

*Blood Kin* by Ceridwen Dovey (Penguin) R160.

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The ominous title of this novel is by no means inappropriate: it is as chilling a fable as any since JM Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The setting is extremely bleak: an unnamed city in an arid region, recently disrupted by the overthrow of the President, an autocratic and brutally repressive leader. The new regime is constituted by a shadowy group of former dissidents led by the Commandant: more charismatic than his predecessor, but evidently quite as vulnerable to the seductions of power.

Against this backdrop we are introduced to our first three narrators: the President's chef, his portraitist and his barber, all deposed and imprisoned along with their previous employer in his former Summer Residence, but all three gradually regaining their former positions, as indeed the new regime starts resembling the old.

The characters are not immediately or indeed ultimately attractive. The portraitist is obsessed with the fate of his eight-month pregnant wife, who is being held elsewhere in the complex: "She is the kind of woman you can never get tired of," the hapless man gurgles, "for she is secretive and has a vivid internal life that is opaque to me." In short, he is a cuckold waiting to happen.

The chef resumes his kitchen duties with alacrity, and Dovey conveys with rare skill the basic brutality of cooking: "The crayfish will be crouched in their buckets waiting for me, the abalone will be tight as marble, piled on top of each other, contracted against contact, and it will take a while to soothe them." The chef's human relations seem to be run with the same kind of ruthless efficiency as his kitchen: when he lost interest in his wife, he abandoned her, and when she went mad as a result, he had her institutionalised, content in the knowledge that his daughter is spending her life looking after her mother, all in keeping with his self-proclaimed "respect for processes, the satisfaction of peeling and chopping and mincing and grating, all the myriad ways one can put a culinary world in order."

The barber is plagued by guilt: his elder brother was a rebel, and was killed by the President. By virtue of his position, the barber could easily have killed the President, but he never did. Now, as the Commander's barber, he is brought into contact with his brother's former fiancée, who happens to be the Commander's wife, and the two commence a precarious affair.

In part II of the novel the narration is entrusted to the women of these men, and they are if anything less attractive than their male counterparts. The chef's daughter hates her father and is yet fatally bound to him by their similarity, his sadism finding a complement in her masochism. "It amuses me that she becomes more like me each day," her father sardonically comments.

The portraitist's wife, a food beautician who takes perverse delight in the frauds she perpetrates for the camera, despises her husband for doting on her, and resents the child she is bearing: "I am tired of the burden of bearing another human being, the enforced earnestness of impending motherhood."

Only the barber's brother's fiancée shows a modicum of humanity in her coming to care for the barber for himself, rather than for his resemblance to his brother – though here,

too, her commitment is undermined by a native cynicism: "It is terrifying that desire can rot into disgust, and so quickly too."

The technique of first-person narration requires these characters to reveal themselves to the reader almost cold-bloodedly: they have no illusions about their own natures or motives, and, apart from the portraitist, are not taken in by their fellow-narrators. "There is a calm that comes from thinking only about oneself," says the portraitist's pregnant wife, "I would venture so far as to say it is the only true freedom."

It is certainly the only kind anybody is offered here. "We all know power and desire couple effortlessly," pronounces the chef, in what may well stand as the novel's motto. This extraordinary first novel has the competence and fluency one would expect from a far more experienced writer. Dovey writes with a kind of clinical purity and a certain ruthlessness of imagination. She has a vivid, at times brutal, turn of metaphor: "my mind begins to seize up like a crushed windpipe," confesses the portraitist; later he describes the President's wife's "thick nostrils quivering like a giant trying to smell her prey." That the mildest of the book's characters is capable of such violent imagery may make its own point, that nobody is exempt from the prevalent brutality.

There is no doubt that Dovey can write, and I am sure that she will establish a considerable name for herself. If anything marks this novel as the work of a relatively inexperienced writer, it is its youthful heartlessness, its indulgence in the very bleakness of its vision. Combined with the icy precision of the writing, such a vision does have considerable force; but it does not entirely convince on any but the rather cerebral level at which it is pitched. It is worth waiting for such technical virtuosity to find a more heartfelt subject.