



***Nice Pretty Things and others* by Rachel Bush. Wellington: VUP (2011). RRP: NZ \$28. Pb, 80pp. ISBN: 9780864736918. Reviewed by Mary Cresswell.**

In “The Tale of Genji”, Prince Genji keeps one palace for each of the four seasons, to best display the nice pretty

things special to that season. This book belongs in the autumn palace: it’s a meditation on people, things and thoughts, all of them growing old and changing.

If she were here she would say
the cicadas, the cicadas and rest
her arms on the frame with the window
folded and pushed aside...

(“Cicadas”)

As well as cicadas, there’s a bare, waiting plum tree. There are houses once lived in, grandfathers, and grandmothers; there is small Jocelyn and Dorothy. In “Birthday” the speaker talks herself into realising “I am an ancestor. The lovely Ghost says: Remember me, remember, and then says,/ No, you can forget. There is too much to call and recall/ to mind,” all the while twitching the remembered landscape back and forth before our eyes.

The poems are a harvest of different voices. In “Between the lines”, “I was fourteen” – in “Everyone loves the book,” “I am Mary.” “Tell me about Menton” gives diary entries from a Katherine Mansfield fellowship enjoyed in a parallel universe – the writing, the parrot, the rain: “But that aside, because we certainly don’t want to dwell on anything morbid, putting that away, what I want is to go back in time and tell you just how glad I was to stay in the Villa

Isola Bella in Menton. ...” (“I am Gingerale”). Lady Macbeth lurks in the kitchen: “Who would have thought/ the stainless steel pot had/ so much fish and stock in it?” (“Spill”).

There are beginnings, as well as endings. “I am a woman with walking frame/ red track suit and sockettes” who thinks that “Sometimes it is not so bad to be old.” “Sometimes I lie” is benign, as is the title poem, “quite/ strange, but broderie/ anglaise. Always my/ friend liked nice pretty things.” “Tyler, Lily and Mozart” witnesses the shaky beginnings of two neonates – perhaps deliberately put between two very old ladies whose years might rub off on them so that they (unlike “Christine”) will live.

Sometimes the world is a bit too much with us to get anything done, and we must wait for time (not always destructive) to help out.

I wanted stories of the spirit but
could only think of pieties crammed
in an ice cream cone outside
where the sun would melt them.

The big wise thoughts all
sank in the bath and
the cheery yellow
duck with its orange
beak floated up...

(“Looking for it”)

Later, in “Pig hunting,” the poet is still trying: “So there was no poem to be found in the usual places,/ nor in the strange ones. It was the day of the pig/ and a week before the year of the sheep.”

This is an autumn book, poems of experience but not gloom. We aren’t being ground down by decay, fog or acid reflux of the soul. Instead, we are given light and vision:

And now
this morning I want to lay these things,
not bare, but in a frame, just these words
on this once white page.

(“Frame”)