearning of a lonely lover:

I have tried to press my mouth
to spaces that might be opening lips.
I think of the velvet moss of giant clams
thick along their jagged smile
that lightly touched, disappears.

Once inside the dome, silence overwhelms the senses, it lays thick and heavy in our ears. Rowland's words on the page ste we navigate her lush labyrinth of various landscapes. We are swept through jungles; told about Russian archaeology; becc in Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence – all in the first few poems. But we do not stop long to admire the view, coloured in nc locations are not important; no one city is more attuned or fluent in the tricky language of silence, or the other difficult lai

From the somewhat otherworldly, travel-book feel of the opening poems, section two features an arrestingly intimate and particularly 'Adhesion', there are resonances of Plath – 'feather-light/crushed with the bone, and the sad, sad heart' – whic the depth of the mother-daughter connection. The distance and dissent of a child betrayed by the death of her mother – 'I and lonely here with you, living underground' – summons the ingrained sense of Plath's 'light of the mind, cold and planet Strong biological bonds are strained with the need for individuality in an ever-present battle, which Rowland invokes bril

You or I? How can I tell?
Who owns this voice? Who speaks?
What did you do here to make one mind out of two
then leave me alone?
I know how you feel.
I am how you feel. You grew into me.
I am the Mandrake plant;
this unearthing, my long screaming.

This strain is materialised in both emotional and physical terms, with both tenderness and hostility. Rowland describes her of cancer, jaundiced ('yellow all over'), yet revelling in what is 'keeping [her] alive'. In 'Dying notes I':

I know it's the attention, just you at the centre.
You want more of that before you die.

There is at times some conscious aggression spilling from recounts in 'The filleting (Part Two)', which gains its power in th to such thought. This works to reiterate a complex relationship, but more so as a weight to balance the overwhelming sorr mother's silence. And once the mother is dead, the psychological filleting is nearly complete. These poems serve as memo guide us through childhood torment and generational co-dependence. The writing is intensely personal, and this fuels its l attuned.

Part three, 'By way of light', sees Rowland stylistically close to ballads, returning to romantic landscape pieces, and the mo her family's deep Irish connection and affirmation of present day Australia, she fuses the two in poems about identity, frie outback desert is genuine, instantly recognisable and benefits from the cultural blend, as Rowland uses Irish folklore to cc Aboriginal history. In 'Govetts Leap, Blackheath, Blue Mountains', for example:

Earth here is tanned and broken, falling into the lap of rock.
Not a country for centaurs or fairies,
the shades here are brown and live inside ochre
and the old stone-people stories.

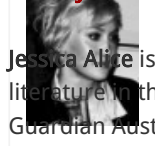
This renewed wonderment with nature is the path out of Rowland's labyrinth of depression. Despite pages filled with long Romanticists, we easily flow through the scenery and are allowed a new way of thinking. In *Beyond White*, the murky the in fresh, confident optimism. Silence is no longer the 'cold and difficult language' – or at least, not entirely – and is instead possibility:

These things settle the heart,
make doubt and knowledge,
sweetness and sorrow, the same.
Soul flows infinite, without a rent.
Leaving, I remain.
Behind us is, as it is; before us, as it will be,
and on the hill, a swinging gate.

This poignant, yet resounding note of clarity is a satisfying weight to level the emotional scale of the collected poems. *Silence* recount of separation and hurt, stirring the child in all of us to consider the depth of love, flesh and blood.

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About Jessica Alice



Jessica Alice is a poet, critic and broadcaster from Melbourne living in Adelaide, South Australia. She is the Director of Writers SA, the literature in the state. Jessica was formerly Poetry Editor of *Scum Mag* and Poetry & Short Prose Editor of *The Lifted Brow*. Her writing has appeared in *Guardian Australia*, *Metro Magazine*, *Overland*, *VICE*, *TLB*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *Australian Poetry Journal*, among others.

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