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Jennifer Mills, *Dyschronia*
Picador, 2018, 354 pp, pb
\$29.99

*A tail-swallowing, symmetrical place, where anything can be hallucination: a review of Dyschronia
by Jennifer Mills*

Reading this book transported me to the days when I read fiction before studying it, under tables at school, in the library, on the porch smoking cigarettes while my parents were sleeping, wondering how surreal yet possible all these fictional worlds seemed. I thought about this moment in my life while reading *Dyschronia* (2018) simply because devoting one's life to learning how to write inevitably jeopardises the sense of mystery that one initially found alluring.

The story begins when an Australian coastal town wakes to discover that the sea has vanished overnight. There are bodies, 'thousands of them . . . all sizes, lying like pieces of raw chicken on the sand and weeds.' Countless sea animals have perished on the desert floor, a stench the sea is supposed to conceal rises up, the townspeople of Clapstone clamber to where the ocean used to be in a classic see-it-to-believe-it moment.

In this tragic introduction to the novel, in which we are invited to imagine the reality of an environmental catastrophe, I am reminded of reading Marquez's short story *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* underneath the table during Mr Thiel's science class, finding it far more exhilarating to read the five or six pages of that story. When I finished it I realised what Marquez wanted me to: if we ever find an angel washed on the shore we are more likely to imprison than revere it: it might be ugly, unbeautiful, we could very well profit from this fallen angel by selling tickets and popcorn to those curious many who, feeling inconsolably human, want nothing more than to gawk at it. In other words, when (if) something magical ever happens, there is no guarantee we would know what the hell to do. These sensibilities, these classic *what if?* scenarios, frequently appear in

Magic Realism, and are less about teaching moral lessons (like their fairytale sisters) and more about showing us the ugly side of human behaviour.

You won't find a definition for 'dyschronia' in your trusty Macquarie Dictionary or on Google, even though Sam encounters an obscure medical report documenting it as a real illness. All of a sudden she is sure she suffers from it, and we, like her, are invited from then on to perceive her future gazing through that lens. The medical report says that dyschronia is a perceptual and temporal dissociation; 'pain and the perception of time have created a dissociative loop, a splitting: migraine as a self-fulfilling prophecy.' But it is not so much that Sam perceives time simultaneously and schizophrenically like *Slaughterhouse-5's* Billy Pilgrim, but rather she is an oracle, a soothsayer bringing news to her small coastal town of a disappearing sea and a decline to ruin once its gone. The words of the report mean little to young Sam when she first reads them, although they haunt her from that day onward as a kind of irrefutable truth, a realisation shared with no one else.

I know what you're beginning to think so let me forthrightly address the fact that considering *Dyschronia* 'cli-fi' or any other abbreviation of speculative fiction is not incorrect, but it definitely misses the nuance of Mills' environmental paranoia. Because of how Mills refrains from any Naomi Klein-esque moralising of reckless human conquer of the natural world being the bullet that we eat, the slow-acting cyanide the Earth chewed long ago, this book is better framed by seeing its portrayal of climate change as experimenting for its artistic and aesthetic possibilities. In other words, she is not calling humanity global cancer, nor blaming us for anything.

When Sam is a young girl, her single mother Ira devotes tireless energy to medical appointments in the hope that someone can explain her daughter's freakishly accurate predictions of the future that happen after she experiences a migraine. Or as a seven-and-a-half-year-old Sam puts it, 'Time goes funny for me.' These migraines catalyse her future gazing, which begin as a blackout from her drifts in a kind of astral projection into the future. As she matures, her prophecies grow darker: she sees a nightmarish vision of six workers jumping to their death from the exact same spot on the seaside plant; a flood obliterating the town; and an abomination that appears to be part-machine, part-deep-sea monstrosity.

The ultimate vision is 'The Big Thing', an amorphous 'water dinosaur' that Mills avoids defining. It is an otherworldly and squid-like arbiter that sits among the decaying cadavers of the dead ocean. As the story progresses we glimpse its nature. A corporation has built it with dreams of generating new sustainable power by harnessing oceanic energy. But of course, the plan goes horribly wrong and what is left is an ammonite creature made of plaster and plastic, anatomy and artifice.

In alternating chapters, the dual engines that power this story are narratives that are happening in two different times, however they quite frequently borrow characters from one another, and Sam's visions eventually render the distinction of 'then' and 'now' pretty cursory. Part of me thinks Mills wants to discourage reading her book through a lens such as I have just suggested, so let's say instead that the novel's timeline is best thought of in the same way that the characters see their world: 'after the sea' is the fate of Clapstone immediately after the sea's disappearance; while the story of Sam's youth begins earlier. The former narrative follows the lives of the residents who remain in the town and resist a corporation's plans to demolish the ghost town and redevelop it. Running tantamount is Sam's story as a young girl being diagnosed with dyschronia and all the while witnessing via future gazing the apocalyptic fate of her familiar hometown. Although in the story's chronology Sam's youth happens much earlier, it ends up revealing far more about what is happening during what I will consider the 'present' of *Dyschronia*, which begins 'after the sea.' By the novel's conclusion, the story of Sam's youth joins with the sea's disappearance, thus completing the tail-swallow synchronicity of this book.

After the sea's disappearance, the residents of Clapstone are at first wary of the tourists who visit the vanished sea, 'photographers, writers, people who collect places like this, the morbid and curious, the gloaters and the sad.' This is of course the saddest thing that happens because the townspeople, poor and hungry, make money as tour guides, entertaining those who visit the tragic site. Mills is at her most misanthropic here, I think, echoing exactly what Marquez suggests about humanity: everything can become a miserable zoo creature.

A great deal of mostly young-and-all-brilliant Aussie writers have been telling stories that echo among themselves, reflecting a permeating sense of technology paranoia and dystopic hyper-reality, although admittedly skewed toward a future that Orwell never would have guessed. In other words, when a group of similarly aged writers who live in different places and don't have any obvious ties to one another write complementary novels, and the experience of reading their books leaves you with the same palpable depression and 'oh my god I hope this never happens', or your eyebrow lifts while reading a sentence and you begin to wonder how they managed to capture the same sensibilities in pretty similar ways—it's probably time to listen to what they're saying. These writers are creating what I loosely call hyper-real paranoid fiction, an evolution of speculative fiction (a quick-fire genre phrase that could mean so much these days that it hardly means anything). The books/writers I'm talking about are *Rubik* (2017) by Elizabeth Tan, *The Island Will Sink* (2016) by Briohny Doyle, *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2009) by Steven Amsterdam, and *The Town* (2017) by Shaun Prescott. If we take things off-shore then there are examples of similar thinking in literature happening in divergent ways—Saunders in the US, Andrei Snær Magnason's underrated masterpiece *LoveStar* (2002) from Iceland, and even Michel Houellebecq's unusual *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), just to name a few. All these books are mirror images of one another, except they're using those mirrors found in theme parks that contort things into funny shapes.

So of course patterns in thinking ring alarm bells no matter where they're coming from—politics, society, arts—because they trigger our algorithmic brains to immediately decipher them. So what the hell is going on among this echelon of Aussie writers? Is it good old artistic fun? Maybe planetary suicide is nothing more than a compelling hook that has triggered our curiosity since Dante's *Inferno*. Or maybe the planetary suicide we embarked upon many years ago is reaching the pyramidion and the fears of being lonely and disaffected and disenfranchised that have reappeared throughout the years, only wearing different masks, have begun taking a new kind of psychic and spiritual toll on the next generation of writers, a group of very clever thinkers who have seemingly said *no thanks* to postmodern flippancy and exchanged uncertainty for a sincere and anxious cry out against what may be waiting for us, not that many years ahead. Maybe I am being banal when I say that the Internet and the rise of technology dependency has a sick paradox fuelling it, in which the very machines that were supposed to be make us feel

more connected and enhanced are one of the biggest causes of unhappiness and solitude, but there is indeed an omnipresent malaise in many contemporary novels.

What Jennifer Mills has done in this book—which is, mind you, *ravingly* entertaining—is represent a version of humanity’s adaptation, which is described best by Sam after she sees the six plant workers jump to their death: ‘I never see anything good.’ If we can’t perceive goodness in our future, how does it look, aesthetically, when we respond to it? By the novel’s end, this question is answered, as the distinction between versions of Sam increasingly blur, and she watches the ‘other Sam’ along with linear time, until we see the world as she does: a tail-swallowing, symmetrical place, where anything can be hallucination.

But because of the alarm in Mills’ fiction should we all suddenly don scuba suits and plunge into the nearest sea, armed with fishnets and resolve to clean our mess up and restore the planet as best we can? It’s far too late for fishing for pollution. It feels shallow and crass of me to say that this novel is a cautionary tale. No. It feels wrong. Because it’s not. It’s an artistic representation, an adventure into the Unknown. Throughout the novel Sam is tortured by her failure to change anything. She sees the nightmare, The Big Thing, and when a representative of the corporation—who uses Sam’s future gazing for its utility—demands she explain the design of The Big Thing so they can build it, she lies, falsifying many key details. But that changes nothing because fate welds it together just the way Sam first perceived it. ‘I tried to make it different,’ she says, ‘but it’s turning out the same.’ This failure is one of Sam’s darkest despairs, as it is ours. We may be able to perceive a future in which our world becomes horribly, irreversibly mutated, but we too are powerless to stop it from happening anymore.

Bio: Jack Cameron Stanton is a Sydney-based writer. His work has appeared in *Southerly*, *Seizure*, *Voiceworks*, and the 2017 and 2018 UTS Writers' Anthology. He is a regular contributor to Neighbourhood Paper.

