

# The Fall

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Sally Morrison

*The Insatiable Desire of Injured Love*

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A COUPLE OF years ago, confined to bed for weeks with a bad case of chicken pox, I was surprised to find that all I wanted to read were chronicles of illness. *A Better Woman* (childbirth-induced fistula), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (shut-in syndrome), *A Match to the Heart* (heart failure after being struck by lightning), *My Year Off* (stroke) — I devoured them avidly. This was more than the egotism of the ill, I hope, although certainly a part of the enjoyment lay in seeing the fact of sickness given its own exclusive literary space. But I suspect my enjoyment had something more to do with watching those authors piece themselves back together in language. So physically altered that I could hardly recognise myself in the mirror, I took a greater pleasure than usual in the mysterious alchemy of word and flesh.

Sally Morrison's new novel is the story of 27-year-old Renata Ochiltree's recovery from a fall in Victoria's Cathedral Ranges in 1973 — a fiction based on Morrison's own accident in the same year and place. Stepping out to meet the arms of the rescuer, Renata instead finds herself broken at the bottom of the cliff. 'The sky is white, throwing veils of rain onto my face and onto the gleaming rocks down which I have fallen — throwing gently, very gently, as if it were the rocks that needed balm for their pain. I can see the others a long way up above, trapped on the ledge.' The novel takes place in hospital as Renata lies trapped in her bed with broken arms, a neck brace, a cracked skull and broken teeth.

It is a generic convention of chronicles of illness that immobility enforces introspection. Patients interrogate their specific illness, look at how it has changed their body and life, and perhaps move on to deeper philosophical insights or a more tolerant understanding of the body's imperfections. Sometimes, as Renata does here, the chronicler comes to understand the physical affliction as less significant than a spiritual malaise. In Renata's case, it is unrequited love.

While she grapples with physical pain that leaves only one toe untouched, Renata thinks back over the raw memories of her failed relationship with Matt, a handsome but emotionally careless surgeon. There is some suggestion that Renata may be addicted to emotional pain. She credits her love with a kind of geological force, stronger than the cliffs that broke her body: 'I have stirred up love where there was no room for it ...

My love is like a tidal wave, something that began way back in history in some mythic ocean ...'

Because Renata is a scientist (as is Morrison), the book holds out the promise that it will reflect on love, the body and fate in a spirit of scientific inquiry. Certainly, the account of the accident at the novel's opening is grippingly matter-of-fact, while Renata often invests in scientific metaphors and stops to consider the clash of science and faith. On the other hand, she notes that the raw reality of her grief floors her scientific co-workers who prefer the controlled conditions of a laboratory. And Renata the rationalist is also capable of the most unsophisticated gushing about Matt, recounting that she 'fell into his clear blue gaze, like a toddler into a swimming pool'.

That, I think, is the point of this novel and its oddly purple title: that science and emotion cannot be separated; that rational knowledge does not necessarily make us immune to abusive love.

These are interesting ideas that deserve investigation, but Renata's narrative voice is so emphatic, her narrative so overdetermined by bitterness, that they are not given the space to move toward anything but a foregone conclusion. By Renata's account, everyone is driven by the worst of motives: Matt, her insensitive mother, her socially aspiring father, her uptight sister, her work colleagues who come to see her only to have something to talk about at tea break. Even Renata's ineffectual boyfriend Warren succumbs to the bullying of her family and cannot act in Renata's best interests. Renata continually describes other people's motivations ('An accident has the advantage of immobilising the victim. Those who deserve control can take it again') or insists on her own truth with caustic asides (her father approves of a boyfriend 'no doubt on account of the salary').

Morrison may be trying to refuse the conventional arc of acceptance of illness narratives, insisting that women had plenty to be justifiably angry about in 1973. But, as a novelistic voice, Renata's is oppressive. Instead of the narrative being allowed the room to breathe and to find its depths and insights, the experience of reading this novel is too much like sitting at the bedside of an angry patient, complaining in real time.