



Home, Away, Elsewhere
by Vaughan
Rapatahana. Hong
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Vaughan
Rapatahana is a
New Zealander who

has lived in a variety of countries and now lives and works in Hong Kong. *Home, Away, Elsewhere* is a poetry collection in three parts.

The poems in the collection vary in length and line length. Predominantly, the reader is offered fragments, terse poems capturing an impression, a thought, and an experience, something seen or heard. Often enigmatic and richly suggestive, these short poems are slices of the imagination. They are never boring, but modest in their claims on the reader. They are also highly controlled. The poems are unrhymed, the verse is free, but they are rhythmically and phonologically neatly shaped pieces that sing as well as record. The moment is transformed by the poet's attention, and the language vibrates with its possibilities. The immediacy of the poems becomes memorable because they are transmitted through song.

In section one, "Home", the poems are about events, situations, descriptions and attitudes about Hong Kong. Rapatahana is a skilled craftsman, as well as a scribe of the quotidian. These poems are often intensely personal, often funny, and some not without a political reference or two from time to time, or a reference to people he sees on the street ("bent man, kowloon" and "just another chinese girl" are examples). The poems are fascinating, ask questions, and strike resonances in the reader's head. For example, this is from the first poem "Mongkok Lane":

marquee
words –

sharded
episodes

in someone else's
life
sentence –

lie

piece meal

crumbs

Section two "Away" contains poems about Aotearoa-New Zealand, in particular from a Maori perspective, and the poems are also about other places Rapatahana has lived in or visited. The poems make the reader work: they are syntactically odd, unhelpfully unpunctuated, opaque in denotation and connotation, and – expressing as they do, many of the places Rapatahana has been to or stayed in – alluding to foreign climes. They are nonetheless or perhaps therefore, intriguing and exciting to read. And they too, have their song. The difficulties of Rapatahana's verses are apparent. This excerpt is from "Oman sands, 2006":

these dromedaries

aloof,

blend
as
their desert
into
m o n o t o n o u s
dunescape,
bereft
of choice.

the few
'trees'
poseurs
aghast
as
the straight-snake highway
quivers ever on

headless

The poems are not intended to be easy. Limited punctuation, lines spilling down the page, the use of typography and format are grist to the mill. But frustration of ease is not necessarily bad. These are poems that make you think, wonder, and work hard and that in itself cannot be bad. And perhaps one is prepared to work at these texts because the language is memorable. For instance, in "Aotearoa blues, baby", Rapatahana uses italics, bold type and Maori language to shape and express various levels in the poem: this roots the text in a sensual physical world of sound and rhythm.



another
of
the
ilk

= my own cousin, on the *pakeha* side =

pukes
out

the familiar
dead
homily:

'Maori are lazy, they don't want to work'

(where?)

'and end up in jail anyway'

(you wonder

why? *e mohio ana ahau!*)

The third section, "Elsewhere", runs through emotions: relationships, family, friends, death and reflections – the poems here not linked to any physical locations. Rapatahana employs technique and form with great freedom in the poems. Always there is a remarkable linguistic and technical recourse at the service of a poet who has something to say, and can only, of course, say it through whatever technical resources he deploys.

The poem called "I love you more" consists of lines flowing down over two pages, of which I quote the first fourteen lines:

I love
you
more
than
all
those
other contenders,
flashing
their sprightly teeth over
lightly-licked lips,
tongues
swishing through
in sexual
derisions.

One meets with everyday images here of femininity and female allure but there is an air about the articulation which makes the reader feel uncomfortable. The lines are swept along in the

surge and sonority of an incantatory song. The poem describes things as they are, with its touches of whimsy, touches of irony.

Rapatahana's poetry is delightful because of the extraordinary way in which, poem after poem, he shows us the reality of emotion and asks us to share it. The poem, "corrupted", for example, strings together a variety of words, phrases and fragmentary statements:

I could have loved you MORE
than
any man
can,

but

for this
Boschean
frame
around us.

These lines, so assembled, compose a poem about a lover that could have been loved more had it not been for other people. The poem is both satirical and kind-hearted.

The poet relishes the confusing richness that surrounds his life and his compelling stories about friends, family and others. Here, for instance, is a passage from "mad cousin in Winter":

you wood-chopped
ecc en tri c al ly:
windmill arms
&
s p l i n t e r spasms
abrogating
the air

This book is not for the faint-hearted. Language fascinates Rapatahana. The letters, the syllables, the sounds that make up a word, the patterns of speech and the games that can be played with meaning engage him in more than one sense of the word. But the collection will offer pleasure to many readers. Thematically varied – not just about the randomness of life's events – the poems are the vision of a global poet. The technical resource, the song, will stay with the reader long after the reading has taken place.