



***Life & Customs* by Bernadette Hall. Wellington: VUP (2013). Pb, 88pp. RRP: \$25. ISBN: 9780864739001. Reviewed by Sue Wootton.**

Alice fell down the rabbit hole to get to Wonderland. A thicket of thorns grew up around Sleeping Beauty's castle. In

Bernadette Hall's latest

collection, *Life and Customs*, we go "through the hedge and way back then" to reach "Tulliver's maze". Muscular, alert, independent, Hall pushes herself "way out into the Central Otago sun". Ah, what an awakening.

In George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Mr Tulliver, mystified by "the maze of this puzzling world", grasps "any clue with great readiness and tenacity". In *Life & Customs*, Hall lays hold of the clues with readiness, tenacity, high intelligence, wit and grace. Literary, cultural, theological and historical allusions are woven into the fabric of the collection, sometimes like invisible mending, sometimes in high relief. The arrangement of the work is meticulous in the micro (word, phrase, line, poem) and the macro (the temporal flow of the collection as a whole).

At times the white space on which the black text makes its marks is Silence, the Void. At times, it is a background hum of centuries of language, life and customs. These poems are measured, but never over-measured into immobility. Lines swing in space: Hall knows the weight of every word, how to set it moving with the lightest touch, how to give it just the room it needs to live out its ideal momentum. Her work can be stately or vivacious, faery-mystical or gumboot-real. This is poetry steeped and strengthened by tradition, yet subtle, flexible and creative. Through the hedge you go, out into warmth, light and growth, into poems whose musicality is informed by the cadences of the King James bible, the language of Catholicism, the language of the farm, the caesura structure of Anglo Saxon poetry, the ballad, the sonnet, the fairy tale, the rhyme and "the breath beyond breathing" ("matiatia").

No word is dross in this collection. Punctuation is used sparingly and strongly. The result is a quality of quiet powerfulness, summed up in lines from "The barn owl":

who wouldn't be amazed
by the stillness the silence
of the barn owl
wrapped up like that
in containment.

The first commas and full stops appear in the third poem, "The grinder", where a child observes meat being minced for Shepherd's pie, and, with hesitancy, then shock, makes a connection with the family's orphaned and bottle-fed "little crimped lamb".

Life & Customs renders Time as more spatial than lineal. Present and past are as firelight and shadow, flickering together in the same hearth. "The grinder" carries echoes of Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'. In the titular poem, "Life & Customs", a paddock has been recently machine-harvested and baled. But "as usual" the weather-gods need appeasing, and so we stand in the paddock "praying for rain", and mulling over our near neighbour's water catchment and drainage arrangements, and gossiping about his love life. It just happens that the near neighbour in this case is ancient Rome's Pliny the Younger. Portals like this open throughout *Life & Customs*. "[O]nce again," comments Hall, in the delightful poem "Door", "I found myself to be in one place and in another at the same time".

Imbued as it is with Hall's deep knowledge of classical European history, *Life & Customs* is equally imbued with respect for cultures with which she is less familiar. When she kicks fallen seed pods in Singapore: her friend shouts "'Bernie, you must never kick things in Singapore / you don't know who lives there'" ("Kampang Bedoc"). Quite so, we hear the poet thinking: something lives in everything, if we pay enough attention.

So it is throughout *Life & Customs*: in the beautiful fable "Sul: a ballet that awaits performance", thaw emerges for a girl whose "heart had filled with blue ice". And despite hedges and thorns, there are flowers "that press in on you within the silence of the thicket"; despite "so many rivers to cross" ("Hurunui") there is "Her gift, the little boat" in which to tackle the crossing. In "Constanza", the "little thistle" begins to lose its power: it's "that hope thing again". Near the end, thorns are prickly but beloved: "little red thorns that prick up their ears on the rose stems" ("The book").

Life & Customs abounds with Hall's characteristic wit and humour, her intelligence, her curiosity, her mastery of perspective, and, perhaps most of all, her capacity for joy. In the poem "Door", two words are highlighted in capital letters. GLEEFULLY and DELIGHT. Follow Bernadette Hall through the hedge. You'll be glad you did.