

# Unsettlement

Amy Lin

WHITE ON WHITE

by Anne Elvey

Cordite Books

\$20 pb, 89 pp, 9780975249291

THE SKY RUNS RIGHT THROUGH US

by Reneé Pettitt-Schipp

UWA Publishing

\$22.99 pb, 122 pp, 9781742589596



Anne Elvey's *White on White* and Reneé Pettitt-Schipp's *The Sky Runs Right Through Us* both offer ideas of unsettling in contemporary Australia; Elvey's is the unsettling brought by the arrival of colonists, whereas Pettitt-Schipp explores the unsettling associated with denying arrival. In *White on White*, Elvey explores the limitations and downfalls of colonialism, and the paradoxical act of 'building a falling' that settlement represents. Despite its title, the collection is about the co-existence of whiteness and colour, as in the line, 'On my desk the whiteout / is shelved beside the pens'. This line is also telling as it is about imprints and markings existing beside modes of erasure. In the prose poem 'School days', readers are introduced to the speaker's skin that is 'peach and cream with a blue undertone [...] the colour of my soul', which a 'drop of ink' would mortally stain. Here, Elvey invokes a thread running through the collection: the potential for ink, the medium for writing and textuality, to be fraught with sin and moral complications. At these moments, readers may reflect on the fact that it was white settlers who brought written language to Australia, with all of its blessings and burdens.

Another running thread of the collection is that of skin, in particular the politics of human skin, its unmistakable presence, and how it is discordant with the Australian landscape. Flesh seems to embody an empathetic quality, a pull towards other humans. But just as human skin is an organ that unifies, collates, challenges, resists, speaks, and is silent, so is the collective fabric of our landscape – its sand, shells, oceans, and salt. The other form of skin in *White on White* is that of the page, described in 'Token' as 'neither clean nor blank', but rather 'asphalt, gravel, dirt'. It is not just human flesh that has the capacity for various shades and pigments, but also the page, the site on which language is encrypted. Elvey encapsulates the 'red and grey and broken' nature of the line, its 'corrugation of intent'. In this we discover a meditation on language and its capacity to be unclean, impure, loaded. While the prose and lyric poems are real strengths of this collection, also striking is the experimental and avant-garde 'Invasion', with the capitalised word 'CELL' smattering the page, and condensed into a central block interspersed with 'SELL'. Elvey reminds us that colonisation is associated with the notion of skin as commodity, and that every invasion, every flesh, has a price.

In Reneé Pettitt-Schipp's *The Sky Runs Right Through Us*, 'This Poem' evokes the fierce life of the poem and its tendency to wrestle with the poet. The poem is represented as a living, breathing organism, reminding readers of a poem's compulsion to be written, 'fed'. It appears that her stories of Christmas Island and the plight of asylum seekers are demanding to be voiced through the poems. A highlight is the powerful and moving 'Parting Glass', which details the attempted suicide of an asylum seeker. In the 'simple enough' act of drinking some unnamed poison, the poem juxtaposes the asylum seeker's life and experience with the act of its attempted destruction. Pettitt-Schipp displays a profound empathy and sensitivity to asylum seekers and an awareness of privilege, ironising the way we thinly converse about the fate of boats, and unearthing the gravity

that lies behind ordinary words. The poet eloquently depicts a sensation of of two-dimensionality, in a place where beauty is juxtaposed with suffering: 'it is hard to feel real in this postcard place'.

But as much as this collection is about the human and the inhumane, it is equally about nature, animals, the elements, and eco-poetics. The titular image of the sky permeating the human is also apparent in images of the sun and sea running through us; Pettitt-Schipp suggests humans are ultimately composed of the elements. The poet often hints that sublime moments are made from a synthesis of the natural and the man-made, such as in the meditative thrill created from an encounter with the moon and traffic lights. Geckoes, birds, and cats bring a vitality and presence of mind, and Pettitt-Schipp regularly personifies elements such as rain and land to both celebrate life and to showcase its fragility, its mortality. Alongside a sense of wonder are the beautiful elegies for her father, where Pettitt-Schipp writes of grief obliquely, through symbols such as the persistence, sad weight, and the ultimate release of a tiny black stone. Although *The Sky Runs Right Through Us* utilises, like *White on White*, an active aesthetics of bold voice and lively imagery, they both acknowledge the potential for reflection inherent in stillness, and in silence. ■



Amy Lin (née Hilhorst) recently completed her PhD at University of Western Australia, where she researched mental illness in mid-twentieth century Australian poetry. Her poems have been published in *Cordite*, *Axon*, *Verity La*, *Social Alternatives*, and *Westerly*, and her reviews, interviews and essays have appeared in various literary journals. ♦