

JACK CAMERON STANTON

Huo Yan, *Dry Milk*

Translated by Duncan M Campbell
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When approaching a novella, I always recall the words of Irish short story writer, Claire Keegan, offered at one of her fiction clinics at the University of Technology, Sydney: “a story is as long or as short as it needs to be,” she said.

I begin this review of Huo Yan’s brief but tense novella *Dry Milk* by referring to Keegan’s advice because it provides a useful lens through which to measure the success of varying forms. It helps as a point of reference, and prompts questions. Does this novella achieve everything it promises the reader? Could it’ve actually been the bones of something much longer? Or indeed has the writer found that the story has exhausted itself before the one hundred page mark, with everything said or inferred? Often, novellas build to a singular scene at the end with remarkable narrative and dramatic intensity, producing the paradoxical feeling of “coming out of nowhere” while, upon reflection, seemingly entirely inevitable. This is not a prescription; always, rules can be broken. Although it’s certainly what *Dry Milk* seeks to create: a sharp inhale with no exhalation.

Dry Milk was written in 2013 while Huo Yan undertook a Fellowship in Auckland, which required her to write a story set in New Zealand. The Beijing-based novelist’s novella was later translated from Mandarin to English by Duncan M. Campbell after earning accolades in China, shortlisted for the Lu Xun literary prize and named as one of the finest novellas of the year. Except, as Yan confesses in the author’s note, “A number of Chinese people in New Zealand have been less enamoured by it.” This ambivalence—or indeed, Yan seems to suggest—*dislike* of her artistic representation by Chinese readers in New Zealand may very well be the reception the book deserves, considering the pessimism with which it portrays a migrant experience gone wrong.

Above water, this one-sitting book tells a deceptively simple story about a trio of liars that enter into a bizarre triangle of deception. John Lee, an ageing Chinese ex-pat who moved from his home in Beijing to New Zealand thirty years before the book opens, has watched his dream of leaving China and acculturating in New Zealand fade into bitterness and misanthropy. His sham marriage to “the woman,” a victim of a carbon dioxide gassing attack during the Cultural Revolution who was left mentally disabled and unhinged, alludes to the ways past trauma can infiltrate the present, a significant concern among the generation of Chinese writers proceeding from the Revolution. In *Dry Milk*, however, the effects of trauma seem to have dwindled into ennui and resignation, hidden in the shadows of John Lee’s misery. The woman spends her days trapped inside their coastal home “peeling the wallpaper with her fingers and throwing the pieces over herself, like confetti,” while John Lee looks after his antiques shop, which is pretty much devoid of customers (paying ones, at least).

The novella’s bleak onset is suddenly disrupted by a single sunray in John Lee’s life: he becomes infatuated with a young girl, Jiang Xiaoyu, the niece of his business partner Ye Xiaosheng, who asks whether she could stay with him. John Lee’s obsession with the young student deepens, all under the apparently dumb gaze of the woman. He spends days in Jiang Xiaoyu’s room, going through drawers, sniffing her underwear, reciting sick poetry in his head.

Although John Lee is manipulative and spiteful towards his wife, and seedily paedophilic toward his friend’s young niece, it doesn’t stop Ye Xiaosheng from convincing him to invest his life

savings into the exportation of NZ-made milk powder to China. From there, Yan skilfully develops this substory, inferring that somehow one of them is being hoodwinked.

This presentation of two worlds, China and NZ, with neither really becoming a “home” for the characters depicts what happens to somebody’s sense of identity and self-worth when they feel trapped in a rift between two cultures. Yan’s view of this cultural disturbance is subtly posed, maybe even too much so. “Walking around nowadays, you see Chinese faces everywhere,” John Lee observes. “How careful he had been, thirty years ago, to try to fit in and become like them.” His story is a parable of failed acculturation, an alienation from his native and adopted culture. Indeed the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of the next generation is alluded to, but never mined for insights. At its core, *Dry Milk* is more about disillusionment than enlightenment, a venture that doesn’t seek to explore trauma, but rather demonstrates what happens to someone who tries to conceal or repress it. The unfortunate result is that sometimes the narrative’s drama can also feel concealed and repressed.

That being said, like many good novellas it builds to an ultimate scene drenched with white-hot conflict, and then clips the narrative before offering any kind of denouement. For John Lee, the “prospect of a new life” that once hung before him is gone. And while the elaborate scheme just beneath the story’s surface begins to take form, we’re given glimpses into what makes Yan such a promising young novelist, born in 1986, with eight books already to her name in China.

The one reservation I have, and this is really a symptom relating to the novella form more broadly, is that certain plot lines never reappear or clarify themselves. For example, John Lee’s life as a librarian who had to burn books for the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution is mentioned in passing, and then left precisely there: in the past. His mistreatment of “the woman” is not condoned but neither is it exposed or condemned. I’m left with the impression that this book, although in some respects effective and entertaining due to its brevity, also leads the reader along a few roads that turn out to be dead ends.