

**Sanna Peden, *Straight Lines*, Mulla Mulla Press, Kalgoorlie, 2017; pp.48;
RRP \$20 AUD paperback.**

From the outset, *Straight Lines* is a curious title for Sanna Peden's poetry collection. At first blush, it might suggest a poetry spoken straight: an unembellished and observational reflection of life happening around the poet. A poetics of ordinary thought and speech are certainly at work in *Straight Lines* – Peden drifts effortlessly between moments of reflection on the interior and exterior – but 'straightforward' doesn't describe Peden's work well at all. While these poems are sometimes observational and celebrating the quotidian, there's a depth to this work: a thread of questioning that runs beneath its images. It's a gentle and generous questioning: a mode of inquiry that doesn't always have to lead to an answer, but one that insists on the asking. Peden's biographical note says that she grew up in Finland and Malaysia, so it's no surprise that the poetry in this collection reveals an awareness of its contingencies with respect to race, language, and culture. The epigrammatic 'Not a Word', a sonnet in single-word lines, has its narrator find herself in Prague, asking a local (in Czech) if they speak English. She then catches herself:

Fifteen
Years
In
Perth

No
Noongar (16)

The *Straight Lines* of the title, then, might draw attention to palimpsestic ways of being in Australia: the absence of straight lines in nature; country overwritten with the parallel lines of rail tracks and dual carriageways. A collection located in a long and thin city, *Straight Lines* takes note of these striations. In 'The Fremantle Line', the poet thinks through a great Australian unspoken ('try not to think too much, mind the gap, face west'): the nation's history of dispossession (22). Workers and First Nations people are marginalised in different ways by the same system:

Try not to think of eighteenth century capitalism and
industrial centres connected by these click clack tracks
separate carriages for whites and blacks we need more
light rail in this city we need to infill this city. (22)

The poem then launches into a torrent of worry reflecting the poem's opening 'there are too many things / wrong with the world' (22). Amidst all her existential anxiety, the narrator looks around at the end of the poem to find an unusual kind of hope in the image of the Dingo Flour factory. Despite the Dingo logo's association with

Western Australia's history of deprivation, its red holds a reminder of collectivity – Peden works for the National Tertiary Education Union at the University of Western Australia. At the height of the poem's anxiety, 'there is a red dog / and you breathe' (23).¹

The straight lines of Perth's freeway system appear in the new and bleak suburbia of 'Freeway': an afternoon in the North, where 'the train line doesn't come this far / not now, not yet, never quite in time' (20). Much like 'The Fremantle Line', 'Freeway' displays a yearning for collectivity and community; finds that yearning frustrated in the construction of Perth, its culture, the poem's narrator. 'Freeway' shows fits and starts of *Straight Lines*' tendency towards stream-of-consciousness, 'I didn't know heirloom basil existed but there you go' and deftly turns the moment into one of anxiety over self-perception: 'the fruit salad says I'm a bad friend / and I'm inclined to agree' (20).

The poems of *Straight Lines* are not explicitly divided into sections, and the collection moves freely between reflection, ekphrasis, political poetry, and personal reflection. Larger trends are also at work, and the second half of Peden's collection shifts its focus to womanhood in many forms: women as wives, mothers, daughters. The collection's emphasis on space remains, however, and Peden's awareness of space remains as effective in poems about train lines as reflections on family and womanhood. 'Onion Women' – in large part a list poem – speaks of women 'wrung dry in this bastard climate': 'rezoned industrial women'; 'graph-paper women / all square root / all rounded down' (34–5). In this section of the collection, space is deeply personal. Physical and psychic space collapse in 'incubate' with its addressee 'stretching the limits of grief / spreading out for the sunlight' (33); space reflects the self and gives a container in which loss echoes. In 'second daughter', the flat plane of a mirror contrasts with the curve of the body and frames the distance between the speaker and her daughter. In just a few words, Peden probes the gaps between image and self-image, self and other:

your second daughter will look like you

at night you will look in the mirror
hold your breasts
and think about pronouns (32)

Straight Lines has a lot to offer, and this survey of its themes is by no means exhaustive. Despite the poetic variety here, Peden's questioning of her surroundings, and how things come to be the way they are, is always a move towards generosity and inclusivity. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes that history is 'made more of crossroads, branchings, and tangles than straight lines' (59). In this spirit, the poems in *Straight Lines*, through their thoughtfulness and generosity with language,

¹ Bamford, Matt. "Dingo Flour logo reclaimed as Aboriginal artists remember past struggle", *ABC News*, ABC, 13 Apr 2013. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-13/red-dingo-flour-logo-reclaimed-by-aboriginal-artists/9641984>

form a winding story of interrelationships between people, places, and selves; how we all look to build a sense of belonging.

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