



The Desolation Angel
by Tim Wilson.
Wellington: VUP
(2011). RRP: NZ\$35.
Pb, 189pp. ISBN:
9780864736482.
Reviewed by Susan
Kornfeld.

Jack Kerouac wrote *Desolation Angels* just four years before alcohol and hard living killed him. He was 47. The first

half of that book recounts Kerouac's summer stint as fire lookout on Desolation Peak in Washington's Cascade Mountains. His solitary vigil, Kerouac wrote, "finds me finding at the bottom of myself abysmal nothingness worse than that no illusion even – my mind's in rags." Characters from his life and best-known work, *On The Road*, criss-cross the novel. In Kerouac's eyes, they are his "angels in desolation." The sense of desolation, of "lostness" in the world, permeate the novel but never so much as when Kerouac has nothing to do but confront himself and the "abysmal nothingness."

That sense of lostness threads through **Tim Wilson's** haunting and complex book of stories, *The Desolation Angel*. Here, too, characters search for connection but ultimately must confront the void in their souls. Some see it about to swallow them and lash out. Others cling to some crumbling edifice of normalcy. One philandering husband (there are several) tells his girlfriend about a recurring nightmare in which he is pursued by a giant mouse: "That mouse," Yang said, "it's a symbol. It means emptiness." Another protagonist watching his life and friendships slip into a dreary banality laments that "a veil covered the isolation that I sometimes felt as a kid. Despite my vigilance, the magician's hankie is rising; his hand is empty." In "The Dress Your Daddy Is Wearing" Tremain flounders in a complex brew of grief, alienation, and the slow poison of self-aware mediocrity. He suffers from a "hollowing out" that is ultimately revealed to be a hunger for life. After a humiliating burst of violence in a boxing match with a lesbian co-worker, he has an epiphany: "he had felt things. [...] His chest wanted to explode with animal gladness. I'm alive, he thought."

Through such small but often profound, often ironic epiphanies of self-knowledge, Wilson's characters achieve some measure of redemption. In the title

story the damaged protagonist is struggling to make something of his life and his struggling marriage with his "trophy" wife when the Desolation Angel comes to him. "I will show you your true self," he repeated. [...] "Don't give out on me." At the end, the protagonist reaches into his pocket and brings up "a handful of ashes. I had not loved my life." Caught between drab entrapments of the mundane and the compulsions of longing and hurt, it's no wonder that he and other characters wander an inner landscape of desolation.

The psychological complexity, the focus on surface description, and the flattened urban and suburban settings recall Carver. Indeed, one of the stories, "What Would Ray Do," is a clear homage. It depicts Vaughan's struggles with his partner Angelina that come to a head in a secondary disagreement with a friend about how much to pay a teenager for a vacuum cleaner. As in many of the stories, Wilson builds tension with an almost disturbing detachment that seems to slip effortlessly in and out of the comedic. The tone is ironic, understated; the dramatic question tantalisingly suspended: "I suppose," Vaughan muses as he considers his options regarding a friend, "this is the point where I change. Or learn something. Or don't."

Wilson's voice is spot on throughout the stories, whether the tale involves a woman scorned and armed with lighter fluid ("I'm a loner, I'm a girl of my times. I'm a survivor. What do you think, baby?"), the devastation and ultimate ambiguous redemption of a high-tech manager who is also a bed wetter, the fortunes of a collector for the United Missionary Congress with a developing fondness for porn, or the bittersweet musings of an older man with a wife lost in dementia. Hardly a word, or even the occasional aphorism ("Experience is a map; it helps to have the bloody thing running the same way as the street you're on."), seems out of place. He weaves the back story into the present until they congeal into some final act with a sometimes dark but always unerring logic.

Perhaps because the protagonists are so richly developed, the stories, no matter how bleak, unfold with compassion. The unhealed wound of the man who didn't love life, for example, reflects the damage caused when his mother betrayed him as a child. As an added bonus, Wilson has an easy proclivity for remarkable and surprising turns of phrase and imagery (some of them very funny) that reflect the underlying themes. In one story where the various characters are drifting through life, the "striped plastic straw" in one of their drinks "floats like a life preserver." At the end of "Kikuyu," the story with the

wife lost to Alzheimer's, the protagonist is mowing the neighbouring park when the machine breaks down. Things are not as they seem in the story, just as the grassy, inviting park covers a former landfill. The narrator hears the rustle of the grass and then "kneeling down seemed like a good idea." He begins to listen – and metaphorically to hear the echoes of his life, his marriage, and his unspeaking wife.

"Sad understanding," Kerouac wrote in *Desolation Angels*, "is what compassion means." This is the

message throughout Wilson's book and it refers to self-knowledge and compassion as well as understanding and caring for others. The characters, isolated and alienated for a variety of reasons, can be both tender and appalling. But Wilson never lets us forget that lives are full of stories beyond our control. The spider-silk thread of connection might be cast many times before it takes hold. "Take comfort in your friends," one narrator advises, "for they make and unmake you."