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REVIEW

Janette Turner Hospital. *Isobars*. St Lucia: UQP, 1990 ISBN 0702222984. \$14.95.

In her collection, *Isobars*, Janette Turner Hospital uses the isobar as a motif for the shifts of memory which interweave place and time, reality and fantasy, through the creative imagination. An isobar is “an imaginary line connecting places of equal pressure on a map” (1). It thus connects physical actualities while also deconstructing them by suggesting that any notion of reality is shaped, and can be reshaped, by the imagination.

The title story, “Isobars,” is perhaps the most experimental in form. In this story, the isobar connects two bodies of water through different moments remembered by Emily, the central character; the Ringwood Lake and the Ballarat Lake have become “one puddle of water now,” signifying the collapse of geographical actualities within Emily’s memory. The style of “Isobars” complements its subject matter, the distortions in memory wrought by what we want to see or what we are told to see. Passages in the story are often broken off mid-sentence, and the sentence is completed in a new passage which marks a different timeframe. This stream-of-consciousness technique suggests that memories, linked in simultaneous recollection, are brought into all sorts of different perspectives, just as isobars join disparate places and people. This brings not freedom, however, but entrapment for Emily, because her memories are forever reinscribed by men. “Isobars” traces different versions of one experience: each time Emily sees a woman crying, the man to whom she turns redefines what she is seeing. She is told to reinvent the sight of women suffering; and when she has to face the victims who testify to this suffering, reported history tells her that the women are themselves to blame. But the one thing that men cannot control is a woman’s subconscious; and it is here that the subtlety of Turner Hospital’s imagery is felt. Water signifies not just memory, but also the subconscious. While Emily’s memories of suffering women may indeed be overwritten by men,

this does not stop them floating in her subconscious awareness of how the oppression really exists for her. Isobars, we are reminded, are constructs of the mind; and despite what Emily is told to think, the mind is at some level its own place.

Water is a recurrent image in *Isobars*. In "The Last of the Hapsburgs" Miss Davenport, Rebecca and Hazel, three social outcasts, join for an illicit swim during school hours. They are shockingly reminded of the social dictates which constrain and condemn them by "the steaming fact" of a turd "dropping stolidly into the pool" (27). Water signifies both freedom ("where we've escaped to" [23]) and oppression ("polluted water" [26]). In "Uncle Seaborn" water links the rhythm of life and death. Water allows the child Seaborn to embrace his dead brother Alfred: "Water was their natural element" (33). It is also the medium through which Seaborn's own voice is heard after death: Clem hears Seaborn's cries as shrieks, while the shivering Grace insists, "It's the way they call to each other" (36).

"Uncle Seaborn" sneaks death so unobtrusively into its narrative structure that in order to determine who is living and who is not, we find ourselves moving into the narrative in just the same way that Seaborn "dreamswims" to find Alfred. The narrative thus ingeniously, and startlingly, mirrors exactly the submerging effect that Turner Hospital seeks to create in her treatment of life-in-death. The idea of submersion recurs in the next story, "The Second Coming of Come-By-Chance": this time, the breaking of a dam is the metaphor for the breaking of a casual narrative tone by a shocking rape. After the narrative closes over the revelation, Adeline, the victim, tries repeatedly to ripple its surface; but at every attempt she is met by soothing, casual murmurs of sympathetic disregard which submerge what she wants to say.

"Bondi," a spare and witty story, concerns the relationship between the mercurial, dope-trucking, sexual Leigh and her cousin Cass, who covertly plays out her fantasies through Leigh's escapades. Each plays "Best Supporting Actress to the other's role" (69), and with irony the story explores the shifts which occur when Cass, shaken out of her middle-class complacency by rebellious Leigh's arrival, threatens to encroach on Leigh's territory by exposing her breasts on the beach. Outraged by this out-of-character behaviour, Leigh exclaims, "A married woman! ... A mother!" (74). This prompts Leigh to take the lead again, making off with a local youth. The next morning, feeling jaded and left behind, Cass watches a sandsweeper "leaving a plane of pure sifted gold in its wake." She wishes "to go back two whole days, to the moment when she picked

Leigh up at Circular Quay” (81). But unlike the sandsweeper, Cass can’t leave a blank sheet in her wake: “She watches the sandsweeper, unable to move” (81).

In “The Chameleon Condition” the skin of Adam, the protagonist, becomes a translucent, chameleon reflector of his experience. Just as Adam’s body refuses to allow him to escape the consequences of his guilty past, so too in “Dear Amnesty” does the body of an abandoned wife internalise her feeling of guilt. With a typically Australian avoidance of psychobabble, this story evokes what is in effect Sarah’s transference-neurosis. Burdened with the sense of guilt that her husband should have felt in abandoning her, she not only devotes her life to writing letters to Amnesty International, but also experiences bodily sensations which parallel the torture undergone by Rosa, a political prisoner of conscience. Sarah’s lack of awareness of her transference makes her a vulnerable, helpless figure.

A prostitute’s suicide is the climax of “Eggshell Expressway,” a beautifully crafted, frightening evocation of the tawdry existence of fifteen-year-old Lisa. Angel Dust is what makes Lisa’s hand-to-mouth existence bearable, and at the story’s end it gently releases her into death. The tales in this section of *Isobars* explore death through different perspectives. In “To Be Discontinued” and “Here and Now,” a female academic watches an elderly male academic mentally disconnect from his present surroundings as he moves into senility. “The Loss of Faith” depicts a man’s reaction to his first wife’s death. In “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” a woman struggles with her prognosis of death, and together with her brother looks back on her dead mother and on the lover who abandoned her. “A Little Night Music” charts a woman’s reaction to a stranger on a plane, whom she later finds to be a terrorist taking his last flight toward a suicide mission. “Queen of Pentacles, Nine of Swords” portrays the bewitching, brilliant Sita, her fear of death-in-life, and her repetition-compulsion as she attempts to infuse into her life a feverish excitement.

Janette Turner Hospital’s *Isobars* is, I believe, her best work yet. It is a stunning collection of stories, both spare and evocative. While each one has its own sense of completion, it is imbued with by the themes and motifs which, like isobars, connect it in subtle and haunting echoes to other stories in the collection.