



Tear Water Tea by Saradha Koirala. Drawings by David Randall Peters. Wellington: Steele Roberts Aotearoa Ltd. (2013). RRP: \$19.99. Pb, 66pp. ISBN: 9781927242049. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

Saradha Koirala lives, writes and works in

Wellington and is of Nepali and Pakeha descent. Reading a collection of poems by a poet whose work you've never read is an exciting journey. *Tear Water Tea* contains poems by a writer with a very close kinship to the natural world; I knew it after reading the first verse of "Echolalia":

This morning's northerly
throws death out in my path
a tiny carcass blown from a rubbish bag
a broken bird
at the bottom of a plate glass window.

Though Koirala's poems often deal with such impossible abstractions as love, anger, awkwardness or story-telling, the poems are always grounded in the moment, in the place, in the person. Her voice, for the most part, is quiet and reflective, but the poems are infused with sparks of language and surprises at the turn of a phrase, the turn of a line. In "Troubadour," she remembers a friend who tells stories:

My friend tells stories.
He wears a hat when he rhymes,
strokes his beard when he's telling a tale.

She asks the reader several questions in the poem "Whatever glory dwells," - "Each hymn, each question, directed towards whom? To each other? Or to some mystic being?" She gives the reader a few lines to ponder these questions, and we do. What do we venerate? God? Wealth? Power?

In "The gift shop at Pollock's Toy Museum," the poet shows us what it is like to be in a strange country, where even the familiar sight of Paddington Bear with his suitcase, hat duffle coat and plush face, is a reminder that "you you're nowhere / near home." In the poem, "Advice," another woman says "it's human nature to ruffle things up / just when they've settled back down". She goes on to detail some of the things that are wrong

with humanity, but the resigned poet says: "I know, I say, I should lighten up // because what else can you say to that?"

Koirala's poems are universal, particular, at the same time. She gives us an evening walk in the moonlight in "Retreating" – Waitare, July '09:

Driftwood, piles of seaweed or washed-up corpses?
Hoof marks, footprints,
tracks left by the retreating tide.
Tyre marks of an all-terrain.

In "I dream of houses" she writes about her brother who is about to become a father, and her own father who suffered a heart attack. The newborn child offers the family a feeling not only of joy but also of safety:

My nephew. Curved spine highlighted grey
the hollows of a face.
He has a big round belly
that makes us laugh, makes us feel safe.

The reader, too, has a feeling of joy reading Koirala's bouquet of language that she plucks from common discourse, arranging words through metaphors and juxtapositions into such startling perceptions as "Granddad listen in the back of my mind, plotting a trip to the neighbours," "You come on like a box of spilt Lego," "Rhetorical, you'd say – / I'm not convinced you know the meaning."

As a poet and critic, I recognize that some verse tends towards opacity while other poems lean towards clarity. For the most part Koirala tends towards the latter, which means that this is a poetry writer in the lyric narrative mode that has a simple meaning. A case in point is "A greening" with its haiku-like beginning, "As if in time lapse / you shake your petals into being / quivering until the colour sets." She goes on to describe ways in which we can cope with "this mysterious world of afternoon light" – a series of transformations on a par with the transformations which characterize the verse.

These lyric poems are not particularly surprising or multi-layered but they still have luminous moments and profound insights. In the final poem, "Tika," the poet opens a window on her family, allowing the reader to peek here and peek there, into the poet's personal and familial life. Koirala does this through simple language:

Goodbye takes the form of a blessing.
My family press tika on our foreheads
rupees into my palm.

The stories that come from Koirala's heart are striking and at the same time there is the familiarity of everyday life.