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Russian dolls in the book cover illustration by Sal D’Angelo. The poet, who prefers to be addressed as “Lisa,” is now married to a retired New York Times writer—Clyde H. Farnsworth, himself a well-published writer. The couple divide their time between homes in Northwest Washington near the National Cathedral, and Broome’s Island, Calvert County, Southern Maryland.

Technically her full name, including both the Russian and American elements, is Elisavietta Yurievna Artamonoff Ritchie Farnsworth. Not only is she herself well traveled and well educated, but she brings to her poetry in this book a remarkably colorful heritage: Say, for example, a grandfather who was not only a Russian general under the Tsar but an explorer and world traveler. Gen. Leonid Konstantinovich Artamamonoff is pictured seated in a sepia portrait (one of a number of exquisite vintage family portraits sprinkled throughout the book). The caption helpfully clarifies that the general is “flanked by the two Cossacks with whom he dodged crocodiles as they swam the Nile.” (!). Then how about an aunt who survived the Nazi Seige of Leningrad during the Second World War? Or a father who himself had the prestige of being a U.S. Army officer involved in much of the blood-and-guts fighting of the same global war. All of these facets of her family history and of her own family circumstances Ms Ritchie assimilates and amplifies in her clear, spare, and enlightening poems.

Take her father, mentally scarred by his participation in numerous battles as conjured up before our eyes in a relatively brief but hard-hitting three-stanza poem, “My Father, Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired,” which concludes:

Forty years have passed, wars have not.

Shrapnel, rubble and peculiar shards of flesh
still litter all the bedroom floor so deep
he cannot find his slippers in the dark.

I think you will see, just by this quatrain, that Ms. Ritchie expresses powerful images and ideas effortlessly. In such a way, she encourages her reader to confront those same nasty demons and to consider the issues at hand. As the opening line succinctly and aptly states: “Forty years have passed, wars have not.”

In the closing tercets of “Improvements,” her father and her mother appear, the retired Army man revealed warts and all in the concluding two tercets, which appear to portray senile dementia or, at the very least, disorientation:
He wants retsina, caviar, turtle eggs, insists he must get dressed now to receive the Queen of Belgium, some princess from Cleves. Till they arrive, we’ll scroll the corridor from bed to chair, set four cups in a row, boil tea, then deal out double solitaire.

The poem has a surreal *Alice in Wonderland* quality to it—beautiful but aching and sad at the same time. The scent of tea from a ghostly samovar is almost evident.

As a resident of rural Southern Maryland and a lover of nature, considerable imagery from the natural world is integral to Ms Ritchie’s poetry. Indeed, as you might suspect from the title of one of her earliest collections: *Tightening The Circle Over Eel Country* (1976). As might be anticipated, then, nature is also a strong element in the collection under review. In “Notes for a Family Chronicle,” we are treated to a four-part cycle comprising a total of twenty-five haiku-like tercets. Here are some random quotes from the cycle:

1. 
We were present and one in one ancient drop of semen briny as seas Those rampant chromosomes swords drawn, already wearing boots, thighs gripping saddles and loves. . . . the blood of princes, tsars rushing to their heads crying for blood, for milk. . . .

2. 
And we, as isolate, unknown and continents apart ripped forth to light drank light from fireflies glow worms in the mud, stars. . . .
Cold seas and hot seas divide our fates but in our passport photographs
you wear my eyes
and I your wide
cheekbones and jaws
3.
Suddenly into my land-locked days
your tides break dikes
flow through
as I untangle and entangle you
in my wild currents
where honeysuckle whirls. . . .
In here is where
antique and royal chromosomes
rejuvenate
link up, rebind and unify
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We burst with crowns of glow worms, fireflies, stars
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Clearly, the poet is evoking her bucolic Broome’s Island home to an extent but at the same
time relating that American, Maryland family environment to her Russian heritage: genes
linked to genes.

This deliberate mixing of cultures as a conscious device on the poet’s part becomes clearer
when we recall the engaging two-page prose essay the poet uses to introduce the collection,
which was inspired partly by an enquiry from Bairma Bartanova, chief curator of Russia’s
only Clock Museum, in Angarsk, Irkutsk Oblast. Ms Bartanova wrote to find out more about,
per the foreword’s title, “. . . an Old English Clock in Siberia.” As it turned out, the clock was
not English at all but made in Germany, and evidence showed that it had been in the
possession of Ms Ritchie’s Russian forebears. Thus the curator was writing to find out more
about her family, and while the lady knew quite a lot about Ms Ritchie’s Tsarist general
grandfather, she confessed that she knew virtually nothing about Ritchie’s grandmother and
other family members.
As Ms. Ritchie states, Ms Bartonova’s request “inspired this collection. . . My poems won’t give the exact information she seeks, but something else about the individuals. Nor can I neglect others who played significant roles in my life. . . Certain princes, and Ghengis Khan fifty-nine grandfathers back may not need poems. . . I trust that all whom I loved, albeit now snowy ghosts, are glad to be disturbed.”

I will end this review by quoting from the poem, “Babushka’s Beads” in which, Ms Ritchie writes:

My grandmother pops up online and disappears
like diving ducks but not sharp black-and-white.
All gray: face, hair, lace collar. Loops of china beads
gleam white, marble-size, worn in place of pearls.
The grandmother, who had been sent to be educated at the Sorbonne in Paris but skipped lectures to “browse the stalls with books and paintings by the Seine,” ends up bequesting the beads to her grand daughter, although she never explained to her grandchild who had given her the jewelry. Ms Ritchie writes in the concluding stanzas:

Did a secret love give her the china beads?
Or were these a proper present from a future general?
Their marriage in St. Petersburg, 1899, the Tsarina came.
Distant postings, wars, revolutions, children lost,
famine, terrors, jails, haven in America, more wars. . .
By then our unstrung fates had intertwined.
I walked her paths beside the Hudson, Neva, Seine.
They sent me to the Sorbonne too. “Avoid French men,”
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Years slide past. She treasured those plain beads
more than sparkling gems, passed them on to me.
I am left to wonder if the china beads may have been given to the grandmother, the Babushka, by one of those Frenchmen who climbed all over her. Now there’s a thought. . . In this passage of the poem, sex is inferred without euphemism but clearly hinted at. Indeed, the grandmother’s well-chosen quote is of a piece with Ms Ritchie’s work as a whole. Her poems are always wise, crisp, and well constructed, without excess words. They always say what they do efficiently and memorably. A wonderful collection. If you love
history, if you love family history, if you love Russian history, and also fine vintage family photographs, you are sure to enjoy this remarkable book.

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2.
And we, as isolate, unknown
and continents apart
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drank light from fireflies
glow worms in the mud,
stars. . . .
Cold seas and hot seas
divide our fates
but in our passport photographs
you wear my eyes
and I your wide
cheekbones and jaws

3.
Suddenly into my land-locked days
your tides break dikes
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as I untangle and entangle you
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