

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# The Worry Front by HG Gildfind: darkness and violence at work within us

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By **FIONA WRIGHT**

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The stories in *The Worry Front*, the debut book from Melbourne writer HG Gildfind, all follow characters coming to terms with their own limitations: physical and emotional, intimate and interpersonal.

Many are living in bodies that are injured, unwell, or otherwise aberrant. All of them are somehow on the fringes of their social worlds. These are characters unable to connect or openly speak, each contemplating love and loneliness in their own way.

There is an elderly woman facing a terrible diagnosis and the petty selfishness of her children; a man struggling to understand his inchoate longings and desires; a childless woman babysitting for a once-close friend.

Gildfind's collection is delicately structured and assuredly narrated, with each story interested in the minute shifts of tenderness and cruelty at play within human relationships. There is a shared landscape: a semi-industrial space of factories, refineries, highways and suburbs, which one character fittingly describes as "monuments to our capacity to destroy and create with the very same gesture".

The final story, *Quarry*, which won the *Griffith Review* novella prize in 2016, is one of the strongest pieces in the book. The title is excellent, referring to an isolated and abandoned landscape through which the main character, Luke, often walks, and the feelings of huntedness that drive him to do so in the first place.

Luke is a chef in a small town cafe, and a large man, heavily scarred from an incident in a kitchen when he was an apprentice. He works under the unpredictable and bullying Cane, and alongside

Sarah, the only woman he knows who “doesn’t flinch at the mess of his scars”.

This environment becomes a kind of pressure cooker for the tensions between the small staff and for Luke’s fears of his own potential monstrosity, his own ability to do harm.

Indeed, this sense of monstrosity, or latent violence, is important to many of the stories. It haunts the protagonist of *Ferryman*, an angry, middle-aged man trying to start a new life in a small town after being accused of an awful crime, and the reclusive woman living alone in *The Wished For*.

In some stories, such as *The Broken Body* and *The Worry Front*, this monstrosity is explicitly linked to illness. In others it is to bodily maintenance: the ferryman is walking around town to “shift his big fat gut off”, just as the characters in *Solomon Jeremy Rupert Jones* and *Eat. Shit. Die* are preoccupied with their weight, especially as a means to express their own self-disgust.

At their strongest, the stories chart the ambiguities of interpersonal relationships with remarkable subtlety and an impressive lightness of touch. These are not stories of high drama and piercing epiphanies but of small moments and movements, and minute shifts in emotion and understanding.

Gildfind’s admiration of writers such as Lorrie Moore, with her interest in contradictory gestures and constant interweaving of humour and pathos, is clear. There are some wonderful, pitch-perfect voices, including the truly strange and slightly manic narrator of *Eat. Shit. Die*, and some startling and funny descriptions, such as that of a man “short as a jockey”, but so brawny that he looks like “a pit bull in an exquisitely tailored tux”.

Occasionally, however, Gildfind does slip into overwriting, into phrases such as “glowing under the moonlit, dawn-lit caps of new snow”, or a description of cooking flavours that “melt and meld”.

Here the deliberately poetic gestures puncture an otherwise smooth narration or break with a gruff or inarticulate character’s point of view, and so disturb the fictional world that Gildfind is building.

Nonetheless, *The Worry Front* is a remarkably assured debut.

Gildfind's stories all gesture towards large questions and insecurities, and chart complex and confusing territories of love and connection, as well as envy and mistrust, within the confines of ordinary spaces: houses, back yards, cafes, offices and swimming pools. They are stories that are interested in messiness rather than order, in what we cannot fully understand or make sense of, and with the darkness and occasional violence at work within us.

*Fiona Wright is a writer and poet.*

## **The Worry Front**

By HG Gildfind

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