

**Bernice Chauly. *Incantations / Incarcerations*. Kuala Lumpur, Gerakbudaya Enterprise, 2019, 63 pp. ISBN: 9789670311418.**

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“Where but to think is sorrow/ And leaden-eyed despair”

John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”

Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” the epitome of Romanticism, may seem an odd starting point for a review of *Incantations/Incarcerations*, which clearly derives from the tradition of confessional poetry known for its typically bleak and brutal tones. But, as Charles Molesworth notes, “confessional poetry can be seen as one degraded branch of Romanticism, placing the sensitivity of the poet at the centre of concern” (1976, 163). Furthermore, “Nightingale” reminds us of the many elements which go into the making of the most effective poetry: self-reflection, a willingness to acknowledge the darkness that lurks beneath externalities and, in some cases, a longing for a little “draught of vintage!” (Keats 1982 [1819], 280).

These all present themselves in Bernice Chauly’s latest collection of poetry, which draws the reader into a world of pain and longing, and an impulse to escape into alcohol and death. Chauly is no stranger to the Malaysian literary scene, having published three other volumes of poetry (*going there and coming back*, 1997; *The Book of Sins*, 2008; and *Onkalo*, 2013), besides a collection of short stories (*Lost in KL*, 1998), an award-winning memoir (*Growing Up with Ghosts*, 2011), and a novel set in the turbulent period of the Reformasi movement (*Once We Were There*, 2017).

Chauly’s latest release reminds the reader of her capacity to write in a broad range of styles, and of the fine line that separates literary genres. It contains forty-five pieces, including two in Malay (“Untuk mereka yang sedang tenggelam” and “Lagu liar”, a translation of Hugo Williams’s “Siren Song”). And although the title page identifies the pieces in the volume as “Poems by Bernice Chauly”, some poems straddle poetry and prose in their structure and cadences, reminding the reader of the lyricism which marked portions of her memoir. “In the end is the end is the end”, for example, is laid out in paragraphs but underpinned by a subtle rhythmic regularity, such as in its opening lines:

That morning she woke up and her mouth tasted salty, of crushed peanuts. She couldn't remember if she had brushed her teeth or if she had stumbled into bed. She couldn't remember if she had turned the lights out and let the dog in. She couldn't remember undressing, or the moment she put her head on the pillow. She pulled herself up slowly, leaned over and looked at the time. (44)

The two poems which provide the title of the book embody much of what the collection is about. "Incantations" recounts the growth and eventual collapse of a relationship with a lover, and the fact that such entanglements frequently become the catalyst for writing. Multiple pieces in this volume bear testimony to the latter, in a manner recalling the earlier work, *The Book of Sins* and *Onkalo*. From the flushes of love in "Matador" to a "filthy" instance of being forced upon in "But we would have to write letters", these capture the breadth of experiences that constitute lovers' relations and present frank portrayals of sexual encounters and erotic desires.

"Incarcerations", by contrast, begins with the arresting assertion that "Women are born with pain, / it is in our ovaries, in the uterus, / in the newborn heart", and goes on to depict unrelentingly "the stretching of the cervix, the / opening of skin, the tearing of it, / the stitching of it, the screams" (57). And though the experience of pain is said to be "our strength", the poem's title resists a simplistic celebration of female fortitude. Rather, "Incarcerations" highlights the many possible results of this pain, not all of which would typically be deemed positive: "pain makes us wise and vengeful / it makes us drink, swear and be brutish / it is our strength" (57).

Other pieces in the volume pick up the various strands of female existence touched upon in this poem. Whereas "Incarcerations" describes pain as that which links women to "our daughters", "Mary of Magdala" and "Nothing" evoke the experiences of other women to reassert this sense of solidarity. The stark description of the female physique in "Incarcerations" finds fuller expression in "A letter to my never again", which is addressed "to my once lithe, dimple-free body, / to the now double chin and lumpy-dough thighs, / to the now flabby arms" (8). Confronting her astigmatism, sagging breasts, and the hot flushes of menopause, the persona concludes by affirming the value of her body because it has carried her through the many tumults of life. Motherhood, alluded to in "Incarcerations", is also presented in a multi-faceted way through Chauly's return to it in several poems. In "L", for example, the persona's encounter with her daughter brings her back to the past by reviving memories of her childhood and the loss of her father. By contrast, "October" and "I have come to fear airplanes" reflect on her daughters leaving home to address the fears of the future this incites. Presenting yet another aspect of motherhood, "Today" begins with the startling declaration, "I want to leave my children / I want my life back" (46). Its subsequent description of motherhood as "a curse / a chain that grows longer by the day" is a candid depiction of motherhood as burden and obstacle to personal freedom.

*Incantations/Incarcerations* also includes the occasional foray into socio-political commentary. In “Broken Country,” dedicated to Australian poet, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Chauly balances images of Australia’s natural landscape with accounts of the abuse of its indigenous groups, observing along the way, “i cannot write in this broken land, but i can grieve for a land that is not mine” (15). The poem is an interesting counterpoint to “May 9<sup>th</sup>”, Chauly’s take on Barisan Nasional’s defeat in Malaysia’s 2018 general election. Here, too, we are presented with a country in which the persona initially cannot write: “the word was silent / thoughts were silenced / stories were not told”, a sentiment previously expressed with greater detail and passion in *Onkalo* (“Jerit”). But the persona’s conclusion that “We can write them now/ all stories are possible” appears ingenuous in its optimism. “17 July 2014,” written to commemorate the deaths of those onboard MH17, the Malaysian airliner shot down while flying over Ukraine, is similarly simplistic and given over to sentimentality: “Like angels, they seek rest/ and return to places of light / blithe spirits, unbroken / by the sun” (29). Perhaps, however, the dissatisfaction one feels with these poems is a backhanded compliment to the strength of Chauly’s more intimate pieces, their superficiality becoming apparent because they stand in such contrast to the searing energy of the latter.

In short, *Incantations/Incarcerations* serves up that which we have come to expect from Chauly, both in subject matter and delivery. It can thus be expected to please her existing fans and will serve as a fair introduction to readers encountering her work for the first time.

### Works Cited

Keats, John. (1982) [Originally published in 1819] “Ode to a Nightingale.” *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press: 279-81.

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