



GIRAMONDO PUBLISHING

LETTER TO PESSOA

Michelle Cahill

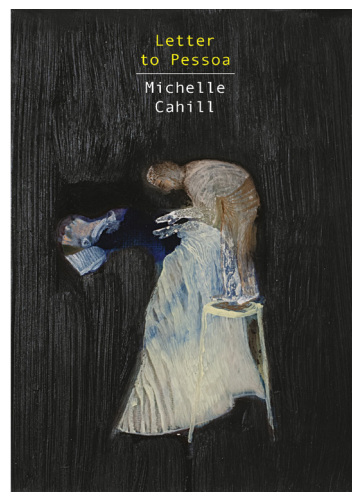
Letter to Pessoa

Giramondo Publishing

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Letter to Pessoa is the first collection of short stories by Indian-Australian poet Michelle Cahill. It is an imaginative tour de force, portraying a range of complex characters in social and political settings across the world, from Seville to Nairobi, Boston to Chiang Mai, Kathmandu to Kraków. Like the poet Fernando Pessoa, who gives the collection its title, and who created as many as seventy versions of himself, Cahill displays a remarkable inventiveness in the creation of perspectives and identities, making distant landscapes and situations come alive, as they express the fear and longing, obsession and outrage, of the people caught up in them. Displaying its awareness of the power of writing to create realities, the collection includes stories in letter form to Jacques Derrida, Virginia Woolf, Jean Genet, and to JM Coetzee, from his character Melanie Isaacs.

Michelle Cahill is the author of four collections of poetry, including *The Accidental Cage*, shortlisted for the ACT Judith Wright Poetry Prize, and *Vishvarupa*, which was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Poetry Award. Born in Kenya, she attended primary school in London before migrating to Australia. She lives in Sydney, where she graduated in Medicine and in Arts. She is editor of the online literary magazine *Mascara* and co-editor of the anthology *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets*. Her story in this collection, 'Duende', won the 2014 Hilary Mantel International Short Story Award.



Line by line, Cahill's writing is musical, assured: cumulatively, her seriousness is evident, her ambition impressive. HILARY MANTEL

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Author's note

I have been interested for a long time in how a minority narrative might enter into dialogue with the mainstream without being tokenised or seen as polemical. Although I am a published poet, writing fiction has always been something I enjoy immeasurably. I became attuned to the barriers facing minority histories, what Stuart Hall described as 'the unspeakable stories of subjectivity.' As a first-generation migrant who spent her childhood in three countries, I wanted to cultivate an aesthetic which expressed contingency without shame or compromise. I was curious as to how Pessoa, Borges and Woolf mediated their complex personas and perspectives in writing. Through heteronyms Pessoa adopted multiple perspectives; Borges grafted fiction to politics and history, the minor to the mainstream. I was inspired reading his brilliant, radical story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote.' 'Borges and I' is my response to his eponymous piece, playing with the layering of real and fictional selves, past and future selves. I haven't rejected structure, but I have trusted the spaces where narrative collapses; I have tried to serve its detours and postponements.

Through psychogeographies of transition, trauma and play, sometimes beginning or ending obliquely, the stories come alive in language. Language has been my home: a place of refuge, pleasure, exhaustion and reprieve. I like the letter form because it creates a double address and a double narrative between two subjects, reader and author. In this way it can question the status of identities. Sometimes I break the narrative frame to allow a marginal character from a different text to speak as in "Letter to John Coetzee". The heteronyms of a young female protagonist resonate through a range of characters in the stories: Sarita the refugee advocate, Hemani the journalist travelling through Myanmar and Nepal, Jo the Australian tourist studying Buddhist meditation practice in Thailand. Domestic accretions and national boundaries give way to passages of dream, memory, desire and sometimes abstraction.

I am also concerned in this book with the aesthetics of the fragment. The migrant or the refugee inhabits a disrupted flow of time, between countries, between languages, histories and cultures. My stories don't reconcile these differences. They shift shapes, weaving narrative threads from surreal elements, exploring the ambulatory possibilities of words while engaging with contemporary political and social situations.

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