



***Remnants* by Leonard Lambert. Wellington: Steele Roberts Aotearoa Ltd (2013). RRP: \$19.99, Pb, 62pp. ISBN: 9781927242285. Reviewed by Sue Wootton.**

*Remnants* is poet and artist Leonard Lambert's fifth collection of poetry, and it is the work of a master craftsman.

These are poems with a burnished feel, attentively constructed and strong under pressure. They promise to weather well. Lambert's voice is relaxed, in the manner of hard-earned relaxation, such as can only follow hours of sustained vigilance and toil. The title of the collection may sound offhand, but the remnants Lambert offers in *Remnants* are not dust and shavings from the workshop floor. They are what is revealed after honing away the dross: the glowing essence of the worked material.

Lambert's voice, then, is confident and relaxed, but neither lazy nor superficial. It is articulate and agile. It has timbre: a gritty, grainy resonance. But no matter their subject matter, the poems are soaked in grace, underpinned by an attitude of solemn regard. They are grave, ruminant, observant and resonant. And they are witty and funny, multi-layered and moving. Each poem starts the head as well as the heart. First readings are welcoming. The language appears plain and direct, communicative and often neighbourly: 'Hey man, look' says the voice in one poem; 'It's over, bro' says the voice in another. Reread, and especially under close examination, the language reveals complexity, difficulty, dynamism, elasticity, durability and strength – it's a beautiful 'magic ink' effect which of course (once seen) also reveals the skill of Lambert's technique. "Last Legs" contains two giant lines camouflaged in words of ordinary dimensions: 'Nature is what Nature does/ but human is what human knows'. "Voyage Heroique" sent me to the dictionary for *stenchant* and *mummers*. "The Auditors", a poem about the arrival in an office of three 'light-shy' 'number-grubbers' ends with ironic flourish in a gorgeous dramatic apostrophe: 'O gadfly dreams! Worlds incalculable!'

Lambert's manipulation of traditional tropes such as rhyme and metre are so deft and competent that

a reader may never be aware of the reason for the indestructible cadence which holds the poems whole. His respect for technique also means that where the work is personal, it is neither selfish nor petty. Rather, it 'speaks Human' (to use Les Murray's phrase), a generosity made possible by Lambert's thorough knowledge and long perspective.

A signature theme running through this collection is mortality, and several poems directly address this subject. Among them are "Last Legs", "The Bridge" and "Evensong". In their meld of earthy pragmatism and large question metaphysics, these are the kind of rich nugget poems you may find yourself deciding to learn by heart. But all of *Remnants* is like that: its poems are worth knowing.

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