

## Introduction

Bella Li

Atmosphere, beyond the province of science, is an amorphous concept: difficult to define, impossible to convey with any precision. For these reasons, it is the most fitting appellation for the work of Emma Lew. Twenty years after the publication of her debut collection, *The Wild Reply*, the poems collected here, under the title *Crow College*, remain charged, pulsing with atmosphere. What does it mean to speak of atmosphere in poetry? It is to recognise the significance of the *sensed* over the *seen*; to be aware that a poetic use of language is constituted by the play between presence and absence, between what is revealed and withheld. Negative space, negative capability – in poetry these are cardinal qualities, and they are what give Lew’s work its enduring power.

To read a poem by Emma Lew is to be led into an oblique narrative in which the beginning and end are unknown. Whether arriving with a theatre troupe on the heels of an army, mid-campaign, in ‘Snow and Gold’, or held ‘in the fallow badinage of a ship’s deck’, months (or years) into a sea journey in the masterful and moving prose poem ‘Bounty’, we begin, time and again, *in medias res*. We are entering a cinema partway through a film, an auditorium in the second act of a play, a novel in the penultimate chapter. Images unreel before us, montage-like, giving tantalising glimpses of voices, landscapes, plots; the sense of a totality that escapes the frame.

The poems here primarily inhabit the dramatic mode: they deal in masks, artifice, impossible acts of witness; their personas are occupied by false memories, invented histories, fabricated impending or recent catastrophes. This is not to say they do not sound out biography or history, but that their central concerns are the chimera of the imagination. Ghosts, prophets, the ever-present dead, range through Old World Europe, post-revolutionary Russia, biblical and apocryphal scenes. Names mark familiar locations – Prague, Berchtesgaden, Chernobyl; each carrying their own heavy cargo of associations – but these are also not the places we know.

Hauntings feature prominently: from the possessed rural landscape of ‘Marshes’, where ‘noon’s/ ghosts are creeping across paddocks’, to the uncanny domestic interior of ‘Usual Rosettes’, with

its 'dour wallpaper/ always bulging at the seams', to the 'crowded rooms' of 'Freight', and its spare allusions to twentieth-century horrors. The restrained menace and sense of unease that runs like a live wire through many of these poems reminds us that the past recedes, but never disappears beneath the surface of the present. It troubles and it troubles.

Lew is a master of prosody: assonance, repetition and slant rhyme give poems such as 'Thebes', 'The Wild Reply', 'Nettle Song' and 'Falconer's Dawn' their complex, unsettling music. In later works, such as 'Anything the Landlord Touches' and 'Avalanches', Lew gravitates towards the pantoum: a traditional Malay verse form of cascading four-line stanzas, in which the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third lines of the next. The pantoum is eminently suited to Lew's poetic strengths: it requires mastery of the single line, and a well-honed instinct for startling juxtaposition. In its circular movement, which takes us backwards as much as forwards, it is also a ghostly form – perpetuating a kind of sonic haunting, through echo and return.

Poetry, Emma Lew teaches us, is a condition of space through which something felt but unnamed works its way. Her poems are compelling precisely for their opacity, their 'luminous alias[es]'. They do what art is uniquely able to do: hold multiple stories, voices, threads of meaning. This precious ambiguity is the substance that rewards a reader not only on the first, but also the second, third, tenth reading. For those who have encountered Lew's poetry before, *Crow College* is a timely reminder of its undiminished power. For others, this will be an introduction to a vital and brilliant body of work unsurpassed in its ability to conjure whole worlds with the slightest and surest touch. This is a place to enter with lights out and senses sharp – 'Go with splendour into the blackouts'.