

David Ray. The Touched Life: Selected and New Poems. Poets Now 4. (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982). 197 pp.

David Ray's The Touched Life is a collection which includes one hundred poems selected from works dating from X-Rays (1965) through Orphans (1981). It also contains twenty-five new poems, the best of which are probably "A Portrait of the Mexican Barber," "The Ribcage Behind a Meat Counter" and "The Snake People." Ray's attention to detail and his conversion of that detail into meaningful poetry are the most striking things about the collection. Robert Peters, editor of the Poets Now series, says in his introduction to Ray's volume that Ray "sees life, in a sense, without eyelids."

Ray's selection of specific details provides images resonant with meaning. The mother in the early poem, "Greens," continually abandoned, with her son, by her husband, brushes back "the long, complaining strands / Of her hair." The man at the counter in "A Midnight Diner by Edward Hopper" has "sought the smoothest counter in the world / . . . His grief is what he'll try to hold in check. / His thumb has found and held his coffee cup." General Custer, in "A Portrait of the Mexican Barber" wears a "red strangling kerchief." And "The Ribcage Behind a Meat Counter" is "like latticework, well-spaced arcade, shadow-making, / alabaster crouching." The animal's "action / is not yet final," for "the butcher hacks elsewhere."

Frequently, the poet in Ray's world is a discoverer and interpreter, both of the lives of others and of his own past, as in "A Hill in Oklahoma," Ray has come "to dig the shards / Out of the wet leaves / And find what you left." In "At the Washing of My Son," he sees his new son for the first time and finds a physical connection to him and to the baby's mother that is surprising, "You were / Covered with your mother's blood, and I saw / That navel where you and I were joined to her."

Ray is at his best when observing others from a distance rather than speaking to them in his poetry. One of his finest love poems, "At the Train Station in Pamplona," reveals this distance as it describes a couple, at a railway station, on the verge of breaking up. The man stands over the woman, "his hands / hopelessly in his pockets." For her:

looking between overcoats, toying
with the green umbrella, in a smoke-
filled station is one more way of
keeping from crying.

One thinks of Hemingway immediately, of course, and wonders why the poem isn't titled "After Reading Hills Like White Elephants," but the poem succeeds in spite of its precursor. The man touches the woman's hand and makes her smile, "using torture," and she boards the train with him. The poem ends beautifully:

When she settles herself by the window
she is already broadcasting to other
men the message of her helplessness.

Ray's poetry is at its worst when the poet, in his full-blown, self-important form, takes over the poem, as in "To One Who in His Love of Liberty." This poem, to a man who committed suicide by leaping from the State Capitol dome, opens with the thought that perhaps the man hoped "we'd notice," but Ray comments, "not a chance, it / isn't done!" Yet by the end of the poem, Ray has reversed himself;

You did it
cleanly, brooded
for a year, then
fell, in one poem.
No matter if
no audience,
save one. I heard
you, friend, I heard.

This poem does not succeed in recording the man's tragic life and does not measure up to such fine contemporary elegies as Howard Nemerov's "The Pond" or Ted Hughes' "You Hated Spain."

In contrast to "To One Who in His Love of Liberty," Ray in "Some Notes on Vietnam," for example, makes an effective political statement as he says of the draftees on their way to Saigon, "They do not sense the dark generations / saying things under the rice." And of "the sad young / marrieds" in "On Seeing a Movie Based on an Episode from President Kennedy's Life," Ray writes with appropriate cynicism, "They know / their dreams are put / to sleep like pups."

All of Ray's poems are not dark Ray brooding, however; he can be quite humorous. "Understanding Poetry" opens with these lines:

Buffalo Bill
by e.e. cummings
is on page 50,
I can never find it
right before class
when the girls are biting
their fingernails

What teacher has not had this experience? "The Snake People" has a more grotesque humor than "Understanding Poetry," for the snakes have boxes:

marked JESUS on the lid's inside
as if those snakes could read and be calmed
by such a word, a kind of snake mantra.

David Ray persistently seeks to discover and interpret his past and the lives of others. In The Touched Life, as in most selected works, Ray has written from a wide variety of moods and perspectives. But often Ray, as poet, seemed to intrude on the poems, telling us of his insights, instead of letting the poem reveal them. When his poetry is at its best, Ray steps back, if only just a little, and allows the poem to explain itself.

Philip Wedge