

Brook Emery

WELCOME EXPLORATIONS

Ron Pretty, *Of The Stone*. Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 2000, pp.104 \$14.95 ISBN 0 86418 568 5

Ron Pretty's *New and Selected Poems* follows *The Habit of Balance* (1988), *Bald Hill with Gliders* (1991) and *Halfway to Eden* (1997) and is a welcome volume from a significant and generous influence on Australian poetry and, especially, on emerging poets. (It should be stated clearly here that Ron Pretty has encouraged me: I am published by Five Islands Press.) It's a chance for those who only know Ron Pretty as a teacher and publisher to appreciate him as a practitioner, to catch him at mid-career in a book that looks both backwards and forwards.

One of the characteristics of the poems collected here is compassion. The American poet Jack Gilbert spoke of one of his own poems in terms of love for the broken of the earth. This is not too big a call to apply to many of Ron Pretty's poems. There is a humanity about them that does not deteriorate into sentimentality or indulgence. They are too clear-eyed for that, too anchored in specifics, too aware of the culture and history of the human condition and its representation in art. Ron Pretty has an eye for the strange and the sad, the big and little tragedies and the ironies of life, a

sympathy for the abandoned, lost, lonely and harmed, the outcasts and scallywags. It's often a sense of humour that intensifies and holds at bay the pain, as in "Flying Ants":

... Old man learing

at the district nurse his daughter
come to put him away (his kingdom
divided among the Medes and Persians
and meals on wheels). Scratching
his balls rank with no washing

but conniving still, hiding his cigarettes
and Playboys for leering eyes.
They've come to take him home:
goodnight, old man, abscond

as often as you can
hot foot & blistered
on the asphalt road
the heat with thunder rolling
dogs at his bare heels yapping ...

By contrast, in the beautiful, open series of poems, "Spiderweb," "Molly and Douglas," "Kerbside" and "Molly," the lives, commitments, predicaments, strength and dignity of the characters is evoked simply and directly:

Molly fades: there's barely a lump
in the blankets, but the thin face
with its glittering eyes continues
to hold you like life itself, accepting
the bargain she made fifty years
or more ago. To live is to be
in pain; escaping pain is easy
as suicide. Living is with pain.

"Spiderweb"

In this volume we're in a world, or a perception of a world, in which goodness and innocence survive (perhaps only just) despite experience, trust despite suspicion, where resignation has not become despair, irony is not yet cynicism and anger has not become rejection, no matter how inhuman society and politics appear. Some poems are overtly political, such as "Awaiting the Barbarians" which is subtitled "after Cavafy," the poet whom E.M. Forster described as "living at a slight angle to the world." Here's the third stanza, the first in which the reader is clearly positioned in the present:

The market hasn't closed, but trading
this last week is very slow: why buy
and sell
what the Goths will simply take? The
merchants
sit behind their desks taking what they
can,
their double-breasted suits, the lapels
wide
and limp with fear. Today, it seems, is
the day
of the turning of the wheel, and what
do barbarians know or care of futures
trading?

The slight angle and the cultural resonances give the poem both bite and poise but sometimes a more direct and sarcastic approach can be as telling:

Economics is dying
the whisper passes from mouth to
mouth

a collective sigh circles the crowd
like a Mexican wave. What will we do,
how can we live without Economics?

"The death of Economics"

In this volume you will also find poems concerned with craft and experiment but they're not formalist art-for-art's-sake or needlessly obscure and hermetically sealed "language-is-futile-so-why-worry-about-meaning" efforts. They can be mysterious and challenging but are concerned with the possibilities and limitations of language and form is yoked to idea—there is plenty of sound and wit and allusion at play. "The Glass Piano" uses repetition, regression and progression to get close to Phillip Glass's music and a reaction to it. In "Engraving" we have the improbability of William Blake in bed, Paul Gauguin in Tahiti and Juan Antonio Samaranch announcing, "and the winner is / Syd-ny." In "Reading Tranter without training wheels" there is a telling juxtaposition between the cool sophistication of the poetry and the suburban ordinariness of a daughter learning to ride a bicycle. It ends with the lovely indirection:

I push her onto the grass and let her
go.
She veers towards the gutter, trying
nervelessly
to stay upright, together.

The political, social, satiric and literary poems give the volume variety, balance and range but,

effective as they are, they are not the heart of the work which, for me, is found in the more personal poems which are only by implication and extension political. Here there is frequently a concern with things passing and lost possibilities, with "the faces of the lives he might have lived." There is a mediating intelligence and a sense of paradox and irony as in the description of a lake that "glitters in the postcard like a blade," or another lake where "the mirror ripples into jaws / to grip the bloodied morning like a vice," or "Waiting. For whatever next / will come, drinking politely bitter tea," or of being in a narrow tunnel "baited with the promise / there's no escape from."

"Of the Stone" deserves the prominence the volume's title gives it. It's not very long but it's a big poem which moves from the specifics of:

the table vibrating under your arm
as the aeroplane takes off
or the train grinds past
or the solid earth crumbles to a fault

and builds and intensifies to symbolic generalisations:

of the night, of the parting,
of the need and the fear
the etched and printed book of loss
of the love that fails all understanding
of the stone that blocks the empty
tomb

It is a poem that is lyrical and unashamedly rhetorical in the best

sense, full of love for the world. It is the accumulation, if not the culmination, of many of the ideas, passions and pains to be found throughout the book.

I have a sense of how much I haven't said, how many poems haven't been mentioned, the lines of development undiscerned rather than of any bow I've tied around the work. Perhaps that leaves room for readers to sense and discover the poems one by one, discover their own favourites. One thing, I suspect they will discover is that, though this is mature work, there is no sense of complacency or self-satisfaction but rather a sense of urgency, a sense that, for Ron Pretty, poetry is still a provisional way of exploring and coming to terms with the world. That is some achievement.

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Cheryl Taylor

IMMERSED IN WARM REEF WATERS

Rosaleen Love, *Reefscape. Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*. Allen & Unwin, St Leonards N.S.W., 2000. ISBN 1 86448 873 5.