



***Poetic Explanations* by Gill Ward. Wellington: Kupu Press (2011). RRP: NZ\$15. Pb, 86pp. ISBN: 9780478187934. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Gill Ward's poetry, scripts and short stories have appeared in anthologies, magazines, literary publications and

on National Radio. The notes on the back cover of *Poetic Explanations* state that "This book of poetry is an autobiography. It is a written acknowledgement of people who have played a part in a full and busy life. It tells of times and speaks of those who were and are part of that life." The book is divided into three sections: "Kith and Kin," "Songs for a Sick Sister" and "Emotional Archives."

The poems in this collection are on the verge of something wholly manifest yet there is much in them that remains latent. This is perhaps why Ward's work is so enticing – one must constantly grapple with her signifiers. This is an immensely personal collection but, in spite of this and the occasionally obscure subjectivity of the poems, Ward's work encapsulates moments of a familiar existence.

Ward's poetry ceaselessly transgresses the boundaries between modes of representation, shifting from the real to the surreal, from memory to fantasy, often within the same poem, as we see in her first poem "Road Trip":

Then bursting with mirth as we looked at each other  
and said  
"Where are we?"  
and everything was light  
and fun was floating  
through the window  
and memories and  
the sharedness of days  
the here and then of it.

The reader too must shift ground, and the depth of these poems lies in being able to connect with the poet and her musings on relatives, friends and family. Here is an extract from the poem "Mother Song," written for her daughter:

Daughter,  
daughter I love  
you so much  
my heart bursts  
with it.  
My breast swells  
with pride.

The worlds Ward creates are both urban:

I was thinking  
you might like to  
come on over  
to my house.

I have a few  
things here for you  
nothing really  
just some stuff I  
picked up at garage sales  
some pickle I made  
and some more of those  
old magazines you like.

and rural:

There was a man  
walked on our beach  
daily  
part of the landscape.

This is perhaps representative of a specialty that draws directly from the experiences of the poet's environment where town and country landscapes and milieus are juxtaposed. The poet's presence is undetached from her relationship with those she has loved and lost, as in the poem "Unfinished":

Everything has been reminding me of you today  
everything  
and I'm wearing it like a giant sack  
weighing me down  
around my neck.

There are also flashes of lyricism, a sentimentality that suggests a romantic nature, and Ward encapsulates this best in the context of the love poem "Perfect Husband":

You do well in these stakes.  
I hold you up with pride.  
You are definitely in the  
running  
except it fluctuates.  
The rule is, although unspoken, that  
one should not hold up  
for scrutiny something  
which has been proffered  
at an earlier date.

“Songs for a Sick Sister” is a suite of fifteen poems dedicated to the memory of the poet’s twin sister. In “Hey sister!” she writes of what it is like to have a twin:

Having a twin is like  
Having an extra bit to my body  
I think I did try  
to leave you behind  
on that first turbulent journey.  
They were only expecting one  
and I struggled out first  
blue and protesting.

A remarkable nostalgia, questioning why things happen, a strong sense of grief and coming to terms with the death of a loved one weave throughout these poems: “Hope” and “Seven questions” are good examples. “When in Rome” tells how the poet “lit a candle in every church” and prayed for her sister’s recovery. “Bereavement weather” takes the reader to the day after Ward’s sister died. “Gathering” takes place on “the remembering day” when all the family gathered for an unveiling:

This is the remembering day  
as if we would forget you.  
But we are all remembering something different,  
husband, mother, daughters, sons, grandchildren,  
sisters, nieces, nephews, friends.  
In no particular order, as they say.

“Emotional Archives” gathers “Poems from here and there – from long ago and now.” The poems demonstrate a high level of refinement and a depth of form and content. Ward indicates a thorough writing

practice through her short, tight lines, her rhythms and phrasing, as we see in “Suburb”:

Bent,  
beneath the  
burden of the  
full sky  
pillowed on their slackness,  
the wires  
stretch . . .  
ahead.

“Wordsmith” is about writing poetry with a friend, while “The advantages of an internet lover” is written for a long-range editor. The language is simple, and this enhances the imagery of the text. Ward achieves effect through a constant process of familiarity that functions not only at the level of the words, but also at the level of the images. An example of this can be found in “Dust to Dust”:

Started off clear  
the tit of Taranaki  
on the horizon  
but  
darkening  
  
an open window  
sucking in leaves  
bits, feathers, stuff  
but  
making an exit  
for dust.

This is a self-conscious collection in the sense that Ward appears to be fully aware of the position of the poetic self within her poems.