

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

David Malouf, *The Complete Stories* (Vintage, 2008) and *Ransom* (Knopf Australia, 2009)

There is something unsettling about the title of *The Complete Stories*, given that the author is still alive and prolific. It is accurate, of course. For the first time, and much to this reviewer's delight, all of Malouf's shorter works have been assembled in one epic volume. But accuracy does not necessarily alleviate the uneasiness this label engenders. '*The Complete Stories*' implies this award-winning collection was written by a version of Malouf that is finished with tales of absent fathers; that is through with speculating about avenues we might have taken *if only*; that he is no longer interested in exploring how the past intrudes and imprints itself on our present. Should any of these themes appear in subsequent publications, this title whispers, they will be the products of an incomplete Malouf. They will be spectres written by a spectre.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that both *The Complete Stories* and *Ransom* are riddled with ghosts, hauntings, and intangible alternate dimensions. Readers experience, second-hand, a spiritualist conjuring up human echoes for grieving family members in 'A Medium'; we witness two dying languages 'giving up the ghost' in 'The Only Speaker of His Tongue'; Sylvia's father and husband are described as 'talking ghosts' when discussing antediluvian philosophy and rabbinical texts in 'Change of Scene'; and we are haunted by the perceptible absence of a prowler along with the 'palpable ghosts' of the town he terrorises in 'The Prowler'. Ghostliness, whether literal or metaphorical, is clearly a vehicle for exploring themes of loss, regret, and displacement in Malouf's writing, whether '*Complete*' or otherwise.

'At Schindler's', 'Dream Stuff', 'War Baby', 'The Valley of Lagoons' and 'Sally's Story' are all perforated by the shades of missing fathers. These stories each reverberate with a fatherless child's yearning for paternal guidance; each of these narratives largely leave this longing unrequited. Similarly, *Ransom*, an intensely beautiful revisitation of Homer's *Iliad*, also explores this unfulfilled desire. As a child, Achilles vies for his father, Peleus's, attentions; now, after nine years away from Peleus's kingdom, Achilles' war-weary mind plays tricks on him. Already beset with grief over the loss of his childhood friend, Patroclus, Achilles is confronted with apparitions of his father, who is not dead, but whose absence Achilles feels profoundly. More noticeably, however, *Ransom* also tells of fathers – and *mothers* – grieving for their missing sons. Malouf gives voice to Hecuba's pain in *Ransom*, and it reminds Priam of how little he can remember of his sons.

Memory levels all men in the novel when their children are taken, whether by war or death. In this respect, the majestic King Priam and his enemy, Achilles, are no better off than Somax, the lowly mule driver whose humble cart carries king and ransom to meet his foe and regain Hector's body. Priam's re-evaluation of his role as a father is a novel-length process, but it crystallises in conversation with Somax: 'Even the ghostly recollection now of what he had never in fact allowed himself to see made his old heart leap and flutter' (139). And although Achilles' boy is yet living, we get the feeling that all three men have been 'blessed and then unblessed' (130) with sons; it is the spirit of these lost boys that help drive the narrative to its moving conclusion.

Malouf also appears to mention ghosts when he wants to signpost ambiguous self-perception in these narratives. There is a sense that bodies can be experienced as simultaneously present and absent in his works, particularly when the characters are survivors of trauma. After returning from Vietnam, Charlie

felt he existed in a space which, the moment he stepped out of it, would close behind him, and he began practising; in mind stepping out, then looking back at the space he had filled for a little while with his warmth and watching it cool and give up all sign of his presence. This sort of thing was new to him. That there might be in you a ghostly quality of your own absence even when you were most warmly there... ('War Baby', 80).

This presence/absence is also evident when characters are described as living in two worlds at once. No matter how hard traumatised characters try to ignore it, the ghosts of their former selves continue to exist in the lives to which they've escaped: 'In the other lives that now haunted him [Charlie] had lived a different history, lighter or darker than the one he had brought home and could show' ('War Baby', 91). Similarly, Colin 'had long understood that one of his selves, the earliest and most vulnerable, had never left' his childhood home ('Dream Stuff', 206). Likewise, Sam McCall's children knew when it was best to avoid their father: 'there were what their mother called his "dumps," whole days it might be when he was like a ghost at their table ... He lived in two worlds, their father—with, so far as they could see, no traffic between them' ('The Domestic Cantata', 155). Priam, too, suffers from the sensation of living such a double-life in *Ransom*, yet it is clear in his case that there is a sustained flow of traffic between his two worlds. Sixty years after his father's kingdom is sacked, and all of his family murdered, Priam's brief experience of being a slave continues to haunt him:

'Leading away from the town ... is a road, narrow, white, winding off across the plain, dwindling away into smoky haze. ... I look up now and I can still see it. It's the road my other self went down. To a life where you and I, my dear, have never found one another. To a life I have lived entirely without you. In the same body perhaps,' he holds up his arm, 'with the same loose skin, the same ache in the knee-joints and thumbs. But one that for sixty years has known only drudgery and daily humiliation and blows. And that life too, I have lived, if only in a ghostly way. As a foul-smelling mockery of this one, that at any moment can rise to my nostrils and pluck at my robe and whisper, So there you are, old man Podarces.' (69).

Fickle chance – a forbidden concept in Priam's world – saved the king's body from that dreadful fate, but his memories of its possibility form an inextricable part of his present.

Hector's body, which is miraculously restored each night after Achilles spends the day defiling it, is a symbol of continuity that applies to both of the books reviewed here. His regenerated figure embodies and illustrates the past's refusal to change no matter how much force is inflicted upon it in the present. Dulcie Porter, like Achilles, is beset with immutable visions, perhaps of her own creation:

Lately – well, for quite a while now – she’s been getting these visitations – apparitions is how she thinks of them, though they appear at such odd times, and in such unexpected guises, that she wonders if they aren’t in fact *revisitations* that she herself has called up out of bits and pieces of her past, her now scattered and inconsiderate memory. (‘Mrs Porter and the Rock’, 123)

Malouf’s narratives imply that the past can be captured in many guises – in stories, in photographs (as in ‘In Trust’, ‘The Valley of Lagoons’, ‘Bad Blood’, ‘War Baby’, ‘Southern Skies’, and ‘Great Day’) or in the form of a Trojan warrior’s mutilated corpse – but it cannot be restrained by any of these media; in the morning, Hector’s flesh is pure, as if he is merely sleeping.

Whether his narratives are set in 1950s Brisbane or on the outskirts of ancient Greece, Malouf’s message is persistent and clear. No one outlives their past; memory is a tangible, life-changing force in history and fiction; nothing, and no one, as Clem explains in ‘The Great Day’, is ever truly lost:

Others were here, now they’re gone. But their heartbeats are still travelling out. Even though they stopped ages ago, they’re still travelling. It doesn’t matter one way or the other, which people, the living or the dead, it’s all the same. Or whether they’re gone now or still here like us ... If we imagined ourselves out there and concentrated hard enough, really concentrated, we could hear it too, all of it, the whole sound coming towards us, all of it. It’s possible. Anything is possible. Nothing is lost. Nothing ever gets *lost*. (‘Great Day’, 320)

Readers will happily not have to concentrate too hard to hear echoes of the ‘complete’ Malouf in *Ransom*—and we can only hope that Malouf’s spectre will continue to prove the inaccuracy of his collection’s title for many years to come.

Lisa Bennett