

*A Line Made by Walking* by Sara Baume

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Review by Melanie White

Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* is a novel made by meandering, two steps forward and one step back, over the same small patch of Irish earth. Its aimless artist heroine, Frankie, retreats to her late grandmother's bungalow in a state of existential despair; the bungalow, in the remote countryside, "shimmered with healing potential", and so Frankie squirrels herself away to press her cheek into the musty carpet, contemplate dust mites and venture forth now and again to photograph roadkill.

Following her acclaimed debut, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, Baume achieves the feat of making a book about depression, alienation and other cheerful subjects deeply absorbing and, ultimately, uplifting, given the elegant lucidity of her prose, the sharp clear truth of her insights, and the wry humour that arises from her character's associative mind. Frankie's thoughts trail across the minutiae of her dusty, isolated world, punctuated by attempts to recall artworks relevant to her mental ramblings. Wondering about a tree that fell the morning of her grandmother's death, "momentously uprooting itself", she turns her mind to "Works about Falling", coming up with Bas Jan Ader's 1970 film about the artist rolling off his roof to land in shrubbery. Frankie's artistic recall punctuates the novel and emerges as something of an obsessive-compulsive tic, but more than that it underscores the book's driving theme: the function of art to capture an idea, a thing, a person, in an attempt to make it "last forever".

Tellingly, one of the few things for which Frankie fails to conjure an artwork is "happiness". Death is more her milieu; she assigns herself the project of photographing dead animals whenever she happens upon them, amassing a series of close-up wildlife casualties (the photos are actually in the book). She examines each one unflinchingly, as if by staring death square in the face she can, in some way, come to terms with the loss of her beloved grandmother. She applies her rigorous artistic eye to every detail: a drowned mouse, "Floating on its belly, paws and tail extended. Ears inflated, eyes scrunched, nose submerged, whiskers pencilling frail lines through the green." She notes every detail as if by looking as hard as she can, and making what she sees into art, she can somehow know or conquer or even control death. (The mouse, incidentally, prompts an association with John Everett Millais' "exquisitely macabre" *Ophelia*.)

Loss in general derails Frankie and, as loss and change in life are inevitable, art surfaces as the only thing she can reliably hold on to. Though never fully explained, her flight to her grandmother's bungalow is precipitated by the breakdown of some kind of relationship with her fellow gallery worker, Ben. Even the loss of her mother's old banger is too much to bear: "It fails the NCT every year – three times, at least – before it passes, yet whenever my mother mentions getting a new one, my sister and I protest, vigorously, as if the car's an old pet she wants to put down." It becomes clear that Frankie's "uneasiness about life" stems from life's fundamental impermanence.

Religion lurks around the periphery of Frankie's experience as a possible antidote, but she can't take it seriously. Her aunt, "Buddhist Beth", persuades her to meditate, but Frankie's thoughts continue to run away with her, the dolls of her youth "rising out of the carpet-lagoon and dancing

inflexibly around my meditating aunt". She cannot appreciate nothingness, as her aunt exhorts; nor can she give herself over to Jesus, as urged by her born-again neighbour, Jink:

“Have you ever thought about initiating a relationship with Jesus?’ Jink says. His voice lowered to a husky whisper, as though the son of God is my secret admirer at the disco and this old man is one of my buddies who has been sent over to ascertain whether or not I reciprocate, to see if I’ll agree to a slow dance.”

Art is her only salvation, even when it is barely there. It transpires that the title of *A Line Made by Walking* comes from a 1967 photograph by Richard Long showing a straight, faint line cutting across a field, like the faded baseline of a grass tennis court. The line of Baume’s novel is far from straight, but, like the title piece, her protagonist seeks to “take up as little space in the world as possible. And ... do as little damage.”