Something to Say

*Juice*, Tim Winton (Picador)

In this strange, lengthy novel, Winton takes us back to traditional storytelling but also moves far into the future, serving up the fictional offspring of Mad Max and Scheherazade (*One Thousand and One Nights*) for our delight.

Across the post-apocalyptic landscape of Australia, a man and a silent, possibly dumb, child are travelling, trying to find food and shelter. By page 10, however, these fugitives are captured and imprisoned in an underground shelter, the kind of place people have to inhabit to stay alive in the searing heat that is now an everyday occurrence.

The man we first met is in some ways an optimist, and wants to parley with his captor, who doesn't really feel the same way. But his prisoner starts talking, and gradually tells him – and readers – the story of his whole life.

We are way into the future it seems. Whilst others have crowded into dysfunctional post-apocalyptic cities, he grew up in the North, on a smallholding in orbit outside a small town or village that houses some kind of area administration as well as a market for trading. With temperatures of 50° plus, work only happens in the winter or at night; during the summers they leave their houses up-top and live in tunnels and underground shelters, trying to stay cool.

They collect water, grow crops, keep hens and collect the detritus from what appears to be our society. The only power available is solar electricity and physical work. It is hard to stay alive, to maintain life, to scavenge, barter and cope. He lives and works with his mother but gradually decides to build his own vehicle so he can travel further, find more. He also falls in love, marries and has a child; although he builds a new house above, they still share work, land and the summer shelter with his mother. It is different but still hard.

Then he is recruited by a secret and subversive organisation, hunting down the inheritors of the industrial age's wealth, clans who are reckoned to be the cause of global warming and responsible for the end of civilization. Anonymous groups of trained experts are brought together for specific operations and targets, as a matter of revenge and justice. They are only contacted about their missions at short notice, so our man is prone to disappearances and absence from family life, although it seems the organisation are able to arrange the delivery of food and materials whilst he is gone.

Turns out their captor also served in the same way, and our man tries to use this as a point of connection, but fails. His 'comrade' is not impressed, is tired of the endless story, wonders if he should just despatch his prisoners now, sees no reason to share his food and future, or listen to any more. But, of course, he is intrigued, and does.

Gradually the world unwinds. The man's wife and child run off, he struggles to connect with his mother any more or to understand what he as part of the organisation is actually doing, especially when some trips go seriously wrong. He gets a bad name in the village, the Earth is getting hotter and hotter and he struggles to remember the special or sacred places he was taken to as a child and visited on his own, how and where his life was rooted: caves and coral, the sea at the edge of the land.

It is a strange book. Much of it is a monologue, the man's back story, but careful reading shows that whilst much of the story is spoken to the other who has locked him up, some chapters appear to be either internal thought or directly addressed to the reader. There are also brief interludes between storytelling episodes set in the book's present.

It is hard to know what to make of these humans, bent on survival but also taking revenge for historical events, unable to maintain a society that works, yet not prepared for total isolation and lonely self-sufficiency. It is clear they do not understand the technology of the past, let alone the power structures that allowed super-wealthy business owners to create luxurious fortresses to keep the remains of the population out. It is also clear we are not going to be given a neat ending to the novel as the three characters climb up out of their mineshaft home-cum-prison. Has our narrator persuaded his gaoler to join forces, or has he simply put off abandonment or execution?

Winton is good at making us do brain work, good at showing readers how messy and confusing life is most of the time, insistent that there are no easy answers, only brief moments of grace. But epiphanic moments by the sea or in a cool shadowy cave, the taste of freshly picked crops, moments of happiness with community and family, or connections with the past, do not solve society's problems. Occasionally being a little heavy-handed, Winton asks us to prevent this possible future happening by thinking about things like fossil fuel and global warming, *now*. By taking responsibility and making changes in how we live, *right* *now*, we might put off the future hell Winton shows us here.

Rupert Loydell

(880 words)