

Sleepwalking Toward Bethlehem

D.G. Gerard

Living Sea of Waking Dreams

by Richard Flanagan
304pp. Bertelsmann 2021

The last thing most of us want to read is a book as full of pain as Richard Flanagan's *Living Sea of Waking Dreams*. In the last two years many have been overwhelmed by grief, inundated by images of climate disaster, have grieved personal disasters caused or fed by capitalism and social disconnection.

It's assumed that the instinct to avoid emotional pain is universal, obvious; perhaps the only way to survive many challenges. Avoidance is an ancient instinct, but it has been turned against us. As media colonizes ever larger tracts of conscious experience, emotional avoidance is becoming all-consuming. *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* is Flanagan's answer to this cultural tendency, casting grief as an act of rebellion and a cathartic release.

The novel focuses on an Australian family witnessing their mother's death during a bushfire season worsened by climate change. Francie, a relic of a dying era of rural farms and women's work, slowly loses her memory and her sense of self as she endures waves of painful treatments that keep her clinging to life. Anna and Terzo, Francie's successful children, return to their hometown to argue with doctors and resist Francie's death. Tommy, a working-class artist who has been present with his mother through her final years, begs his siblings to let their mother go, retreating into defeated silence when they crush his appeals. As the landscape burns and Francie continues her inevitable decline, Anna notices that body parts are vanishing without warning—first, from her own body, and later, from her son, her girlfriend, and strangers.

Flanagan links Francie's death with climate change, but it is not a direct metaphor. He does not allow us to forget that keeping Francie alive is a sin and a torment, and the same cannot be said about efforts to keep our planet alive. Francie's death represents the death of an old way of life, one which has caused harm even as it has served. As Francie's



Kerala 2018 by Marcia Teusink. Oil on panel 2018

children circle her in her final days, they remember the harm she caused, and the abuse that sometimes spilled out in between her love. All is forgiven, but it is a thin forgiveness that stinks of denial. The family's drama mirrors the relationship between the upper class and capitalism—the mother of wealth and the father of endless horrors that aren't polite to discuss at the dinner table. Anna, Terzo, and the upper class cannot survive without resisting change and denying suffering, which fuels a fanatical and absurd resistance to death. Flanagan does not spare us the unpleasant results: the archetype of the steel-strong venture capitalist becomes a parody as we watch Terzo vacillate between manic, cruel love and pathetic, disturbing collapse.

The family's denial infects more than the process of death. Every aspect of life is choked by a dissociation that Flanagan makes physical through vanishing body parts. As Anna suffers through the events of the novel and cuts away inconvenient feelings and desires, she loses fingers, a knee, a breast. In moments of emotional intensity, she runs away to scroll through scenes of environmental destruction on her phone, shoving down her grief and

terror and replacing it with acceptable, commodified anxiety. She has no respect for her own need to grieve and suffer, so she hates herself, and her hatred drives her to be cruel to others. Despite this, she is aware enough to notice what she is losing, and to feel alienated when people around her refuse to notice or acknowledge those losses. But environmental losses disturb her more than anything else, and they coalesce into a grief so large it can't be put into words.

The old wound in this family is the death of a son and brother, Ronnie, who killed himself as a teenager after he was abused by a priest at his Catholic school. Flanagan elegantly captures the amnesia characteristic of child abuse. Details concerning the incident are sparse because the family cannot bear to look at the tragedy directly. Fragments erupt without context, and implied violence haunts the narrative. The presence is so subtle that one can sense the characters straining to avoid deeper memory. When violations occur in a culture whose primary defense is dissociation, the first instinct of the witness is a frantic avoidance of memory. Francie's confused and fragmented memory is perhaps the final stage of this intentional forgetting.

Anna attempts to save her son, Gus, from Ronnie's fate by punishing him for his vulnerability. When Gus was young, Anna refused his need for comfort, and he never recovers from this wound. He refuses to participate in the struggle of existence and instead entombs himself in a closed world of video games and internet use. He vanishes faster than anyone, and soon enough, only one eye is left, the final portal through which he absorbs the images that flash across his screen.

Flanagan's anger spills out in sentences where Anna hypocritically bemoans the insubstantial conversations of people who surround her, describing Netflix shows and liberal magazine features as "bedtime fairytales for adults". Sometimes this anger descends into a solipsism that evokes Shakespeare's Hamlet. Anna feels superior to the emotionless drones who surround her, without considering the deep grief that others are carrying beneath their polished exteriors. And worse than Hamlet, Anna does not outwardly resist participation in the same shallow behaviors. This too is part of Flanagan's profile of the contemporary mind. Although Anna has awareness of her culture's collective dysfunction, she cannot imagine ways to transcend the systems which trap her in misery, and never bothers to search for them.

There are characters in *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* who imagine futures that transcend the mistakes of the past. Awkward, stuttering Tommy faces the grief of his mother's death with graceful acceptance, and parents his castaway granddaughter with deep kindness. A scientist who Anna encounters on a flight, works quietly to save a parrot species from extinction and speaks freely about what sustains or pains her. This is not a novel that imagines new possibilities. It is a work of art before anything else, revealing the grief that must be faced before one can get up and begin the work of fixing things. It is a novel of gratitude and awe for a beautiful world that is already fading away.

D.G. Gerard is an activist, student, and bookseller based in Berkeley, CA.