



The Catastrophe by Ian Wedde. Wellington: VUP (2011). RRP \$34.99. Pb, 191pp. ISBN: 9780864736375. Reviewed by Susan Kornfeld.

In the opening pages of Ian Wedde's latest book, a has-been celebrity food writer abandons his braised rabbit, dashes after a Palestinian woman who just coolly murdered two restaurant patrons, and then flings himself into her getaway car. At this point, readers might expect a fast-paced thriller, but despite the murder and a plethora of other suspense-genre elements, *The Catastrophe* is, instead, an intense examination of what it means to be alive in the present moment. For the protagonist, writer Christopher Hare, it comes down to the question "When would Christopher wake up? Or who would wake him?"

Underlying the existentialist themes of the book are the Israeli expulsions of Palestinians in 1948, *al Nakba* – literally "the Catastrophe." The resulting displacement, corruption, and such subsequent traumas as the Shabilla and Sabra massacres of 1982 directly and indirectly drive both plot and character. Wedde lived in Jordan in 1969-70 and his experiences there enrich the Palestinian passages. The book, itself, is dedicated to the late Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet about whom Wedde wrote an impassioned article in *Ka mate ka ora* some months after the poet's death.

There are two other point-of-view characters in the book and one of them, the assassin and paediatrician, Hawwa Hashbon, recalls Darwish telling her "that there were two exiles, one from the place and another from the memory of it, and his poems were always losing their way between the two; that was their meaning." This sense of between-ness permeates the book: characters are "trapped between a false memory and an impossible dream," stalled "somewhere between sensation and dreaming," and between "nostalgia for the past and some weird hope for the future." Christopher is at a tipping point and must "choose to decide, or choose to let fate decide." The difference between the two options, Wedde implies throughout the book, is a matter of ethics. To abrogate choice is to avoid responsibility and obviate freedom.

The third point-of-view character is Mary Pepper, initially Christopher's photographer and dinner companion (as Thé Glacé, Ice Tea) then his wife, then his ex-wife. As she flashes through memories and feelings in response to a cryptic message from someone who may or may not be Christopher, she reflects on her difficulties in being "just *here, now*." Wedde uses several vivid images that come to represent his characters and their epiphanies, and one of them for Pepper is a photograph she took of a rich Jordanian dish. Hands reach hungrily towards it, "men's hands, with expensive gold wristwatches." But of course she is not in the picture, "only a ghost of her." The image of the missing photographer, the effaced and never-quite-real one, will be familiar to readers of Wedde's haunting book of poetry, *Commonplace Odes*. In those poems it is the poet's father who is "missing."

Other *leitmotifs* weave through and help unify the characters' overlapping, looping narratives. The result is a visual, prismatic, and often dreamy quality that provides ironic tension with the novel's drama. For example, as Christopher begins to remember "his Māori uncles and cousins with Italian names up there on the coast in the 'Bay of Plenty,'" the image that stays with him is that of a "rooster box" his grandmother Nana Gobbo would put over their noisy rooster at night to quiet it down. This rooster box becomes a symbol of Christopher's sense of calm as well as his passivity. "Really, all he wanted was to be here, in this dull, smelly room, inside the rooster-box of the present, waiting for the moment when someone would lift the cover off to let the sunshine in."

The slow, looping pace and use of repetition is reminiscent of Wedde's 2008 dystopian novel, *Chinese Opera*. But where that book at times churns sluggishly, Wedde uses the technique to great effect in *The Catastrophe*. The novel is 191 pages slim but seems much longer in terms of savour. In addition to Christopher Hare's jump into an assassin's car, the wrenching events in Hawwa Hashbon's life and Mary Pepper's search for self, readers are given a culinary romp in Paris, Nice, Genoa, and Amman. Each character is well drawn, but Hawwa Hashbon nearly steals the book. Wedde was very recently awarded Poet Laureate of New Zealand and is working on a sequence of poems. As a novelist he is in full stride.