

**Antonia Banyard**, *Never Going Back*, Thistle-down Press, 2010  
**Lydia Kwa**, *Pulse*, Key Porter Books, 2010

Possibly the most evocative opening to a novel ever penned is the first sentence of *The Go-Between* (1953) by L.P. Hartley: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' The strangeness of the past is fruitful territory for writers who are interested in how people can be shaped over time by specific events beyond their control; it is especially fruitful for novelists convinced that accurate memories well understood are the best bulwark against personal fragmentation. Like Hartley, both Antonia Banyard and Lydia Kwa create characters who are compelled to examine painful incidents in their pasts in light of their mature experiences. The task of these characters is to bring to the surface nuances and impressions that were, at the time, either misunderstood, misclassified or suppressed, and to reframe a sequence of events in a way that makes healing and wholeness at least imaginable in the present. In both *Never Going Back* and *Pulse*, the duty of self-forgiveness is essential to grasping the meaning of the past. And, like Hartley before them, neither Banyard nor Kwa underestimates the psychological turbulence that figures in coming to terms with the role one has played in the lives of others. Letting go of broken things without a loss of self is a daunting prospect for even the sturdiest of egos.

102



Both these books are dark, but (despite its ironic title) *Never Going Back* is the more optimistic of the two. The novel is Banyard's first venture into full-length fiction, and she has chosen to set her story in British Columbia, where she currently lives, and among characters who seem contemporary and familiar. Readers in their 20s and 30s will probably recognize the phenomenon of the 'urban tribe' that makes up part of Banyard's premise here (though it must be admitted that not all her characters are urbanites in the strictest sense). Friends and allies since their high-school days in Nelson, Siobahn, Evan and Lea set off from Vancouver on a trip back home to reconnect with the two members of their clan who have stayed behind. There, well-adjusted Mandy is about to give birth, whereas Lance, an intellectual and a loner, is emotionally paralyzed, unable to leave or to finish his half-renovated house. All five, in addition, are haunted to varying degrees by the death of a sixth friend, Kristy, who drove her car off an embankment into the river one summer night shortly after their graduation.

Banyard makes effective use of shifts in point of view and of deft narrative jump-cuts from present to past. As the principal characters

reflect on their adolescent missteps and oversights, the threads of Kristy's mysterious death are delicately unpicked, like stitches being removed from a wound. Evan feels guilty for turning a blind eye toward Kristy's status as a high-school misfit. Lance blames himself for first befriending and then rejecting her. Siobahn's complicity in the tragic affair, oddly, is both more sinister and less culpable. Though she had reason to suspect that her friend was one of many victims of sexual abuse at the hands of a trusted teacher, her own self-image as 'the one faithful believer' has led her to refrain from condemning the perpetrator, even as he was convicted and jailed for his offenses. The most complex and interesting of the five main characters, it is Siobahn who carries the narrative forward, beset as she is by self-doubt and hesitation. In the end, the baby is born, a window is installed, a lifeless relationship terminated, and a long-abandoned model rocket ceremonially launched—all four events signalling a liberation from the past and some tentative steps toward the acceptance of what cannot be undone.

Though similar in plot and relying equally upon the uncanny continuity of the past with the present, Lydia Kwa's *Pulse* is an altogether denser, darker and more mystical treatment of the process of reconciling what is with what was. An epigraph from the maverick psychologist R.D. Laing hints at the varieties of awareness, both conscious and otherwise, that imbue this text with psychologically sound ambiguities: 'Moreover Jack sees that Jill herself knows what Jill thinks Jack knows, but that Jill does not realize she knows it.' To augment the atmosphere of claustrophobia and uncertainty that is necessary to the story, Kwa makes use of first-person narration and a single point of view. (Most of us, indeed, squint at the truth through the small keyholes of our awareness.) At the same time, protagonist Natalie Chia is an unusually sensitive narrator. An acupuncturist, a seer, a transplanted Asian of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage, and a practitioner of the Japanese art of erotic bondage known as *kinbaku*, Natalie is no stranger to the many levels on which outward experience affects inner realities.

*Pulse* begins with one letter and ends with another. The first calls Natalie back from Toronto to her childhood home in Singapore. The last (written many years earlier, but not sent) bestows a kind of blessing on her existence; it represents simultaneously a forgiving and a plea for forgiveness. Both letters are written by Faridah, Natalie's childhood friend, adolescent lover and reluctant betrayer. In the interval between the receipt of these letters comes a journey into the past where the frailties and misdeeds of one generation ap-

pear to be visited most unfairly, yet with a decorous symmetry, upon the next.

After abandoning Natalie, Faridah has married Adam and has promptly miscarried the child with which she was pregnant. Later, she gives birth to Selim, a boy whose destiny it is to make up for the absence of his never-known brother and to appease his father for the loss of that earlier, ghostly child. This appeasement makes Adam the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of his father, an episode in the novel that is conveyed only indirectly. The details of this abuse, however, matter less than the parallel it creates between Selim and Natalie (who for identical reasons a few years before had sought solace in the arms of Selim's mother).

It seems to me that Kwa has looked deeply into the least appealing crevices of the human heart and has found something there not merely to contemplate philosophically, but to nourish and protect generously. As the superior, controlling partner in erotic bondage, for example, Natalie continually denies (even as she is aware of) her inability to tolerate vulnerability. This negation, ironically, makes her most vulnerable. As she learns eventually, 'To be closed is to be vulnerable. Openness and vulnerability—these aren't the same thing, after all.... Without openness, how could anyone live fully in the present, respond to what is actually happening, as opposed to things of the past?' By the same token, Selim, the son of her former lover, cannot relinquish his need to be vulnerable, and this leads him to commit suicide in a fashion that brutalizes his family most unnecessarily. That Natalie and Selim are granted a brief moment of connection across their respective generations, despite the desperate denials of those most dear to them, makes this novel both profound and absorbing.

Overlaid on Kwa's saga of parent-to-child abuse is her equally painful and absorbing account of the history of Singapore. In modern times, it was a British imperial acquisition, made a colony in 1826, and then in 1942 conquered by the Japanese, under whom the Malay were subjected to a second form of foreign rule. Reclaimed again by the British after the war, Singapore became self-governing only on June 6, 1959—the very day, as it happens, of Natalie's birth. Primarily Muslim, those of Malay descent faced many barriers in their entry into the modern Asian economy. Those who intermarried had familial prejudices to contend with as well. Kwa very ably illustrates the congruencies between personal and political identities in late 20th-century Singapore, and the primary motif of her novel—father-to-child incest—though horrifying, is an apt vehicle for this historical reality. As the young Natalie concludes, 'Monsters had to go on rampages. It



was inevitable. We humans would survive only if monsters were kept dormant. They're dangerous when awakened and...you've got to get them before they kill you.'

Banyard, by contrast, is more or less silent about the larger historical forces that may or may not bear down upon her characters. This is not a literary weakness; rather, it suggests her as-yet-untarnished conviction that individuals can exert some practical control over the direction of their lives. Whereas for Kwa, understanding is all (or nearly all), Banyard believes that informed decisions have an impact on the course of events. Thus, despite the similar concerns of these two novels—sexual abuse, suicide, survivor guilt—the chief difference between them is that *Pulse* is written in a minor key, *Never Going Back* in a major one. Still, in light of the very public discussions of child abuse—within the Residential Schools, within the Catholic Church—that are necessary in Canada today, one reads these novels as symptomatic of a contemporary preoccupation with the wrongs of the past and their legacy in the present. Books like these are certainly part of the analysis, and possibly part of the recovery.

—Hilary Turner

