Blank spaces

Tim Grgec

The Farewell Tourist
Alison Glenny
Otago University Press, $27.50,
ISBN 978198853129

All of Us
Adrienne Jansen and Carina Gallegos
Landing Press, $22.00,
ISBN 9780473451684

Louder
Kerrin P Sharpe
Victoria University Press, $25.00,
ISBN 9781776561964

Alison Glenny's Kathleen Grattan Poetry award-winning debut collection, *The Farewell Tourist*, ends abruptly with an erasure: "You are twisted into my being / [The remainder of the letter is missing]". The blank, barren space of Antarctica occupies each page like scatterings of snow, concealing much that's left unsaid. Glenny offers an experimental range of form, piecing prose poetry, footnotes, fragmented dictionary definitions, appendices and epistolary excisions together as a narrative on loss.

The Farewell Tourist begins with "The Magnetic Process", a sequence of prose poetry about two lovers in their first sparks of intimacy, studying a polar continent that will eventually grow between them. These are poems preoccupied with minute details. Glenny's two figures remain beguiled by Antarctica's "magnetic attraction", their scientific observations finding a precarious space where order and perspective are disrupted. "IV" recalls the curiosities of a young mind fascinated by calculation:

> For an entire year he walked around
> with a telescope
> permanently fixed to one eye. He
> enjoyed the way it made
> the world vanish and brought another
> one into view.

Glenny proceeds with startlingly original description, direct in its simplicity. Fragments of a lost past float up to the present in a palpable, yet unrecognisable, world, where mountains are "buried to their necks" and icebergs hang "upside down in the sky". The poems descend into surrealism: "The dressing / table, room and everything in it had detached from the house / and was floating away, calving new impossibilities", as the two eventually disappear from one another.

The next major section offers footnotes to vanished texts from a much larger, unspoken story. Glenny provides a delicately referential narrative, with each footnote referencing a vacancy only known to the unnamed he and she. In "Footnotes to a History of the Atmosphere", for example, the two lovers' gradual estrangement is called sharply into focus:

> "I had wanted to describe the
> atmosphere, its subtle architecture.
> But the unreliability of the instruments
> affected the quality of the
> observations. Instead of the clicking of
> gears, an ominous silence."

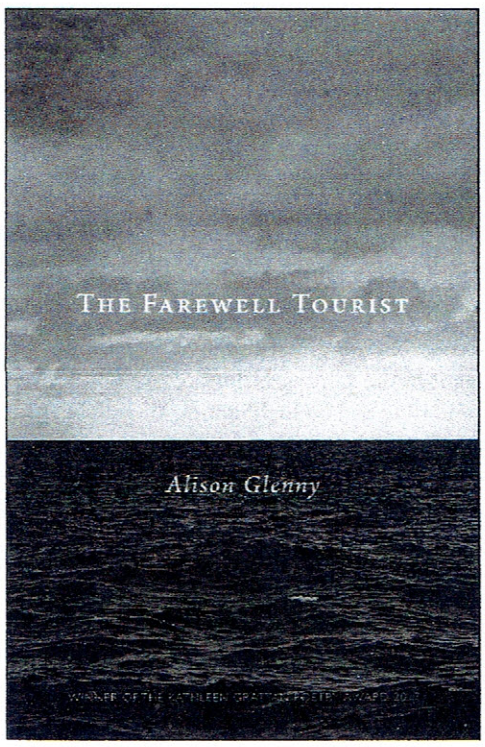
Glenny constructs an unbearable poignancy from what is not there, from all that is obscured and left unsaid. The blank space above each page further darkens the landscape, where intimacy is lost in the precarious zones of divergence. However, despite the sparsity, what remains on the page is precise in its detail, surprising and unexpected: "each year the sun seemed to take longer to climb the / sky. As if the seasons were slipping backward, rather than moving / forward".

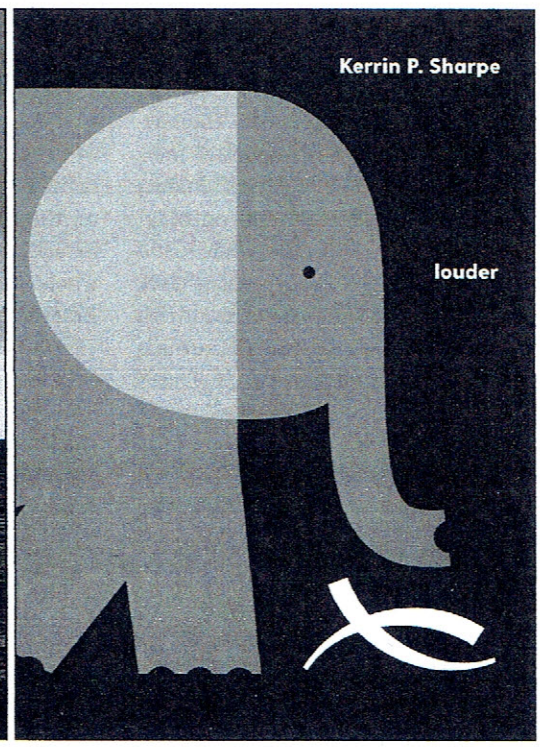
Finally, Glenny moves into a series of appendices characterised by erasure and excision. In the second appendix, letter correspondence is obscured by weather, indecision, illegible handwriting and regret. There is a profound sense of loneliness, as both lovers grapple with life without one another:

> ~~A year today since you left, and I thought~~
> ~~of you as I walked~~
> ~~through the empty rooms. Wishing that~~
> ~~a bridge might~~
> ~~appear or a door open so I could step~~
> ~~through to wherever~~
> ~~you are.~~

Here, Glenny not only details a communication breakdown – right down to the revisions and self-editing we make in their heads – but also how two people can disappear from one another. Each page becomes more sparing, with the letters crossed out, ripped and lost, in a tactile severing of ties. Ultimately, this is a book on the melancholy of heartbreak, and the despair of someone and something lost.

All of Us by Adrienne Jansen and Carina Gallegos fills its own kind of blank space: giving voice to the often untold migrant experience. It begins with a conversation between its two authors reflecting on the collection's genesis. Jansen, the author of several books on migrant experiences in New Zealand, all with a strong concern for





social justice, says that she wanted to write poetry that embodied two ways of seeing: "what does someone from Syria, for example, experience when they go to a railway station, compared to what I experience?" Gallegos, a Wellington-based poet who emigrated from Costa Rica 13 years ago, also aimed to explore the realms of "here" and "there": that is, the differing perspectives of migrant and local, new and familiar. Jansen and Gallegos simply allow migrants to tell their stories, providing a space to document the human lives at the heart of a global crisis.

These experiences are deeply personal, yet begin with a wider and more universal lens, with poems not necessarily fixed to a certain past. The collection takes us to classrooms, the doctor's office, markets, taxi stands, beneficiary queues and rural sheep country, highlighting the challenges of assimilation to a new society and all the strangeness that comes with it. Our language is "'a big big puzzle / with hundreds, / no, thousands / of pieces'", we're told in "english", as its speaker twists their mouth around each new word. So many poems in this collection serve as conversational exchanges, blurring the distinction between writer and subject, with neither necessarily achieving a dominant perspective.

Both Jansen and Gallegos write lyrically about the power of conversation. Both poets spent much time talking to migrants and refugees in New Zealand and hearing their stories. With slight and careful gestures, a movement of unrooted people is braided through very simple yet complex narratives. These are simply the experiences recounted to Jansen and Gallegos, who write without "taking on" their subjects' voices.

The poem "Bread" speaks to very different ways of seeing, of "here" and "there". From a New Zealand perspective, walking to the store to buy bread is one of the most banal experiences imaginable. However, in Syria, the poem's "she" warns, one must:

> Join the queue outside the shop
> pay the money get the bread
> pay the money get the bread
> fast. Everything is fast.

The threat of aerial bombardment and gunfire feels genuine. What is taken for granted in New Zealand can be life-threatening in the landscape of civil war, for, in Damascus: "'If you go to buy some bread / you might not come back'". Here Jansen captures not only these two ways of seeing, but also, for those in Syria – and countries ravaged by civil war – the urgency of departure. *All of Us* proves successful in its aim to provide "storytelling" poetry that can be easily read and understood by those whose new land, Aotearoa, is "slowly becoming home".

Louder, the fourth collection of poetry from Christchurch-based poet Kerrin P Sharpe, contends with great urgency the political, moral and ecological exigencies of our time. Sharpe asks us to question the blank pages of the future yet to be written, and how, as human beings, we wish to fill them. Sharpe's exploration of pastoral and urban Aotearoa, with expositions on Syria, the Mediterranean, across continents and centuries, evokes the frightening capacity of a changing planet, that stretches far beyond the contemporary. With great skill, Sharpe displays her ability to inhabit the lives of others. What emerges is a voice profoundly affected by the state of humanity and the earth as we know it.

The book is divided into five parts, touching on the displacement of refugees, crises of faith, global warming, and animal cruelty. While Jansen's and Gallegos's *All of Us*, in its conversational structure, allows the voices of refugees and migrants themselves to carry the burdens of disclosure, Sharpe writes of their place "between land and sea", inhabiting their displacement. "they are found in the sea" is a heart-breaking account of the dangerous journeys made across the Mediterranean aboard overcrowded boats. "I call for my mother", the speaker yearns, "when the winds try to stand upright / turn back to Syria but the boat won't listen", as Europe, and the world, holds its breath.

The final poem, "how they leave the world", speaks to the collection as a whole, and the uncertainty of what is to come. We are left to question how we wish to leave the world, the impression we not only make as individuals, but as a civilisation. Sharpe's speaker is clearly troubled by the earth's changing climate. With each day that passes, "these bears in bubbles of blurry fur / quiver drift / dwindle away", as our planet is radically modified by human action. How we wish to fill the blank pages of the future is entirely in our hands.

Tim Grgec is a Master's graduate of English Literature and Creative Writing from Victoria University of Wellington.

Wake-up Call, *Anthony Ellison*, Sunday Star-Times, *6 August 2000*.

The pioneering study by Paul Diamond, Savaged to Suit: Māori and Cartooning in New Zealand *(New Zealand Cartoon Archive/Fraser Books, $39.50, ISBN 9780992247706), examines the succession of stereot appearing in cartoon representations of Māori and Māori life and culture, charting changing attitudes by analysing editorial cartoons as valuable historical sources, and concentrating on the period from the 1930s the 1990s.*