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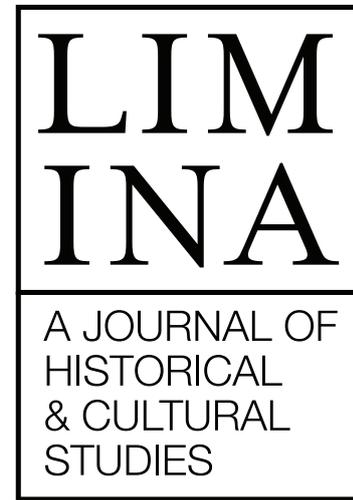
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Submitting to Limina

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Cover Image

In Dreames. Digital image by Brook Guidry

Mills, Jennifer, *The Airways*, Sydney, Pan Macmillan, 2021; paperback, pp.384;
RRP \$32.99, ISBN: 9781760980504.

Reading Jennifer Mills' *The Airways* in 2022 is an oddly discombobulating experience. We live in strange times. Two years into a global pandemic which has radically upended the ways in which we communicate and interact, many of us are still trying to locate ourselves within this still-evolving landscape. Intimacy has become a commodity many cannot afford—intimacy gained through proximity and touch becoming something loaded with a sense of threat. Yet bodies are not 'machinery'; they are porous places with fluid boundaries—within which, as Mills writes, there is 'no separation between outside and in' (316).

The Airways reads as a narrative of many dimensions—of perspectives, temporalities, locations. The novel tracks between Sydney, Beijing, and the uncertain journey made by a spirit back to its birthplace. In one temporality, we follow Adam, an Australian living in Beijing. He holds down a job whose description is vague—he works in marketing, but it '[isn't] clear what [the company is] selling' (18). His girlfriend is estranged due to reasons we learn later within the book. Adam lives an inane, Kafkaesque existence, its meaning and function as unclear as the air of Beijing; the quality of which Adam ritualistically checks and rechecks throughout *The Airways*.

It would, perhaps, be logical to assume that the central character of a novel about hauntings would be Adam—the living protagonist. Yet *The Airways* opens and closes with Yun, Adam's non-binary ex-housemate, whose death in Sydney occurs three pages into the narrative, arriving with brutal poetic force:

fall, falling. Back of the head.
(grunts and drunk scents, sweat)
the eyes went for a white moment, contents tipped out, nonsense
(what sharp rib this)
the sense of harm arrived before pain
[...]
not breathing. Clear the airways (3-4, emphasis in original)

'So it went,' Yun tells us. 'The body that possessed me, the nothing that was all I knew' (4). Yun is the force which gums the novel together. They are a charismatic central protagonist, whose name means both 'cloud' and 'consent', and who imprints themselves onto our skin as the reader. They saturate the air through the breath of the living: 'they feed: they divide and multiply and separate and become singular and multiply again' (90). Yun's spirit swims through bodies, inhabiting them for as long as it is necessary until they find the next host. In this way, they travel back to China—but not in the sense of returning home, for 'the body was the only homeland. And that's long gone' (251). Yun's journey in search of Adam is about unfinished business. It germinates around the central preoccupation of *The Airways*: what does it mean to cross boundaries—personal, gendered, political, sexual?

It was Michel Foucault who wrote in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976) that 'power [...] was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself: it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it' (136). This statement resonates with the aim of Mills' work: to frame depictions of consent around the concepts of death and power. The boundary Adam crosses within *The Airways* is that of watching those he desires sleep, without their consent. As Yun puts it, 'Adam [...] disturbed my surfaces' (2). In intruding into the private space of somnolence,

Adam feels he does no wrong. 'You must respect people's boundaries [...] But he *did*,' Mills writes. 'It was harmless, really. Innocent' (238, emphasis in original).

There is a moment in *The Airways* in which Adam and Yun's roles are reversed: Yun watches Adam rest with his eyes closed, before making their presence known, saying that Adam will 'burn'. Adam awakes to find Yun standing over him. The moment is undeniably heavy with homoeroticism. He asks them if they were watching him sleep—'Who would do such a thing?', Yun replies. 'Adam felt an understanding pass between them, electric in the damp air' (148). After Yun's death, with Natasha, Adam ventures a step further: he films his girlfriend as she sleeps. Her discovery of this violation fuels their estrangement.

This fascination with prone bodies circles back to the death of Adam's father, whose death—when he was a child—Adam failed to grieve and process satisfactorily due to his mother's swift repression of the event. The separation of death is irrevocable, and the paternal intimacy cannot be recovered. Through the recurring symbol of dying lilies in vases of browning water, Mills evokes a sense of the unresolved nature of Adam's grief, and how he replicates the experience of watching the dead with that of watching those who are sleeping. Later in the novel, when Yun wakes and confronts Adam about touching them, Adam feels the 'sudden pain of separation, as desire became poison' (339).

Mills' clean precision of language is masterful and intense: she can as easily evoke the claustrophobic tension of the Beijing underground as conjure the skies of Sydney like a Whiteley painting. This dual sense of locatedness and dislocation intensely communicates itself to the reader—as the novel progresses, you become more finely attuned to your own body. Mills' expert handling of sensation means that even passages in which nothing happens—as when Adam is lying, half-conscious, in his room—are mesmerising. Similar to many moments in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Airways* makes the torture of the tangled mind not only evident on the page, but also far from mundane.

Although the pandemic is not an element within the novel—the ideas for which first began to possess Mills in 2014, whilst living in Beijing—it is impossible to read *The Airways* without being haunted by certain aspects of the narrative. Natasha returns home to Wuhan to see her family. Reminiscent of social distancing, passengers on the Beijing underground 'line up obediently in the area indicated by yellow lines and arrows' and are expected to 'stay behind the line, respect the boundary' (19). While watching a man 'hoick wet phlegm', Adam wonders

how long it would take for a person to come into contact with every other person in the city, if there was a six-degree-type equation for the likely exchange of microbes, viruses, spores (22).

The Airways is a novel which does many things: it elegantly navigates non-binary and queer existence, and it poetically sets forth a discourse around consent and the violation of personal boundaries. But perhaps most importantly, Mills' work explores pressing ideas around what it means to be haunted by trauma, to be haunted by the past. As someone tells Adam within the novel: 'places aren't haunted, people are haunted' (219).

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