

MELINDA COOPER

Gretchen Shirm, *Where the Light Falls*

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Art is not about art. Art is about life.

– Louise Bourgeois (epigraph to *Where the Light Falls*)

At the heart of Gretchen Shirm's novel *Where the Light Falls* is a meditation on silence, and art as of a means of speaking. The novel's protagonist, Andrew Spruce, is an art photographer who sees "honesty in broken things" (298), choosing subjects that are damaged in some way: a fractured tea cup that has been glued back together, a grown man with a full set of baby teeth, a girl with a paralysed face. Through framing and capturing a broken subject, Andrew is able to transform it—a metaphor for integrating traumatic experiences into reality. Shirm writes, "A photograph could do this: it could make strangeness seem normal and transform it into a thing of beauty" (205). In this novel, the act of representing is ultimately a means of healing.

Shirm's reflections on artistic representation can be read in a metatextual light. Like Andrew's work, and the photographs of Diane Arbus that he admires, Shirm is interested in damaged subjects, in "oddness in the ordinary" (202). The short stories in her first book, *Having Cried Wolf* (2010), all hint at "something hard under the surface" of human relationships ("Unmarked", 48), and, while the plots are full of physical and emotional trauma—suicide, car accidents, drowning - only a few of the characters seem able to find a way to speak. *Where the Light Falls* is Shirm's first long form novel, completed as part of a Doctorate of Creative Arts at Western Sydney University under the supervision of the writer and academic, Gail Jones, and it too is interested in the damage we inflict upon each other.

One the main forms of damage explored in *Where the Light Falls* is that caused by parents to their children. In a passage of ekphrasis, Andrew recalls seeing Goya's painting *Saturn Devouring his Son* (1819-1823) in Madrid:

The whites of the old man's eyes, the fear and madness he felt at the prospect of being usurped by his own child; between his hands an adult's body, the size of a baby, the old man clutching its waist with both hands like a lover. He [Andrew] couldn't help but think that what Saturn was doing in consuming his son was trying to silence him, and maybe all parents had this instinct in relation to their own children. Maybe all parents fear what their children might have to say to them. (190)

It's a striking description and one that exhibits Shirm's willingness to explore darker psychological themes, such as the injuries of parental suppression. Most of the characters in *Where the Light Falls* are tightly bound by family silences. For Andrew, this is caused by his mother's inability to speak openly about his father's death. Her grief becomes "a thin white membrane around them, sticky and wet as a caul" (39). As a consequence Andrew is a man who, in adulthood, finds silence easier, and replicates his mother's avoidant behavior in his relationships with others.

Shirm creates a parallel between Andrew's character and that of Kirsten, his former girlfriend. It is Kirsten's disappearance and suspected drowning that provides the impetus for the narrative, prompting Andrew to leave his current home in Berlin, and return to his childhood city of Sydney, where he attempts to trace the reasons for Kirsten's silences. Not unlike Andrew, Kirsten is "a woman who was always on the verge of speaking", who was "fighting something inside her, perhaps an urge to let everything out" (32, 39).

Photography is ultimately the medium through which Andrew is able to find a voice and break the impasse of silence. This is the key difference between Kirsten and Andrew: while both struggle with their instincts towards silence, Andrew finds "a way to speak" through his art (276) and his photographs are the "expression of his deep need to be heard" (276). In contrast, Kirsten, although gifted at drawing, only replicates other people's artwork, failing to find her own subjects—a metaphor for her inability to break the pattern of trauma.

I found the novel's ideas about art and trauma arresting. They stayed with me long after I had left Andrew's story behind, and made me more willing to forgive the novel's other imperfections. There is a heavy handedness at times, a tendency to provide too much exposition or explanation. Andrew can also be a frustrating character to follow. Throughout most of the narrative he remains arrested by the past, and this is played out in a series of stilted conversations and delayed decisions that drag at the narrative pace. However, the descriptions of Andrew at work as a photographer are some of the best of the novel, and here Shirm exhibits a lighter touch, leaving more up to the reader, and presenting Andrew as a more active and interesting character.

While he is in Sydney, Andrew finds the main subject for his upcoming exhibition: Phoebe, a girl whose face is damaged on one side. Phoebe's facial paralysis is the result of a childhood accident caused by being thrown from the back of her father's ute—another injury inadvertently inflicted by a parent on a child. Phoebe has "a smile that could never look completely happy", that would "always suggest some inner grief" (137). She represents in physical form the "inner grief" that Shirm suggests is universal: "everybody felt this way, this dislocation, though some people were better at pretending they didn't" (202). If Andrew's photographs are able to offer a means of healing by witnessing to this inner sense of dislocation, then so too does Shirm's writing. She takes as her subjects a series of damaged characters, directing the lens at the injuries we cause each other but also at the opportunities for healing, ultimately finding "honesty in broken things".

