



***Thicket* by Anna Jackson. Auckland: AUP (2011). RRP: NZ\$24.99. Pb, 55pp. ISBN: 9781869404826. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

*Thicket* is Anna Jackson's 5th collection of poems. She has previously published four solo collections of poems as well as academic books.

*Thicket* contains forty-one of Jackson's

poems. She takes the reader on an enchanted journey beginning with "Watch This"; a poem about getting older, with all that entails, to "Summer," whose theme is the "thicket" of the title that encloses the poet where "it does seem darker." Between these two poems, each central to the poet's world, we are beguiled by vividly rendered nature poems, friendships, memories, games, dreams and more.

Although Jackson presents the reader with a dream poem, "Dream Golems," it is reality that pervades this collection, and keeps it on track. Her tone, observant and self-appraising, is clear-sighted and without illusion, but strangely reassuring in its ability to state things as they are, and to place them so tangibly in among the unknown. Here are characters that accept uncertainty, but have a sure grasp of the home territory: "of the familiar and the simply human," as we see in the poem "Speaking as one of the billiard balls":

The film *Troy* doesn't start till after dark,  
four hours after school's out. So I take  
Johnny up to the pool hall where  
I have to teach him *not* to take turns –  
except that neither of us pot a ball  
very much more often than rolling a six  
in Snakes and Ladders.

The mundane experiences of life are recorded, their troubles and small triumphs. Not least among these poems are "Red Riding Hood's mother" and "Red Riding Hood" in which the poet rewrites the fairytale in a modern idiom:

She is always looking back to before me.  
Me, she sends outside, while she searches

in cupboards and books.  
I'm sent into the woods.

I'll go back too.  
I'll ask her mother what she was like as a child.  
(*"Red Riding Hood"*).

Jackson talks about what she knows, ranging from her relationship with John:

I have spent the morning preparing and when he arrives,  
My heart in my mouth, the linen on the table,

It all looks like a picture, a magazine spread.  
(*"It was an honour, John"*)

to poems about a Frank O'Hara lecture and a visit to the British Museum. Often these poems inspire some of her most striking images –

There was a mummified *fish!*  
For the mummified cats?  
Or to allow for fish *ba*  
To flow to and from fish body;  
Merrily merrily merrily  
Without itch or seam?

(*"We were at the British Museum?"*)

Always there's an awareness of the bigger picture, ranged against the contingencies of daily life, often with ironic humour as here from "A beautiful theory isn't a poem, James":

I still haven't written a duck poem although  
the duck was good, what can I say *was so*

good, but now it is more like three *weeks* later  
that I am once again leaving an elevator

with James, and I have a theory I want to unfold  
to him about tequila and wine:

Composed, for the most part, of longer lines, the poetry has its own momentum and turns corners to find its own destinations along the way. The flow of verse seems so natural and direct, that we are enabled to share the passing revelations: this adds to the poetry's immediacy.

Jackson's approach is to try things out – a different viewpoint, a new verbal strategy, but always with her own recognizable voice. Sometimes the poems use a longer narrative style, occasionally a simple social or psychological observation in a dead-pan style. Her more usual free-verse style, of continuous down-paging in a rush of lines, suits her vision. At times the layout on the page is more adventurous, where form follows function, as with "Indexing" where the poetry is chopped up by numbers, or in "Imogen" with its shorter couplets, or in the poem "The coming on of a maths brain" with its eight verses beginning with one word and ending in a string of words and the final verse reverses at the bottom of the third page.