

Ellen Van Neerven, *Comfort Food* (UQP, 2016)

Ellen Van Neerven's debut poetry collection, *Comfort Food*, is dedicated to 'those who have made me meals', and the feeling of open-handedness continues in the book's following 56 poems. Open to the first one, 'Whole Lot' (3-4), and you'll get it straight away. The title itself is like a basket with words spilling out, such abundance and goodness. It's as if the poet is saying '*Here, this is what I have to give, and it's a whole lot; it's everything*'. What a generous way to begin and so apt a signifier of what's to come.

The poem begins:

family, earth
dingo, eagle
fire, food
Whole Lot
it's all of those things

Van Neerven uses a lot of lowercase throughout the collection – one would certainly say it's a stylistic thing she's homed in on – but I'm immediately drawn to her choice of capitalising 'Whole Lot' amid all of those big, encompassing words. The concept of 'Whole Lot' takes on a higher level of status, becoming a religion of sorts. An example of a suitable prayer might be found in the fifth stanza:

we are not here until we sit here
we sit in silence and we are open
there are different kinds of time
I hope you'll understand

Van Neerven's well aware of her predominantly white audience, as those of us who fit that category are well aware of her status as up-and-coming-Aboriginal-writer (her debut work – a short story collection called *Heat and Light* – won the David Unaipon Award, the Dobbie Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Indigenous Writers Prize and was shortlisted for The Stella Prize, the Queensland Literary Award for State Significance, and the Readings Prize) so those last two lines carry enormous weight. Her approach favours invitation over recrimination.

I want to stick with 'Whole Lot' a bit longer because there's so much going on in it that symbolises the book. For instance:

what we eat comes from our roots
if we stop sharing there will be nothing

Food is a perfect metaphor here for cultural understanding. Sitting around a kitchen table or in a circle at a park, eating with others, *sharing* food, places people in a position of equality. How the meal progresses is entirely up to the participants, but this collection lacks anger – not critique, but anger – so poetry is a convivial vehicle for perspective, tolerance, maybe reconciliation. And it's exactly this notion of 'sharing' that makes the poem – the collection – so successful.

In the third stanza she writes:

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we start with black
let it get hold of you
look at the stars
or are you afraid to?

This sets up a dichotomy of black and white, with Van Neerven's 'black' playing on both the colour of her skin and the space between the stars. And there's another invitation to her (predominantly white) readers with 'look at the stars', with only a short line, then, asking them if they're willing, if they're ready.

The next stanza moves from sky to earth:

the day shows
country spread open
a map of all that was and will be
don't forget it
I'm tracing it to remember
don't be scared

Here Van Neerven says that she is another voice for her people, that this is what she does, that this poetic narrative of indigeneity that is *Comfort Food* must address the hard issues and must begin with a welcome: 'don't be scared'.

The poem continues the book's other themes: leaving (I want this to be here / when I leave again / I've been leaving a lot of times) and longing (there is no easy way to cry / tell them I'll be back soon).

There is an inherent push and pull in the mood of these poems, where food is a presence as much as it is an absence, and it focuses most of this book, though particularly the first half. Food is tied to the past – as in 'Roo Tails', a six-line poem that captures a meaningful, however mundane, image of her grandmother as a magpie flies by – and it's enmeshed with the present, especially in the overseas poems, like 'Smoking Chutney':

Don't fall in love if you can't live that love. Don't put that pickled hand on someone else. The closest you get is a shared flight, stopping in Bangalore. She'll smile from the tarmac. Find somewhere to preserve this. An ageless woman, an ageless goodbye. (31)

Food also works to illuminate disconnection

Fussed by nothing but the company. The way an evening tumble-turns out of trouble, warm voices, tunnel of black beans, every tamale tastes the same (27)

just as it envelops connection

she is of the bear people
so she's first to the berries
...
take off your socks, show your fur
and I'll show you my feathers. (28)

Food is a space for the political, too:

can I say
white people really bore me sometimes
to be exact
I grow tired with what's unmentioned
idling in surf club bathrooms
nothing wrong with the chips
but they're talking about Tasmania
my thoughts haunted by islands
...
what is happening
with the dialogue of this country
they are killing people with words
if I'm not back soon
tell them I've had too many chips (21)

Food is a starting point for all of these things, and in this spirit of giving, Van Neerven's opened herself up to us, opened up the discussion of: Whose food? *Our* food. / Whose Australia? *Our* Australia. There are differences between black and white that go far beyond colour – specifically historical differences and those that are felt in the blood and in the gut – and *Comfort Food* recognises this with an aim to share stories from the one side of the table that rarely gets a chance to speak (the other so busy talking with their mouths full of food as if the food will otherwise disappear). *Comfort Food* begs of the other side of the table, again and again, to please, just listen, just eat; there's plenty to go around – Whole Lot.

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