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Omar Musa, *Here Come the Dogs*
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In *Here Come the Dogs*, summer stretches as wide as suburbia and is as indistinct and brutal as the drought-dry bush. Young men, with at once too much and too little, circle the Town's roundabouts with their turn-offs to frustration, hopelessness and hangover. Language trickles through cracks in asphalt, through the rocks in still visible waterfalls, and through the still night time solitude. We know these men but not written like this. Gone are the grunts and slang that often stereotype people like the main characters, Solomon, Jimmy, and Aleks. Instead, they speak with a lyrical beat and a narrative track that is as complex as their hidden emotional landscape.

Omar Musa has written a story of intimacy and power. His lyricism flows easily from the force of music to the ease of crime to the knife-edged ecstasies of love. But in the slide between first and third person, the slip between lineated hip-hop and observant storytelling, comes the idea that our true inheritance is language. Through the dazzle of views and strong pulse of the sentences, young men struggle to live with this inheritance, its power and its responsibility. Language is what these men have most constantly and most potently – it is their un-making and remaking, their tie to the past and their hope for the future.

The story follows Solomon, a handsome ladies' man who could have been a great basketballer; his half-brother, Jimmy, lonely and awkward; and Aleks, a painter who will do what he shouldn't to support his family. They are united by their deep love of hip hop, their shared history of misdemeanor and the fact that they have always lived in a small town in regional Australia.

The text moves consistently from character to character, devoting chapters to each in turn. Solomon is first and last, in narrative order,

and in our affections. His chapters are strong, first-person and poetic. He reads like a rhyme and his emotions move with rhythm and flow. His observations of the dog races that open the book are aggressive and brutal:

Eyes tick like a stopwatch/
 People head home or out/
 A cop car smears by/
 Then a Ninja-Turtle green Supra
 with two hanging from one window/
 techno pumping/
 ‘Ay, boys, show us where ya piss from!’/
 We’re cracking up
 and our middle fingers go straight in the air/

This is good shit/ (20-21)

But as the novel progresses, his sensitivity to his inner life is rendered in sweet, sharp bursts. We get to know him as he gets to know himself, in a captivating progression towards honesty. He confronts his actions, especially his failure to make decisions:

I used to walk home
 through this oval,
 lie in the dew,

 Drunk and reeking,
 thinking of the times I pured a three
 or threaded a pass perfectly.
 Misses,
 awards,
 failure.

No basketball, no dad to play for –
 been rudderless ever since.
 Maybe that’s why I bought the hound.

Maybe it was a reason to be responsible for something again. (98)

Solomon's wasted opportunities are matched by Jimmy's lack of them. Jimmy is compelling as the picture of the shy guy, the also-ran, who is as opaque as he is recognizable. His internal world makes hip hop a faith:

The moment of epiphany about hip hop had come at age twelve. A cassette tape passed from paw to paw, backpack to backpack, had ended up in Jimmy's pencil case... A crackle, and then suddenly a maelstrom of noise from the tinny speakers – street, eloquent and masculine – tough as Smokin' Joe Frazier. It was love at first listen... If he could have prayed at an altar of hip hop, he would have. (112)

Yet this faith does little to ward off his demons, loneliness and madness, or the paternal rejection they spring from. He turns violent and has vivid dreams that extend into his waking hours, so that he finds cars, people, and equipment misplaced and broken:

Jimmy is at the wheel.

The red bonnet is reflecting the murderous sun, throwing up vertical spears of light. The fan is not working. He hasn't eaten since the curry four days ago and is unsure if he is awake or asleep. He feels faint as he listens to the voice on the other end. The voice – robotic, metallic – is unmistakably his father's. (304)

The action moves from past to present tense in his chapters, which compounds Jimmy's waking nightmare. He glides through suburbia, invisible and ignored, tinder-dry dangerous in his need for love.

Aleks is married with a daughter, but his sincere family love is complicated and compromised. Family love includes love of Macedonia, his birthplace, and the explicit responsibility of a bi-cultural heritage. It is compromised by violence, an internal pulse that he cultivates and

uses, with terrible results. He spends half the book in prison, exposed to his own insecurities:

A rectangle of sky, seamless and cyanic.

A bird hangs against the lidless sun, turns, wheels and turns back before disappearing. Half an hour later, a reef of water-coloured clouds drifts across, then a distant plane, like a fugitive, carving the blue in half with its contrails.

Aleks looks down.

...It is his second day inside. (151)

...When he returns to his dark, silent cell, the presence beneath him almost seems big enough to devour him. There are times deep in the clockless hours when the man cries out and Aleks worries for him. Then he feels disgusted. So alien, so black. (199)

Both despite and because of his violence, with these kind of lyrical observations Aleks can be explicit about the inheritance of loss through language:

He recognises for the first time that his mother's face is inscribed with something like a timeless pain, which is perhaps contained within every Maco, every person from the Balkans, who at some point has just had to cop it, again and again. The lines on her face like infinitesimal divisions and subdivisions of anger, trauma, loss – a tumbling alphabet within the DNA. (299)

Solomon, Jimmy, and Aleks each push beyond what they feel is possible, push past bad habits, to find something new – for good or ill. Their stories don't connect. They move around each other, but not with each other. They are united by their identification with place, which includes a confrontation with race. This confrontation is subtle, as it resides in language. It ranges from the personal – Aleks' racial

prejudices and how they're changed in prison, Solomon losing face in front of his Samoan cousins, Jimmy's uncertainty about his background – to the general, with the racist euphemisms of politicians and the shadow memory of an Indigenous past that deepens the waterfall and sky. Race is everywhere and nowhere, on the tongue and in the body, the characters' changing as they change the words they use to see the world.

This is a portrait of young men now. It shows the complexity of small town life, and each day is lived between legality and illegality, biculturally, on the edge of racial tension and sexual tension and destructive inattention. The man in the hoodie dreams of love and the open-faced father hides a gun. Our brothers and sons, lovers and friends, neighbours and colleagues – their dreams bounce with a beat, an Australian hip-hop sensibility that vibrates with the detail of the everyday. It speaks particularly and peculiarly of these three young men in the Town, and in doing so, writes of a generation of men who are privileged globally but underprivileged locally, and the way they navigate this dissonance in their identity.

Or perhaps this is just me. This story feels personal, which made this review hard to write. I know these men – they're the men of my generation. Not at this age, in their late twenties with a succession of failures already behind them. I know them at eighteen and twenty. That action is just like an ex-boyfriend, in despair at his wayward and abandoning father and in tears from the effort of creating masculinity from rejection. That conversation is my brother and his mates, boys I've known since their puppy-fat was dimpled, now blasted and wasted and rapping obscenities in a syntax that doesn't belong in their privileged, educated mouths. That pattern of thought, the bounce between hope and despair along the asphalt, belong to the friends carried with me from high school as they try to disentangle strength from drunken passion, emotion from smoke-paranoia, and love from obsession.

They try and fail and try again, just like Solomon, Jimmy and Aleks. They move in and around the vast interior of themselves and the land they live in. For all the summer's crushing heat, the sky's crippling space, they have enormous energy and verve. The men of my generation,

like Solomon, Jimmy, and Aleks, have hope. In this book, hope resides in the sentences, in the lyric descriptions, in the exciting, insightful writing. It lies in the bounce and beat of the lines, like those voiced by Solomon as he finds the phrases that make his true story:

Scarlett is tattooing a kite on the back of my arm.

Each puncture
is beauty and sadness,
is fear of falling back into bad habits,
is furious freedom,
is knowledge I can change,
that I have changed.

Beneath our feet,
tectonic plates are gliding,
shifting. (277-8)