Staying Alive in Mary Street

Richard Johnstone

Peter Skrzynecki

THE SPARROW GARDEN
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In ‘ST PATRICK’S COLLEGE’, a poem that appears in his 1975 collection Immigrant Chronicle, Peter Skrzynecki recalls the last day of school, when ‘mass was offered up for our departing intentions’, after which the young Peter makes his way home, ‘taking the right-hand turn out of Edgar Street for good’. It is characteristic of Skrzynecki that he should locate such a crucial turning point in his life so precisely, naming the very street that led him to it. It is this impulse to map, to plot the coordinates of a life, that lies behind much of Skrzynecki’s work, forming a grid by which he reads the past and makes sense of it. ‘The streets of Regents Park,’ he says elsewhere, ‘run through my blood / even though I don’t live there anymore’.

‘The Streets of Regents Park’ is included, along with others of his poems, in Skrzynecki’s subtle and moving memoir, The Sparrow Garden. The poems distil past experience, which the prose re-examines with a more forensic eye. ‘Strangely,’ he says, pondering both his life and his poetry, ‘the names of streets have stayed with me, stayed alive’, and their aliveness is captured, too, in that characteristically Australian fondness for streets with first rather than second names. Not just Edgar, which could perhaps be either, but streets called ‘Elaine … Barbara or Helen’.

Skrzynecki grows up on Mary Street. The name adds a personal touch, even a kind of nurturing intimacy, without providing any history or lineage or pedigree. ‘There are many streets in Regents Park with girls’ names,’ he notes, but he does not press the point.

The Sparrow Garden is a chronicle of accidents, beginning with the accident of arrival in a country one did not especially choose. Skrzynecki’s early recollections are of the Displaced Persons Camp in Lebenstedt, as he and his parents wait to be told when and where they will go. They fill in the forms for Australia, but it could just as easily have been somewhere else, ‘a New World, north or south of the Equator’. It is the very newness of this new world, and the fact they are unprepared for what they will find, that makes them and their fellow newcomers susceptible to accidents. Arbitrary events seem to come from nowhere, out of a country they have not learnt to read, a country that may, in the end, be unreadable.

Whole chapters are devoted to these accidents. A farmer is maimed by a circular saw that suddenly assumes a life and a will of its own. A young boy wanders away from the Parkes Migrant Holding Centre (Skrzynecki is good on bureaucracy and the names it invents) into an abandoned sewage plant and drowns. That story is almost repeated several years later when Peter and his friends go searching for eels in the spot they have christened ‘New Africa’, a new world within the new world. Leon slips into the murky water. His friends panic, assuming that Leon has drowned, but suddenly he splutters to the surface. ‘We laugh like idiots … Leon didn’t drown. That’s all that matters.’

Later still, while on school holidays, Skrzynecki accompanies his father to work for the day, laying new pipes with a Water Board road gang. At the centre of his memories of that day is an accident. A workman is trapped by a falling concrete pipe. Once again, there is panic and confusion. Nobody knows quite what to do, until Peter’s father comes to the rescue, lifting the pipe just high enough for the man to slip his leg out from under it. ‘Good on you, Feliks!’ his workmates shout. But Peter’s mother is less impressed when she hears the story that evening. ‘Why don’t you be a hero,’ she says to the excited boy, ‘and eat your dinner?’

For Peter’s mother, the story is not so much one of heroism but of the pragmatic need to respond quickly to the unexpected. Sparrows beset their garden at the house in Mary Street, and his parents devise an elaborate system of wire covers to protect their vegetables, which are grown from seed. The wilier of the sparrows manage to get through the barriers, and for years these brave but unlucky birds are clubbed to death by Feliks, determined to protect his crop. ‘But at some point in our lives in Mary Street, it changed, and although the wire coverings stayed, the clubbing became less frequent, until it stopped altogether.’

The Sparrow Garden is a story of filial devotion, and of the admiration felt by an only child for parents whose lives began somewhere else, who overcame the odds and who adapted as best they could to the new world, accepting over time that protective measures may not always work. Even so, old habits linger on. After his mother’s death, Skrzynecki wanders round the house recalling their lives there. He notices the pink baby blanket his mother liked to place on the top of the washing machine. ‘My mother did that for years,’ he says, ‘as a precautionary measure, to protect the enamel.’ In retelling the lives of his parents, Skrzynecki highlights the unfashionable truth that bravery and caution are not mutually exclusive, but sides of the same coin.

That is not the only aspect of the book that runs counter to fashion. It emerges in the first few pages that Feliks is not Peter’s biological father, yet this is treated as a fact much like any other, significant of course, but not to be given undue weight. The point is that Feliks accepts his role, and takes it on with such commitment that the absence of a genetic link becomes, for both father and son, an irrelevance. It is not so much inheritance and lineage that are important, but the power of the family to create, from the materials at hand, an enduring framework for living.