



***A Little Book of Sonnets* by Julie Leibrich. Wellington. Steel Roberts (2014) RRP: \$19.99. Hb. 64pp. ISBN: 9781927242292. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.**

Julie Leibrich's has published children's books, books on the mind and poetry. *A Little Book of Sonnets* is her tenth

book. In an opening passage, 'January', Leibrich says: "Last year I decided that the only poetry I would write for a whole year would be sonnets, so I set out to write one a month and to make a little book for friends at the end of the year." This little book – in which the poems, one per page, are faced with one of Leibrich's photographs – is the elegant result.

Everywhere the tone is bright, and form and construction are tight, worked and correct. There are sonnets in this collection that I really enjoyed. Leibrich comes into her own in these personal poems, where there's room for thought and often a sense of humour. Her strengths lie in her combinations of memories and imagination that coalesce and open up her world to the reader, so that we meet her partner, her friends, her father and her old English teacher.

The pacing and rhythms Leibrich achieves are strong. In "The gulls" the opening stanza drives the narrative and carries us through the vista that the poet creates:

How can I say what happened on that night
in the undulating silk we call the sea,
when a mist concealed the island from my sight
as I became the water; and it, me.

In "First tomato," Leibrich creates another narrative, this time the weight of the poem depends upon the massed togetherness of the stanzas. The first focussing on tradition segues into the closing couplet, where the tomato is a sacred offering to her father:

My first tomato's redolence is true.
I've cut it in four. Dad, here's a piece for you.

The lovely sonnet, "Tapestries," is written about her partner. The lovely lines

Quite late, these tapestries of ours combined.
The past, by then, already in its frame
Quite late, these silver threads of ours entwined,
When innocence was far too old to claim.

signify that this is a partnership made later in life.

Leibrich is a master of the sonnet, which are often terse, succinct, intriguing. This is a poet who is not afraid of cutting out all the unnecessary words, who works bravely with language. My favourite sonnets are those that don't tell me everything but leave me wondering. These include "Last frontier," about a note from a friend which she finds in a book; "Secret gardens" in which the ending couplet sums up all the gardens she has known, particularly the one in her own heart:

That year, I tended the garden of my soul.
There, I found the space which makes me whole.

and "How rituals are made," whose subject is the quilt made by her sister-in-law:

We sleep, we dream, and somewhere in between
a world exists where words have never been.

This is an accomplished, finely wrought gem of a book. The sonnets pull you into them gently and quickly and then as you proceed through the poems you keep hearing echoes of what has gone before and echoes of what is to come. Pleasure in nature, gratitude and friendship are constant pulses that beat through the poems; viewed from different angles they are the constants in the poet's life. Love, too, is a constant ad in the poem, "The English teacher," it becomes "I see you as a slant of light through glass" and, later, "Your passion for possibility set us free – / gymslip girls to women we could be."

Leibrich works her material in a way that makes you believe a poet can reach into the past and make language and life new again, seen through a prism and given more life, more light. This is not easy, but Leibrich does it with lightness of touch.