Ali Alizadeh, *Ashes in the Air* **(UQP, 2011)**

Ali Alizadeh's third book of poetry, *Ashes in the Air*, is a finely structured collection that speaks powerfully of transnational lives and identities. Global in their concerns, settings and perspectives, the poems in this collection move between the autobiographical and the polemical. Travel and migration are recurrent themes, as the autobiographic content traces an arch including a childhood in Tehran, adolescence on the Gold Coast, work as a teacher in Istanbul, Dubai and China, and time as a student and writer in Melbourne. The poems also trace the poet's arguments and struggle with the larger forces shaping lives: ideologies, histories, cultures. At times angry, at other moments self-deprecating and playful, this book is an important contribution to Australian writing which – as is increasingly recognised – traverses borders, cultures and languages.

  Born in Tehran, and migrating as a teenager with his family to Australia, Alizadeh completed a PhD in professional writing at Deakin University in 2005 and has maintained a solid literary output since then, with seven books published. As well as poetry, these include a novel *The New Angel* (2008) and a biography *Iran: My Grandfather* (2010), which was short-listed for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Community Relations Commission Award in 2011. He has also translated Persian poetry with Kenneth Avery in their book *Fifty Poems of Attar* (2007). Alizadeh is reviews editor for the literary magazine *Cordite Poetry Review* and he now lectures in Creative Writing at Monash University. In 2012 *Ashes in the Air* was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and 2013 will see his second UQP publication, a work of fiction titled *Transactions*.

  Ashes in the Air comprises 40 poems, beginning with 'Marco Polo', and ending with 'Staph'. Both of these are autobiographical and both involve a confrontation with death, a central concern throughout the collection. Throughout the book there are suicides – actual and contemplated – beheadings, assassinations, death by chemical attack, a near drowning and, perhaps most startling of all, instructions for the disposal of the poet's cadaver to be dismembered and fed by his son to vultures. A fitting end, the poet writes, 'To a lifetime of feasting / on birds' (80). This comes from the poem 'Sky Burial,' also autobiographical in its inclusion of details of the poet's life, with references to Iraqi bombing raids during his childhood in Tehran, schoolyard abuse following his family's move to Australia, his move to Melbourne where he intends 'to 'make it' as a poet' (82), and where he meets his future wife, a vegetarian with a love for travel. Their travel leads him to countless meals of poultry through Asia and the Middle East, and thus the guilt for which he feels the need to atone.

> … I cringe
> past the glistening corpses of Beijing ducks
>
> but my mouth moistens. So please
> a secular sky burial for me. A machete
>
> doing the work of maggot's teeth
> on my dead body. And proffer the chops
>
> to the vultures to apologise for a life
> -time of eating their kind. … (84)

It is a brilliant, touching and, in places, funny poem which exemplifies the best work of this collection in its easy, uncontrived movement from the poet's personal circumstance to large-scale concerns of globalisation, consumer culture and climate change.

Personal circumstance provides the material and setting for many of the poems but always with this movement outwards towards histories and ideologies. 'The Suspect' compares the poet's younger self in Iran, where he was identified as '*gharb-zadeh*,' or '*west-smitten*,' with his identity in 'Our land' where he is labelled a '*Muslim immigrant*' and 'Muslim rapist' (10). Suspected in both countries of not belonging, the poet concludes that where he would be welcome is in Tehran's infamous Evin Prison, or the West's equivalent, Guantánamo Bay. A similarly structured poem, 'Us & Them', superimposes the images of mourners for a Gold Coast teenager who has committed suicide with the mourners for an Iranian adolescent 'charred by another Iraqi chemical / attack' (21), to prompt reflection on the ferocity of impersonal forces which take young lives and channel grief amongst those who survive. 'Culture and Its Terrors' compares the coercive operations of culture to the violence of natural disasters; migrant assimilation as hurricane: 'And / your winds try to suck me up, have me / twist, submit to the cycles of your national / psyche.' (8). In the poem 'Shut Up' an Iranian dissident writer, first incarcerated in Evin Prison and later held in detention in Australia as an illegal immigrant, finds himself unable to write as

… anger

blocks the passage of language
from the heart to the page. So he's

shut up. (19-20)

These poems illustrate that issues of belonging and unbelonging, of nationalism and identity, are not confined to West or East or Middle East, but are challenges that replay across geographical contexts.

It becomes clear that it is language or discourse – its tendency to reify, to delineate and constrain possibilities – which is the focus of Alizadeh's struggle. Nearly all previous reviews of the book have selected the poem 'History of the Veil' to demonstrate Alizadeh's poetic critique of discourse and history, in this case an outline of the historical processes involved in the control of women's bodies, in both Middle Eastern and European cultures. One poem in the collection that has not received comment yet is 'Language(s)', dedicated to South African-born Australian poet John Mateer, and it deserves to be highlighted as it is particularly relevant to a discursive framework that often remains unexamined in the context of Australian writing. 'I'll speak you mine, you speak me yours', the poem begins, 'to mangle the Master's eavesdropping / on subalterns' whispers.' The poet's first language, Farsi, is 'the fierce Real or the sad Other of the Master- / Signifiers' (32). The argument here is with the constraints of monolingualism, a mindset that limits the possibilities of expression.

… Forge a discourse
to chain your/my tongue/s. You'll write me

       yours, I write you mine, and we'll relish
       the mystery of the written sign, the tricky

       similitude between things, incoherent
       thorn in the monoglot Master's eye. (32-3)

One doesn't need to stretch a reading of the poem very far to extend its critique of monolingualism to the Australian literary landscape, where Australian literature is presumed to be in English, where writing in other languages by Australians from diverse linguistic backgrounds continues to be perceived as Other. 'Language(s)', on the contrary, suggests an embrace of linguistic diversity, and delight in difference of expression and in mystery.

      Ashes in the Air is an example of Australian writing that pushes against everyday understandings of nation and national. From one perspective, Alizadeh's work can be read as part of a worldwide Iranian diasporic literature, to which a number of other Australian writers have contributed; there is certainly enough Iranian-focused content in the poems to support such an approach. Yet the poems are as much about Australia as they are about Iran, not only in reference to place, but also in reference to processes of becoming in which being Australian is, by necessity, an ongoing argument with ideologies.

Michael Jacklin