

Michelle Cahill, *Letter to Pessoa and Other Short Fictions* (Giramondo, 2016).

Having signed at least three well-received books of poetry into the world, Michelle Cahill, established poet, sometime essayist, medical practitioner, and founding editor of *Mascara* (whose journal mandate is to publish migrant, Indigenous, and Asian-Australian work), has released her first compilation of short fiction. Cahill's multiple and widely-ranging experience and talent infuse the oneiric volume with a dense heterogeneity: captivatingly cultivated, albeit sometimes to the point of sounding, looking, or seeming overly-contrived in its efforts to display a cutting-edge 'post-something' contemporaneity.

This inaugural collection of 24 often epistolary and regularly auto-bio-travel-stories begins with the titular letter to Pessoa and ends with 'A Miko Coda': a tail and coda-tale historically and etymologically derived from western traditions of musical composition (the 24 preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys J.S. Bach published as *The Well-Tempered Clavier* comes to mind, as does its successor, the *Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues*), here infused with a swirl of Shinto orthographics from the jinja priestess, female shaman, or shrine maiden, 'infinite possibility of hypertext' (239).

Permeated by eastern spiritualism or by an autobiographically accidental even occidental desire for such experience (where and into what familial lineage one is born is literally not a matter of choice for the neonate), the genre-migrating collection traverses the geographical spaces of a global and trans-national world based in the Asia-Pacific (Cahill's home base of Sydney serves extensively as backdrop) with variously simulated visits elsewhere also: to Europe and the British Isles, for instance, but also to South America and the United States, parts of Africa and elsewhere outside the Asian places the collection commonly visits (India, Thailand, Nepal, Hong Kong). Throughout the collection various reading gestures attend textual migrations from place to place, and explicitly single out several more or less migrant writers born into and moving among disparate world-wide addresses: Fernando Pessoa, of course, and, for brief example favouring still better-known writers writing here and there in some sort of exile: Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Jacques Derrida, and J.M. Coetzee (one could also include Jean Genet, travelling writer and sometime French Foreign Legionnaire titularly alluded to by David Bowie's 'The Jean Genie':¹ exemplary as counter-culture icons both, along with Neil Young, who also makes an appearance as addressee in the collection, or Kurt Cobain, co-founder of grunge musical group Nirvana, who gets a collection mention [139]).

Like Cahill herself, who in a *Muse India* interview speaks of 'the writer' as an 'artist who is always an exile,'² most of the writers singled out above as denizens of her fiction are exemplary for their transnational experience, and for the birth or life of their writing 'in exile.'

Salman Rushdie identifies migration as unremarkably central to twentieth-century experience. Indeed, writing in some sort of migratory exile has never been an unusual circumstance. Textuality, etymologically linked to tapestry weaving as a potentially mobile home, has known migrancy from the beginning. And, despite some always attendant sense of loss, writing in exile (a state the once-migratory Edward Said has keenly and carefully celebrated as a potentially 'potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture') has often been an especially productive

¹ See David Bowie and Mick Rock, *Moonage Daydreams* (London: Cassell, 2005) 140 ff.

² <http://www.museindia.com/featurecontent.asp?issid=53&id=4684>

experience.³ For confirmation, one needs only to add James Joyce and Samuel Beckett to the names previously listed.

Although Beckett presents a special case, none of these writers, dead or alive, Cahill included, have immediately faced the devastating plight of migration in its most brutally war- and poverty-induced manifestations, to which Cahill sometimes alludes in her collection, most notably in a brace of stories contiguously presented nearly half way through. 'A Wall of Water' tells the story of a family's migration to Australia as focalised through a character identified by book's end as one of Cahill's (Pessoa) 'heteronyms'. The story begins and ends with one of the narratively much later Australian Christmas Island disasters in which – this time – 50 refugees die. This is a story economically framed by 'grief for those [who] drowned and [for] those who survived: Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds' (72). The adjacent and unusually brief narrative, 'Sleep Has No Home,' ferries us into the memory-experience of a young girl who has survived an attack by the Mehdi in post-Saddam Iraq, and who ends up joining the scramble of migrants reduced to having 'no country, no certificates, no money left to pay the rebels'; in this state, the girl joins potential survivors whose 'tongues burn with a story we cannot speak' (76). The brevity of the story (matched only by the collection's coda and one other story in the collection, a 'Letter to Derrida') is telling: that Cahill directly and explicitly does no more with the migrant disaster erupting around us is to her credit – this is not exactly her story to tell any more than the story (fictionalised this way or that) of Derrida's non-death.

But there are other stories of migration to tell, the telling of which is likely itself always to be some kind of migrant act that in this case implicitly, willingly, links Cahill to Borges and Nabokov – born 1899 in the West and the East respectively, who in their teens migrated under some pressure from one cardinal point to the other and, later, at least partially back again – and to the Africans of European descent from her named list of letter-receiving writers: Derrida, who saw himself as an 'Algerian exile,'⁴ and Coetzee, widely quoted on his self-expatriation to Australia as saying that he has not left South Africa as much as he has 'come to Australia'.⁵

Cahill too was born in Africa – Kenya in her case – though by chiasmic reversal she received her earliest schooling in London, while her titularly epistolar recipient, born in Portugal a decade or so before Borges and Nabokov, received his formative education in Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Like her older and better-known African-Australian compatriot, Coetzee, and like those other now dead writers she welcomes to her collection, Cahill is strictly speaking neither a refugee nor an exile; but she too clearly knows something about what it takes to make writing one's home irrespective of one's actual location: migratory writers of this kind take their cue, knowingly or otherwise, from the exiled writer Theodor Adorno of *Minima Moralia*, a morally-imbued text informed, as Said puts it, by Adorno's 'belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing,' a home lodged, that is, in the kind of writing able to 'cross borders,' and to 'break barriers of thought and experience': a 'nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal' exile of writing.⁶

Crisscrossing thus and thus chiasmically crossing from place to place and person to person, often in pursuit of other writers, and going into exile from her first practice of poetry per se, Cahill's lettered stories and storied letters spread themselves around the already-mentioned brace

³ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 173.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham UP, 2014) 7.

⁵ <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-03-06-jm-coetzee-becomes-an-australian-citizen>; J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2012) 541; David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time*, (New York: Viking, 2015) 216.

⁶ Said 184 and 186.

of core entries carefully approaching twenty-first century migration disasters as if the arrayed stories too, like the protagonist of 'Fever', are 'destined to be in transit, on temporary visas' (200), or as if they were 'fragments of the mirror,' as the 'Letter to Pessoa' puts it by way of beginning (4), reminding us readers of Pessoa's 'heteronyms' (5) as we prepare to embark on a journey: 'A train leaves this evening for Lisboa Oriente' (5). Thus prepared for a trip, readers begin the following story, 'Biscuit,' in which they will meet 'Crust,' probably expecting by way of the collection's title this green-eyed Kenyan Sokoke cat 'born west of Nairobi in a dusty town', who knows Swahili (7) and writes (9) by dipping her claw into a pot of sepia ink, to somehow connect Cahill's native Kenya with Pessoa's native Portugal and formative African years, perhaps all mediated by Cahill's self-identified Goan Anglo-Indian heritage, given that Goa, one of the former Portuguese enclaves in India ceased to be Portuguese only in 1961 (when it was taken from Portugal by Indian military action).

But this is not to be. Crust bears witness to an intensification of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya – synecdochic anti-colonial African effort – and ends up on a plane en route to Australia. Crust, it counter-intuitively turns out, is not a Cahill heteronym (as identified by the 'Notes' appended to the collection). These latter are all human, and the connections are not especially motivated. 'Sarita' heads the list of Cahill's 'other selves, heteronyms in the Pessoa sense' (245), and Sarita is indeed the focalising agent for the previously-mentioned 'A Wall of Water', which takes place in India and an Australia suffused by 'jacarandas' that 'flowered during exam time at Sydney Uni' (67) – emblematic flowers native to Brazil that have come to identify so much of the Southern Hemisphere – where Sarita 'canvasses against racism and mandatory detention' (68), and whence she 'absorbs the latest update on the Christmas Island disaster' (70). So Sarita is closer to Cahill than, understandably, is Nasrin, the focalizing agent of 'Sleep Has No Home': but why the need for Pessoaan heteronyms if this is just a case of all writing being more or less autobiographical? Sarita appears again as a momentarily 'homesick' Sydney inhabitant (81) visiting Nepal while trying to rid herself of entanglement with yet another named heteronym, 'Logan' ('The Sadhu'), but the link between this Sarita and the previous one is inconsequential in any heteronymic sense, an inconsequence underscored by the narratively unmotivated linkage to the heteronym named Logan, who might (or might not) be the unnamed narrating protagonist of the next story, 'Disappearing'; such complications complicate themselves to little satisfaction and 'heteronymically' continue to confuse some following stories: 'Finding the Buddha,' for example, which supposedly orchestrates into the mix a 'Jo' in relationship with a 'Luke' – both unhelpfully identified as heteronyms in the concluding 'Note' at text's end. Then comes some sort of reprise of 'Borges and I'. Under Borges's pen, this is a breath-takingly brief adventure into writing that resembles and resists autobiography. Cahill's version is about fifty-fold the delicate length of the Borges original – about twice as long as 'Funes, the Memorious' and closer to the length of 'Garden of Forking Paths' – and it affords little or nothing to approximate the affect and effect of any of the three Borges works.

Cahill's collection of storied letters is likely to resonate with contemporary readers, especially perhaps with youngish readers and with that youngish-part in all of us no longer young. For all readers it is likely to cause some pause here and there as it no doubt should do: the blogging and the sexting of the more or less auto-but-unnamed protagonist who wipes 'the secretions off her body turning the dribble into ink' ('Dirty Ink' 21), takes place alongside a later and more charmingly quirky letter to singer-songwriter Neil Young, which twice turns to lyrics from Young's *Rust Never Sleeps* tour of 1978, citing 'Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black),' from which Kurt Cobain borrowed for his suicide note one of the same lines Cahill quotes in italics: '*It's better to burn out, than to fade away*' (146).

Cahill's collection will open doors to readers who are – for whatever reason – not yet familiar with some or all of the writers she follows, and might prompt some research inquiry into attendant geo-historical situations not universally known. But for those who already know Larkin's 'Aubade' – or Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, Borges's 'Borges and I,' Derrida's oeuvre and hors d'oeuvre, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, or Różewicz's *Mother Departs* – Cahill the writer of prose has less, perhaps little, even nothing, to add to the record (though, for that record, I find myself charmed by the 'Letter to Coetzee,' moved by the 'Letter to Tadeusz Różewicz' [sic], and touched by 'Duende,' a tribute to Lorca more than to Hemingway; I find myself variously intrigued also by other, previously-mentioned migrant stories that make up this collection, sometimes – to their credit – by not so desperately depending on precursor stories). Neither as memorious as Borges nor as melodious as Bach, then – but who could reach such heights again? – the collection offers itself as another embroidered stitch in the record of migrant tapestry-fabrication.⁷

Brian Macaskill

John Carroll University

⁷ Woven tapestries, from which weaving activity the word 'text' derives, can be thought of as portable homes, part of some versions of the migrant experience from the beginning. See Joseph Koerner, 'Tapestries' in William Kentridge, *Thick Time* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016) 48-55. Kentridge tapestries collaboratively articulated with the Stephens Tapestry Studio, formerly of Swaziland but now located in Diepsloot, South Africa, regularly and compellingly concern themselves with migration – as does much of Kentridge's work in other media.