

The Saturday Paper

Two women meet in a cafe. One asks permission to write the other's life "while she lives it". The writer is a compassionate and observant interlocutor. Her subject, Jin, is wary and evasive. Their conversation examines words survivors of violence live with: memory, forgetting, blame, denial, doubt.

What form could an account of Jin's life take? More words: memoir, confessional, the problem of the unreliable or narcissistic "I", the crooked and fragmentary nature of testimony, the desire of the person remembering to protect those remembered, including the very people who did not protect her as a child. The hope not to hurt readers with stories so full of pain.

Janine Mikosza's enthralling debut work of life-writing dramatises memoir's fraught project as a dyadic conversation between selves. It is tender and tense, wry and riven, as one self asks questions and the other variously shies from and opens to this attention. This intimate interview frames slivers of history and flashes of memory as they visit the 14 houses Jin lived in until she turned 18. As evidence of her history, she offers sketches of floor plans and houses and notes written on paper serviettes and Post-it notes.

In her essay "A Sketch of the Past", Virginia Woolf bemoans the sidelong manner of her early reviews, something acquired through "tea-table training" – "handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar?" Yet she finds this surface manner allows her to "slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud".

Homesickness is concerned with concealing or disclosing traumatic and abusive histories, and how they jut into the present. Remembered moments emerge obliquely to jab and trouble the conversation. It is about pain and how we manage it. Jin works her way through a slice of chocolate cake "large enough to feed a family" at their first meeting. But sugar – a Crunchie bar bought at a servo on the way to one of the houses, chocolate-coated almonds consumed during a painful episode – wreck Jin's digestion. It's an addiction, the writer observes. No shit, replies Jin, with a bent smile.

Not having a witness, not being seen, compounds the pain of a "carelessly broken childhood". This phrase is not Jin's own: it's from an interview with writer sisters Kate and Rozanna Lilley. *Homesickness* is patched with others' testimony, finding words in their words and affinity in experiences that are, even so, always unique.

Jin mentions another such testimony, 96-year-old Katie's story of abuse in an orphanage. Jin becomes to Katie what the narrator is to Jin. She imagines reassuring her: "You're safe now, Katie. You're safe." In another exchange, Jin asks the writer about a hypothetical child, in an angry growl: "Would you believe a little girl if she told you..." She lists scenarios such a child might want to report to someone, were anyone listening.

These testimonies allow Jin to cast the unspeakable into the realms of the speakable, to express history as hypothesis and to challenge the writer to react. This catalogue of violent, invasive and cruel events shadows what Jin can and does speak about.

One secret Jin discloses more fully is an affair with a man she calls "writer-man". This kind of naming recurs in the book as a jokey shorthand the women share. One of the many inept, inattentive and abusive therapists Jin sees is referred to as "torture-lady" for her suggestion that Jin imagine an extreme version of an event that never happened.

The affair with writer-man is anguished. As they become close, he tells her about someone he knows who killed himself. Another shard of Jin's history appears in the negation of her comment: "I didn't tell writer-man about my own attempt, at 19, after years of depression." Writer-man is inconsistent, manipulative and abusive. When the writer suggests that the affair involved repetition compulsion, Jin tells her she's full of "Shit'nFreud."

This sounds like schadenfreude – taking pleasure in another's pain. That is another of memoir's traps, as Jin is aware. She knows that writing this kind of memoir comes with the potential of voyeurism: "there'll always be someone with money chomping me up, extracting, wanting more, more, more terrible details".

Jin quotes poet Sharon Olds, who says: "It is a lifelong labour trying to turn away from lies such as that one is worthless." That turning away, with its refusal to stay faithful to untruthful versions of history, offers hope – as Jin knows: "I'm not the only one ... There are other women out there." Poignantly, the writer replies: "Oh I know ... You're definitely not alone."

Olds also says: "I want a poem to be useful." Writing about violence you've experienced raises the question of purpose. What impact might this have on others and how is that weighed against the painful isolation of secret-keeping?

At art school Jin says she "smashed up my plastic childhood toys with a hammer and cast each broken piece in plaster ... I broke the horse heads in half to make two mirror-image bas-relief pieces." *Homesickness* makes something from shattered history, inventively dismantling and remaking linear memoir to do so. It is a work conscious of the hope it might offer, as well as the fickle and provisional possibility of ever sharing our most painful secrets, and of what might have to be smashed for that to happen.

Ultimo Press, 256pp, \$32.99

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on May 21, 2022 as "Homesickness, Janine Mikosza".

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