



Shift by Rhian
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Rhian Gallagher's first collection of poems, *Salt Water Creek*, was shortlisted for the Forword Poetry Prize for Best First Collection. Gallagher left for England in 1987 and returned to New Zealand in 2005. Her latest collection, *Shift*, follows a journey of attachment, leaving, anxiety and dislocation. The book is divided into three sections: Shift, Butterfly and Shore.

Throughout the poems Gallagher explores what it means to live in the shadow of one's birthplace. Reading the first poem "Under the Pines" I am reminded of Gallagher's decision to leave New Zealand and "To walk off the edge of the green world / and into their dust bowl, / that crypt-like half-shadowed temperature . . ." Gallagher examines this disjunction and dislocation in the fine poem "The Moss of Bunhill Fields":

England, her moisture containments,
quaggy, earth sponge – the old retaining walls
with damp embossed, a towelling green. The moss

anchored over the burial floor
with a slowness that resembles no movement at all,
the tiny threads squeezing against each other.

Predominantly emotional rather than intellectual, the poems are characterized by a mood, not of attachment, but of restraint. Several of the poems in the first part of the collection centre on the death of the poet's sister: "My Sister's Country," for example, focuses on her sister's birth and death:

Your first cry broke,
barely touching earth
you turned back through the veil
and were gone.

No other girl but you
out before me, almost
weightless, you would not have burdened
an angel's wings.

These are considered poems, experience magnified by hindsight.

Change, renewal and scale are the major preoccupations in these poems. Gallagher probes the complex relationship with home and leaving to live in another country. She says for example, in the first part of the three-part poem "Shared Ownership Flat":

My neighbours want to go home
to the Caribbean and to Russia.
These are the things we speak about
on the steps outside when something else
has happened – another night, scored
low across the rooftops, one helicopter after
another.

And discovers in the title poem "Shift" how she misses her friends:

Friends, I miss you all already.
This night brimmed with your hopes,
the South Island couldn't be more far,

It is in lines like these where she is most skillful, in the latter poem, the contrast between the clouds of London and thoughts of going home make such a moment appealing.

There is obvious love for another person evinced in the section Butterfly. The title poem, for instance, says: "We entered a year of slow burn / I stole a line from her eyes / She wrote by hand return." In "First Night" she writes: "We were high and far away / in a hotel room where / nothing would remember us / or be returned to." Whereas in "Gaze" she remembers the joy of being intimate with another person: "Morning carries into the room / sounds of you / wrapped in the shower . . ." For the most part, the poems in the second section are suffused with her humour – "I could hear Donne's poem replay in my head" ("Lunch Hour"); "Those nights New York felt evangelical" ("Becoming") and "The barge, slow as a royal, loaded with scrap" ("Red Hook"). The conversational tone of the poems is deceptive, however. They are so packed with images that the reader is pulled up short by a dense line, often the last, as in the final verse of "Under Cover":

Lapping the freeze . . .
your gentle step
breaks between single beds
and we're almost invisible,
with our hush of unison,
making love like the drowned.

In the final section Shore, the long title poem is divided into two sections. Here the poet returns to New Zealand. Her descriptions of the South

Island are infused with its beauty, majesty and awe-inspiring views, as we see in the poem “Good Day”:

The wide southern sky from Bay Hill
and the Pacific in a clinch
that makes one giant horizon.

There is nothing in these poems that jars. Technically they are well-constructed and carried by assured rhythms. Gallagher’s sense of beauty and ear for fine phrases ensures there’s something to delight every reader. The scenes are apprehended with acuity, surprise and felicitous images: “paddocks give up their ghosts” (“The Nor’wester”) and “It’s always been a wired country” (“Paddocks”).

These are sharp, refractory poems. There is much to be discovered here in poems that demonstrate a high level of refinement and a depth of form and content. The language is simple (yet no less lyrical), and this enhances the intense imagery of the texts themselves.