



**Parallel** by  
**Jillian Sullivan.**  
**Wellington: Steele**  
**Roberts Aotearoa**  
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**Reviewed by Mary**  
**Cresswell.**

This is **Jillian Sullivan's** first full-length poetry collection.<sup>1</sup> The contents build on a sequence which was awarded the

2011 Kathleen Grattan Prize. The poems are pastoral in feeling, growing very much out of the author's physical surroundings, and they trace patterns among three generations of women.

In the first of the book's three sections, "Door to door" begins:

I walk down to the beach and the sea is coming in  
so still, yet underneath it the peristalsis of the tide,  
a rolling in that ends in a ripple so fine  
the sea dissolves in sand

and continues step by step as the poet travels from sea through forest to mountain to meet her lover:

From the car to the first creek – 404 steps.  
The open country burns with light. Pith, marrow,  
backbone,  
everything exposed; the manuka slopes and  
boulders,  
rocks and yellow grass.

From the creed to the waterfall – 1301 steps.  
Last night it rained in the hills. I hold my face to  
the rock.

Resurgent flow. The water spurts over.  
From the waterfall up to the plateau – 571 steps.

...

I climb over, around, the great beech remnants,  
the silvered bones of trees.

204 more steps to your door  
the hut facing out to my sea.

In this first section the patterns are implicit: the ripples and motion of the tide, the repetition of phrases, the carefully counted steps climbing through a cross-section of New Zealand scenery.

The second part centres on pregnancy – motherhood – and knitting, patterns being brought to the surface, checked, inspected, and passed on down the line.

The singlet isn't finished and yet  
it's time to go, ...  
do the last vacuuming  
so you don't have to do it  
and sit, hopelessly knitting, closer  
to the end of the pattern.

And I'm showing you this is how you cast off  
("Distances")

Big-bellied and mountainous in their splendour,  
the women "with the big group" gather and knit,  
gather and talk of quilts and nighties, gather for the  
baby shower. But at the end of the day,

An old fighter pilot told me of the last  
moments before his plane exploded.  
The young, parachuted men, their first mission,  
silk threads all that tethered them to sky

and how like that it is;  
we journey into the night of unknown territory,  
the lane below named  
but not our landing.

("Unknown territory")

The final part of the book unrolls a variety of loss. There is the loss of parents. There is the loss of closeness. There is the loss of a child:

She's seventeen.  
We take our horses up the forest track  
past the fringed lake. On the long upward stretch  
she calls,  
Mum, shut your eyes!...  
I open my eyes to see her  
back straight, arms out wide  
in reckless gallop.  
I close my eyes.  
I try to let go.

("This is the journey")

There is the loss of a sense of direction and a loss of certainty, lightened with hope and an awareness of life. There is the loss of innocence:

... I walk through all the trees

we planted and come across two beech-lings,  
their leaves above the grass,

seedlings we carried down from those great  
trees that cupped the light. I don't look at how they  
shine,

or for any other symbol. I'm simply glad,  
as I pass by, to see that they survive.

("Beech trees")



The collection, *Parallel*, is a welcome contribution to a developing pastoral tradition which shows the poet not only as a thinker, but also as an active member of society – a woman, a lover, a mother and grandmother – not an isolated seer standing before an alpine sunset, wondering where it all went. In short, it's a fine book.

- 1 Sullivan writes novels and short stories, fiction and non-fiction for children and adults. She lives in Central Otago, in the Ida Valley, writes, runs workshops, and describes herself as “a grandmother and builder.” See more at: [www.jilliansullivan.co.nz](http://www.jilliansullivan.co.nz)
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