

Marcelle Freiman, *White Lines (Vertical)* (Hybrid Publishers, 2010)

*White Lines (Vertical)* is a collection of poems that weave across oceans and the history of a family, surviving the holocaust in Lithuania and Latvia, living in South Africa during the apartheid and migrating to Australia where the poet, Marcelle Freiman, lives and holds a position as Senior Lecturer in creative writing and literature at Macquarie University. In preparing this review I focused on four aspects raised by Freiman about her poetic process – memory, words carrying more meaning than memorials, her use of colour and nature and use of ekphratic practice.

In a paper prepared for the Australasian Association of Writing Programs on ‘What do students learn when they do creative writing?’, 2007 Freiman explores the concept of ‘creative writing ... that is impelled by a state of *un-knowing*.’ She describes a class exercise that she sets for students ‘to engage with memory’ –

Write the words ‘I remember’ and follow on by writing down a concrete detail or image. Without thinking about it much, repeat the return to each line with ‘I remember ...’. Don’t explain – rather allow the details to build up the picture.<sup>1</sup>

Many of her poems that reflect her childhood memories, tributes to family members, friends and domestics, have no doubt utilised this technique.

Three of Freiman’s most moving poems are memories of her nanny, grandmothers Leah and Chana, her father and his nurse, Mercy who each night came from Soweto to the white suburbs to care for him. ‘In Our House’ in South Africa, she recalls her nanny:

when we crossed the road  
she’d hold me –  
my life in her hands:  
her voice was  
in every room. (30)

‘The Hairdresser c. 1950’ is for her grandmother Leah as

she spins her web of coloured hair,  
frail threads tie her to the past  
held by filaments  
soft as the chrysanthemums  
printed flamingo pink on her pale green gown  
of silk, (8)

In ‘The Enamel Plate’ she asks

<sup>1</sup> ‘What do students learn when they do Creative Writing?’, *The ‘and is’ Papers: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the AAWP* ed. J. Webb and J. Williams, 2007.

<http://www.aawp.org.au/files/u280/freiman.pdf>

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Why this memory over and over?...

the bright  
enamel plate on the table, blue rimmed,  
a call to prayer: my grandmother,  
her arms held wide over the stove  
like wings. (27&28)

Her poem about 'The Factory' her father owned in South Africa is particularly moving as it recognises her father's efforts to address hunger in the land by producing a protein rich drink of maize *Puza Mandla* that fed children and prisoners 'who waited apartheid's end' (47&48).

Her most searing poems of memory and reflection are about the holocaust. *Furnace* vehemently lists the range of furnaces and closes with the following lines:

the lists of names, the numbers, the records  
the factories, the chimneys, the ashes  
the smoke from the ovens  
the white heat of the furnace  
the blackening heat of shrapnel  
the noise of stem hammers  
the silence after burning. (11)

'No memorial can equal their words,' as Freiman declares in 'Masha' (22). Unlike words, memorials are silent. In 'Lightening' she refers to the building of

...columned allegories  
granite upon the earth  
to memorialize the dead –

the edifice is nothing more than  
façade that covers  
our brittle memories. (16)

In her poems about massacres under apartheid and ghetto life in Poland Freiman declares that words written by the Jews in the form of stories written in pencil or drawings and sealed in milk urns are more potent than memorials, as they 'hoped for resurrection of readers' (22).

Freiman's poems are vivid with colour, such as the spectacle of colour when light beams through stained glass windows, and appreciative of the arts of lace making, cloth and carpet weaving, for example in 'Oasis':

If my bedding was carried  
in a bag of cloth, rich with patterns  
  
woven red, orange and black....

then my dreams  
would thread intricate colours  
my days be carpets of peace. (24)

She alludes to the colour bars in South Africa and being called by England in 'Oak',

outside the classroom windows –  
birth-written by our whiteness  
either to rule or leave. (37)

Colour and nature are dominant images in many of the poems. In 'Visitation' she refers to 'the green-gold-black butterfly', and 'Ginger Plants' are

red orange, winged with yellow, like birds,  
the flowers struggle and droop in the heat,  
sticky stamens are red wine. (57)

Freiman's love of colour is also enmeshed in her exploration of *ekphratic practice*. Some of her poems are dedicated to artists such as Sidney Nolan, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams. Through ekphratic practice, one art form, here the poem, utilises another art form to trigger memory. In Freiman's poems the viewing of paintings prompts the telling of a story or reflect on another landscape. For those unfamiliar with the paintings it can be difficult to relate to some of the poems that seem to free-associate. Not so in 'This Country'. Her viewing of the painting by Fred Williams on landing in Australia triggers images of landscape probably experienced in South Africa:

paintings on a gallery wall  
showed ochre and sage on desert gravel  
grey as cold clay –  
yes, I'd fingered blood-rimmed leaves  
in days of forgetting, blood-prints on earth,  
on red sand, had forgotten-and now the art  
cut loose my clouded vision,  
black brush marks, charred wood,  
as if it knew my memory, saying  
here death lives in every seed,  
the land endures everything,  
the poetry was always there  
it takes a new eye to see. (60)

The life-generating image of seeds, and insects, is used in other poems such as in *Seeds* that remind one of childhood exploits of planting seeds in saucers on cotton wool.

It was not until I read the final poem in this collection, 'Intuitively', that I made sense of the title and symbolism of the cover of the publication. The painting is

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by Tony Tuckson, and consists of broad white and blue brush strokes, lines, against a dark blue background. 'Intuitively' describes how

everything depends upon  
the slash diagonal, the crossing,  
branching where two parts join –  
a mighty thrust  
white heat momentum  
ultramarine of infinite, (74)

The poems do cross and join the overlapping thematic nuances, experiences and memories in the somewhat free flowing manner of this painting. Some of Freiman's personal poems of life and relationships in Australia carry some beautiful lines, such as 'In Paddington':

in Paddington gothic  
the courtyard was steamy  
February was in lust; (63)

'Slipping on Red Shoes': 'my high - heels clicking on the pages' (61); 'Burning Branches':

He's burning branches down the back  
...he breaks his way into a new life, (55)

However, I found them out of place in a collection so strong in its voice of political outrage and dislocation. Perhaps, though, her point is that the peace, freedom and normalcy of life as an immigrant alleviate the pain of memory.

**Loula S. Rodopoulos**