



***Half Dark* by Harry Ricketts. Wellington: VUP (2015). RRP: \$25. Pb, 63pp. ISBN: 9780864739841. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Harry Ricketts teaches English literature at Victoria University of Wellington. He has written and edited more than twenty-five books.

His previous poetry collection is *Just Then*.

In this new collection, *Half Dark*, Ricketts focuses on friendships, love and the passage of time. The poems are crafted from memories of school friends, house-mates, family and places. It could be said that this is poetry of careful observation, of graceful cadences and painstaking craft. But that would be to underestimate its cumulative powers. Ricketts does not shy away from difficult subjects, and his craft is flexible and adaptable enough to encompass memories of dead friends, acute observations of the natural world, response to books and poets he has read, poems about war and his beliefs, among many other themes.

The collection opens with the remembrance of school friends, long since gone, in “Blanks”:

Some nights, jolted awake,  
they float back, blurred, shag spots,  
bad haircuts, blue ties.

This is the first of a number of poems set in the poet’s youth, recalling friends. There is a characteristic liveliness and empathy on display here; one never feels that these are exercises in historicism. Among the poems is the beautiful “Breton Café, Brandon St” (for Bill), which deals with the difficult subject of a friend’s death:

Hard to hold the thought you died  
over a decade ago – another world.  
We used to meet here

when it was in other hands.  
You liked the slight seediness, rickety chairs,  
palpable struggle

to survive

These often difficult subjects are handled with a sensitivity and lightness of touch resulting in large part from the tactful distance afforded by Ricketts’ skilful use of words, phrasing and verse formation. The regular rhythms and cadences of Ricketts’ verse have a lulling, consolatory quality to them. For example, in “The Wishbone” is a poem about six friends who shared a house in the poet’s youth. The opening stanza remarks:

This is not the saddest story  
in the world. But it is sad.  
It happened long ago.

It is the story of a beautiful girl who gets the wishbone from a roast chicken and offers it to Sam, only for him to discover when he opens his eyes, that ‘you’re still here.’

Elsewhere in the collection, Ricketts’ acute sense of the natural environment is striking. Poems such as “Pewsey” and “Te Mata Peak” are touched by the mystery of the natural world, even as they describe and celebrate aspects of it. “Huia” recalls a walk in the hills, as the poet meditates on the reassuring continuity in nature by his repetition of the couplet:

The hills are steep, root-entwining.  
Grey warblers sing a different tune.

And yet, underlying this meditation is a sense of anxiety at change, an environmental awareness that is never dogmatic or strident, but is, nevertheless, persistent. This comes to a head in the poem entitled “Weather.” There is a pleasing sense here of things coming full circle as the poet writes of a time in Malaya, describing how

On long summer afternoons over lapsang souchong,  
you note my long hair, flares, girl friends, gay friends:  
your beady eyes take everything in.

Despite the anxieties darkening the edge of some poems, Ricketts’ voice is ultimately a celebrant’s voice. In “Noddy” (in memory of Richard Gilmore, 1952-2010), we are reminded of the love between friends:

Noddy: that was what we used to call you  
because all that scary firs term,  
skipping lectures and half-falling in love,  
you nearly drove us mad, telling that joke.

Such moments of affirmation are far from facile; rather the poem implies that friendships are hard-won through experience.



The best of the poems in *Half Dark* are humane, interesting, serious or cheerful, and they manage a clarity that comes from these qualities. Ballasted by real subjects – not infrequently family relations, death or danger – they can articulate the obvious in words that are given impact by a context – belief in “A modern creed” for example, or a friend with a penchant for acting in “For D”:

You had a car, were good at extravaganzas (that  
at dawn), always up for burning the moment to the  
lake  
wick.

Taking your bow as Theseus/Oberon on Keble  
College lawn, forty  
years back, it was, it seemed, all magnificently  
about to begin.

Ricketts unpretentious style can juxtapose loss of friends, personal adventures, love; poems set in Frankfurt or Rome are photographic stills, which capture the essence of those cities. The achievement of this poet is that he convinces the reader that he is seeing or feeling what he describes so simply. His voice is intimate, immediate and definitely his own. Ricketts allows the reader to drift with him from thought to thought and insight to insight. The thoughts he offers are sensitive and deep, and he does not just hand them to you, but makes a place for you to sit beside him and look around. His poems challenge us to see the world as a place of connections and connectedness; poems that are deftly crafted by a fine poet.

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