



***The Red Queen* by Gemma Bowker-Wright. Wellington: VUP (2014). RRP: \$30. Pb, 220pp. ISBN: 9780864739209. Reviewed by Laura Borrowdale.**

**Gemma Bowker-Wright's *The Red Queen*** may be her first book, but it is written with the craft of someone far more experienced. The

collection (taking its name from the opening story) was the winner of the Sunday Star Times Short Story Awards in 2010.

The stories are connected both in the writing and the selected Kiwi locations. The latter are various, but the author engages us with places as distinct as Wellington and the Kapiti Coast through a deliberate assumption of familiarity. Victoria University and its environs are particularly palpable in the stories and demonstrate Bowker-Wright's assured skills of observation and psychological reflection.

Landscape is recurrently employed to highlight and reflect characters' states of mind. Environs often appear bleak with skies more grey than blue and the characters appear resigned and defeated the situations they find themselves in. Characters repeatedly appear to be suspended, or arrested in time and in their relationships. They dream of drowning or being paralysed in ice. Their time slows down or stops, holding them still in the moment of the story. *The Red Queen* of the title story says, 'It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.' Yet other characters appear unsure whether they want to remain stationary or not. In the penultimate story, 'Sanctuary', we read that 'the road is still moving, continuously, and by not staying with it they are losing ground.' Although characters acknowledge this feeling of paralysis, they remain passive, stalled by the memories that haunt them and yielding to the action of the story. In 'Cowboy', Matt returns repeatedly to the memories of a father who has disappointed him at each turn. The story, 'Katherine', reveals the contrast between David's memory of his wife as a young woman, and her present disposition as she descends into Alzheimers. In each story the writing is lean and clean with much emotional impact stored in the deft

details and dialogue where it gains weight through restraint. Consider the first time we become aware of Katherine's state of mind:

'Okay,' says David, rubbing his forehead with his index finger. His leather briefcase is waiting at his feet.

'It's September, isn't it?' says Katherine.

'Yes,' says David, 'it is.'

She is silent for a while. Then she turns around on the spot, as if unwinding herself.

It is in intimately observed moments such as this that we see Bowker-Wright's confident, pared-back craft. Here is collection of short stories by a writer who knows how little is needed.