

COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE: JANETTE TURNER
HOSPITAL'S SHORT PROSE FICTION, 'ISOBARS'.

Today's popular press entices readers with invitations to partake, often for the first time, of fiction by well-established authors. This media participation, generated by tall poppy curiosity perhaps, contrasts [happily] with a lack of short prose publishing opportunities for our writers earlier this century. This situation was admittedly circumscribed by the aftermath of depression and world wars, which extended well into the fifties. Recognition was particularly slow in relation to our own women novelists whose reputations and lifestyles had been moulded by audiences and experiences beyond what would be, for the Australian reader, home ground. Christina Stead and Miles Franklin come readily to mind from that era. Janette Turner Hospital seemed a likely recent addition to the list when her short piece 'Isobars' caught my eye in 'The Australian Dozen', offered as holiday reading last Christmas in *The Australian*.¹ The story was first published in *Overland*.²

Not having read Turner Hospital's novels, what would I find on this one broad popular page to prompt exploration of her longer works?

Both geographical and temporal frames of reference are imaged by the above term 'home ground'. Turner Hospital has used Melbourne, Brisbane, brief sightings from the 40s and the late 80s, together with reaffirmation of certain mores in Australian society (firmly in place, for narrative purposes, in the 40s) on the grid.

'Isobars' offered an immediate challenge to expectations — it is not a conventional short story. It is, in a blatant extension of metaphor, a map, and, true to the promise of the story's title, specifically a weather map. Personal feelings, in the form of admitted bias and attitude, are to be detailed as notation on the map: they provide points of 'equal pressure' for plotting. Past and present are made to interact in a manner which accords to the literary term 'setting' a different dimension. Delineation of events — deaths, rapes and murders which have shocked the public and can still shock — serve to place only the reported narrative on a specific day past. The emotional response is thereby freed, and timeless. History is not permitted to mask an individual's reaction by nominating the comfortable 'long-ago' as a palliative. Readers must hold the page in the present tense and deal with this emulsion which is, hints the completed map, our future.

The structure of the story is visible on the page, in five units. Firstly, a short, neat introduction provides the basic map, which is both concept

and image, and justifies its use as a tool for measuring the potential of a natural element, water. Its 'highs' and 'lows' involve human existence in the guise of weather; its placid surface serves as tranquil lakes, with foreshores for a picnic. Primarily, the element is utilised because of its latent capacity for violence, the 'rainstorms, cyclones and other such assorted cataclysms and disasters', and its indifferent drowning of a careless child which is alluded to and retold to maintain awareness of this potential. The second unit is titled 'Water', and thematically includes the third section. Counterpoint is provided by the last two units (each of about the same volume as previous units) titled 'Newspapers', and 'Air. And circles within circles', in which violence, and especially sexual violence against young women, is itself observed. The metaphor offers the weather and oceans as symbols of universal participation.

In the introductory section, Turner Hospital also begins to extend the metaphor. Maps in general may be straight edged and appear linear, but within this particular evocation, which is the result of the meteorologist's expertise, the patterns to emerge are circular, cyclic; and whole because they are inconclusive. This scientist-observer is placed, briefly, in Melbourne, and accorded the aura of an ancient seer — 'Lines on a map are talismanic and represent the magical thinking of quantitative and rational people'. With the meteorologist emerges another surprise; the author has a sophisticated sense of humour which should alert the reader, like an undertow, to the dangers of complacency:

If the meteorologist has received sufficient advance training in oceanography, statistical mathematics, Jungian archetypes and dreams, he or she will be able to read the signs correctly.

The reader observes that 'equal opportunity' for the sexes evidently applies in the employment of meteorologists. Then there appears to be no further requirement for the professional services of this employee.

Turner Hospital extends the metaphor by splicing together contradictory images and points of view. The piece is neither satire nor farce, both of which are end products; interest is centered on the skill shown in the splicing, the balanced working of strands for a particular purpose, strengthening and joining.

The main narrative strand is the memory life of the Melbourne child, Emily. This satirises the encultured lines of prissy social convention which require that we (the reader assuming a female point of view) should be 'more decorously, more appropriately, buttoning our gloves and keeping our knees together in the approved Melbourne manner'. The ethos of a 40s childhood is evoked with picnics by the Ringwood Lake and the Ballarat Lake. These lakes had separate names, but became one in the power of the water, and this defines them. The temporal

period is confirmed by a later reference to 'the Japanese defeated, but black paint still being scraped from the windows of Melbourne'.

Emily's family history, a temporal rather than a narrative strand, lists English and Welsh heritage (inferring an autobiographical context). Her English grandfather proffers philosophy, while his pragmatic Welsh counterpart recounts the horror story of a little boy drowned in the lake, recalling to Emily's memory her presence at the picnic and the tragedy. They take her hands, the lift and swing (the pulling either way) is fun for the child who moves 'out out over the water, over the Pacific, over the Atlantic, over the Arabian Sea' to pause on Kovalam beach in South India. The expatriate travels relate to the author's own early life,³ confirming the strand of biographical authenticity in the splicing. The child Emily's unprocessed witness to the mother's tears and distress at the drowning of her son are overlaid with awareness of the grandfathers' unity in a determined dismissal of the woman's display of emotion, her weakness. Thoreau's philosophy now becomes a referent, with another body of water, the pond at Walden in another era, providing linkage which supercedes the requirement for chronological and geographical pretext.

The philosophy is present in the form of Thoreau himself, who comments on the drowning in the present tense and off-handedly notes the accepted male assessment. Emily reports:

Thoreau looks and looks away. They say she has lost a child, he [Thoreau] says. They say she has never been quite right since.

This poet who championed the individual and opposed slavery is shown to subscribe to an oppressive urban myth about women. Emily reports the man-philosopher's self-revelation: 'But men rarely mean what they say. Still, he [Thoreau] adds, the woman wants to believe him. Can't you hear her laughter?' Emily tries to understand as the scene advances, over water and through time, to Montreal in winter where the remembered scream of the bereaved woman could merely be 'one fractious chunk of ice shrieking up against another?' The craft of the poet is shown in the surrealist writing in this section; images derived from water are deftly worked. These are concentrated once more as weather, in a distant part of the globe, at the end of the section.

The last two units use newspaper headlines and extracts from reports. Newspapers are reputed to deal with facts (though 'people do tell lies', Thoreau had warned), and a journalistic style takes precedence over the fragmentation that accompanied childhood recollections. Several big city dailies are noted, and one headline, 'BETTY SHANKS MURDERED' from the 'Brisbane *Courier Mail*, circa 1953', is recalled to provide a focus upon male oriented determination that the woman victim is responsible for her injury or death. Sexually derived violence

may be charted, condoned and rationalized. This opinion surfaces; subtle opposition to it is the main emotional strand. Even an ice-cream licking boy of Emily's own age who also witnesses a man's vicious knifing of a woman, turns aside with the comment "Girls!" In this sequence, which employs both irony ('Tuberculosis attacks failures' . . . the Australian medical historian), the horror magnified through the observing mind of the school child, the temporal strand is defined by evidence selected from the years 1912 to 1988. Reference is made, for example, to the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York, 'when a porridge of her screams filled the air and reached dozens of ears, but nobody saw', and a survey in Canada (May 6 1988) which found that 'most [high-school] boys think girls who are raped were asking for it'. The cycle will again be complete in one generation.

Back on home ground, suburban Australian attitudes when the victim is an Aboriginal woman confront the reader. Authority figures, who were reconstituted previously as the traditional male grandparents, the Bishop of Ballarat and a fisherman in South India, are now the ordinary policemen. They are 'sarcastically patient' with a young adult Emily, and the tone is ambivalent when there is, as they see it, an even lower female order for collective male authority to deal with: 'About the Abo whore, they say [to Emily]. (Excuse our language). Just asking for trouble'.

'All lines on a map . . . are imaginary; they are ideas of order imposed on the sloshing flood of time and space' the reader is told. The imagination can be culturally subversive, and a formidable opponent when engaged in social struggle. The child Emily's deliberations about violence are convincingly dispassionate and ingenuous. The adult woman's perception of the force opposing her provides a neat balance in which the issues raised may not be discounted by being moored in a specific time and place, or as the product of a (female) author's imagination. Subscription to the patrilineal points of view examined is self-condemnatory, and this will encompass, also, a small minority of unthinking women. The extended metaphor is effective: every desensitised reader of newspaper reportage on rape and murder is challenged not to accept the placebo of social familiarity. I wonder how many men reading 'Isobars' will concede a willingness to accommodate a similar personal rationale for violence, or will the comfortable majority continue to lie to themselves, in accordance with Thoreau's prognosis?

The ending is imaginative, and seems abrupt; but it is difficult to get out of a circle, it is dangerous. Janette Turner Hospital's splicing is complete, and skilfully worked. 'Isobars' plots a most revealing map of

one kind of violence in today's (is it unchanged and unchanging?) human climate.

NOTES

- ¹ 'The Australian Dozen,' p.9, *The Australian*, Wed., 28th December, 1988.
- ² 'Isobars. A Fugue on Memory', *Overland*, No. 112, October, 1988, pp. 2-5.
- ³ Candida Baker, *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*. Janette Turner Hospital, pp. 248-278. Sydney: Pan Books (Australia), 1987, pp. 248-78.

STEPHEN ROBERTS

SATURDAY NIGHT

The plover registers the night
(The cock the dawn)
The Moon is in pretty good shape
Love in bedclothes has a backdrop
Soak in the atmosphere it's Saturday Night
Play Sophisticated Lady. worn but in the groove
The Scene is set You have a context
Situation is free and easy indoors you're pretty safe
Tender talk I'm not going to lead you on strike now
Go straight in Lovers don't loiter Take advantage
The Moon says it's right The Music clinches the Lovers
Pleasure is not unbounded People get picked up get busted
So step right in heavy Sunday will come round the garden calls
Church may drag some away but that's anticipating
Draw the bedclothes over the obstacles
The Moon stands guard
The Music creates the space
The Morning is holding off
(The cock is fast asleep)