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6-2013

Five Seasons by Syd Harrex [Book Review]

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Citation

SINGH, Kirpal.(2013). Five Seasons by Syd Harrex [Book Review]. *Asiatic*, 7(1), 168-170.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/1386

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Syd Harrex, *Five Seasons*. Adelaide: Table One, 2011. 64 pp. ISBN 978-0-9807049-3-8.

This is a beautifully produced book, befitting the poet and his abiding faith in the capacity of human beings to transcend themselves. On the back cover, are the lines:

I have a presentiment of dark
Clouds over snow-covered
Mount Wellington returning
To haunt me when the
Full moon is lazy
And my release framed.

These lines are taken from the author's poem "Sublunar Lovers, and Other Miscalculations" which appears in the *Winter* section of the book. Those of us who know the poet know that he has not been too well these past few years and the timing of this book – and several of the poems in it – comes amidst various memories that flood our consciousness about the brilliance of the poetry. Though loquacious – and more vitally so after a few good glasses of good wine – when meeting and talking face-to-face, Harrex has always been shy and reticent when it comes to his poetry. We of course muse at the sentiment of his release being "framed" but then, perhaps, that's exactly where the "miscalculations" might lie? Always one with a slight glint in the eyes as he teases, Harrex's poems in this collection highlight a significant feature not apparent in previous volumes: the poetry here is both calm and urgent. There is a subterranean intensity which hides beneath the sophistry of the language the poet employs to convey deep feelings and emotions. Many of the poems here are personal, written for special individuals and with very special contexts in mind. This notwithstanding, these poems speak to each and every one of us, regardless, and what they say both in manner and matter reveal how profoundly the poet has crafted them. Take, for instance, the following:

I must zip up my fly
figuratively speaking
and get on with the job
of reconstructing my
medically deconstructed life.

The seasons haven't changed.
Neither have we, apart
from ageing a little.

Our devotion to beauty,
mine to yours, yours to you,
roses along the slopes
retain the admiration of desire
which is what our marriage
garden proclaims to us: our
senses inspired, the truth
of natural beauty verified
and all this after forever's died. ("In Catastrophe Mode")

Obviously a very personal poem, but one which contains meanings for anyone who bothers to reflect on life's meanderings and the way age(ing) changes perceptions, perspectives and values. This poem comes from the *fifth* season aptly named "Out of Season." In the Introduction to this slim volume, Melinda Graefe and Molly Murn write:

In the fifth season of the collection, the poems confront death and dying, as well as celebrate the precarious beauty of love and longing. In all five of the seasons the poems embody both the clamour and grace of being grounded in the physical, and the quiet of the infinite landscape of the soul and beyond.

It is abundantly clear in "In Catastrophe Mode" that the poet is both seeking a way out while at the same time affirming that sense of loss which invariably fills the void which threatens finality. I find this a deeply moving poem, full of a certain "spiritual" quality that defies simplistic explanation while it invites a complex contemplation. It is sometimes said that the real poet shares suffering so as to ennoble us who read and experience secondhand the anguish captured and portrayed. When things go *out of season* it is easy to mis-read and mis-represent. But Harrex's is too strong a personality to admit suffering without some payback – and the payback is the power of the words which entrance and enrich by enlarging our vision of life and living.

As I write this, Harrex is getting weaker and this truth is hard to digest because this man has always been there for all of us who have known him. I first met him when he was passing through Singapore with his wife Jane in 1971, on his way to the lovely island of Penang in Malaysia. So we have known each other for more than forty years. I can vouch for the fact that this poet spent so much of his time promoting others that he nearly forgot that he was himself a real poet. Thus it is not in the least surprising to read a Donne-like testament to the reality which makes poetry and which gives life its extraordinariness:

This is my room. Here I am, here

I have to leave to sleep in a real bed.
 I'm not schizoid. Just like any lover,
 sumptuous with desiring before autumn's...
 shall I say passed or conveniently out
 of the way. But now is high summer,
 the clouds on heat, erogenous images
 multiplying on towels on the beach.
 And the outside world's out there silent
 or gregarious as the case may be; while here,
 the library of questions never answered,
 the inexplicable death of the rose,
 the last wet whispering eros kiss,
 the other side of Paradise of bliss. ("This is My Room")

The pounding rhythm of the definite article as it brings this sad, poignant poem to its conclusion heightens the paradox of all our existence: we are here for a while and then we presage our exits, remembering, most fondly as well as most sharply images and associations which have made our passage engaging, fulfilling. If the writing of poetry offers us an exploration of what it means to live and to be human, then these poems of Harrex's can be read (and reread) as tributes to a mind vitalised by experience and humbled by knowledge.

Towards the end of this collection there are ruminations upon poetry which tease:

A poem is the result
 Of a mind moving
 From why to how –

Like foliage in the sun.
 Poetry is how, not why,
 You postpone your death. ("Pieces of the Moon")

Can we truly *postpone* our death? Ought we even to try? Between the *how* and the *why* may well lie a long, long riddle. And our poet is, at least for now, not in any great rush to explain or clarify. For him it is sufficient that we attend upon his words and try and attempt, perhaps, some mode of *empathy* for, after all, what is the worth of poetry if it does not redirect us to the beginning of our journey, where all other journeys must eventually end.

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