



***There's a Medical Name for This* by Kerrin P. Sharpe. Wellington: VUP (2014). RRP: \$25. Pb, 65pp. ISBN: 9780864739292. Reviewed by Janet Newman.**

If the purpose of poetry is to open the world through personal stories and individual insight then **Kerrin P. Sharpe's**

collection, *There's a Medical Name for This*, goes a long way towards achieving it.<sup>1</sup> In fifty-four short poems, Sharpe ranges across subjects, times and geographies as varied as the Christchurch earthquake, the holocaust, the sinking of the Titanic and a 2013 Belgium euthanasia case. There are also personal memories of a father and a miscarriage. The latter is the subject of the title poem – a moving reflection situated at Hanmer Springs, as is the facing page's 'queen mary hospital hanmer.' Like these two, some poems about similar themes appear consecutively, but the collection is more a dance between pilgrims, earthquakes, and Hemingway and crane drivers – and this just in the first five pages.

What might then seem like fragmentation is, in fact, connected by Sharpe's gentle yet strong voice that achieves a floating quality through the use of non-specifically referenced pronouns for the poem's protagonists. This detached tone is compounded by a lack of punctuation and scant capitalization, which has a moderating effect on place names and on people's names, which are rarely used.

Sharpe's images are *sharp* and frequently surprising in their compactness. There is often a killer blow at the end of a poem that deflates or unsettles images of otherwise moderate impact. For example, the final lines of "karaka bay 1905": 'a blue penguin, korora/ is blown under the hut', tells all we need to know about the weather conditions.

Similarly, "she gets these letters", builds gently towards its final image as the past intrudes into the present and the protagonist finds she is at the place where her father was shot. Here are the final three stanzas:

this is the plantation  
her father was taken to  
perhaps this is the pine  
he walked towards

as if he spent  
his mornings collecting  
alpine specimens

and the snow he fell into  
pages of white birds

Here, as in many other poems, Sharpe provides clues as to situation and setting. In this poem "secret army" and "a map of Poland" locate it as a reflection on WWII.

This is a topic Sharpe deals with deftly from many angles. In "my father's twin", an appreciation of the effects of war are examined through images of her father at an island he loved where he 'skimmed stones' (5), 'put / the billy on' (8-9) while haunted all the time. As the final stanzas reveal:

on the island there  
were soldiers lying

everywhere and rows  
of white crosses these

photographs were numbered  
my father couldn't look at them

Another aspect of WWII, which Sharpe writes about, is the holocaust – difficult terrain she negotiates through her device of using pronouns with non-specific referents which provide a balance between personal connection and universal significance. In "when the train stole us", 'our' references a particular though unspecified family, and also gives voice to all holocaust victims. Here are the final three stanzas:

our suitcases grew the teeth  
of an ss bank account  
our hair became rope

even our shoes were forced  
to dig mass graves  
before they were shot

the stars folded our jackets  
after we fell  
the sound was yellow



This is Kerrin Sharpe's second collection. Many of the poems have been published in journals in New Zealand and in the UK. "the alchemy of snow" was published in the International Institute of Modern Letters' *Best New Zealand Poems 2012*. In the online anthology, Sharpe writes: 'I felt I had had a chemical reaction myself to snow and I just couldn't get her off my mind.' Sharpe's personification of snow reveals an idiosyncratic attitude that lends her poems a surreal quality as they reflect on a variety of times, places, and moments of personal and historical significance.

1 Sharpe graduated from the Victoria University Original Composition programme taught by Bill Manhire in 1976. She is a poet and creative writing teacher in Christchurch.

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