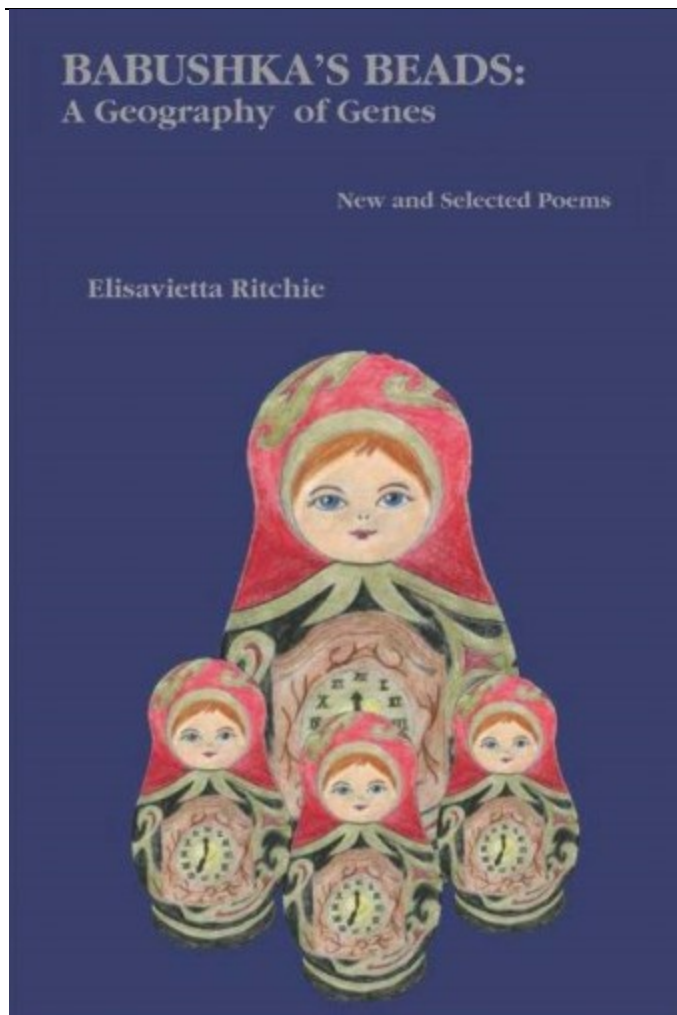


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*Elisavietta Ritchie, Babushka's Beads: A  
Geography of Genes, New and Selected Poems.  
Reviewed by Christopher T. George*

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Elisavietta Ritchie, *Babushka's Beads: A Geography of Genes, New and Selected Poems*.

Poets' Choice Publishing, 2016, ISBN: 978-0-9909257, 120 pages. Price \$18.95.

Veteran Maryland and Washington, D.C. poet Elisavietta Ritchie has delved deeply into her Russian heritage to produce a richly textured and nuanced book as alluring as the nest of

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 Siege 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  
those noble old alliances  
and glorious coronations

4.

We burst with crowns of glow worms, fireflies, stars  
and once again pass on  
as one

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 bequeathing 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  
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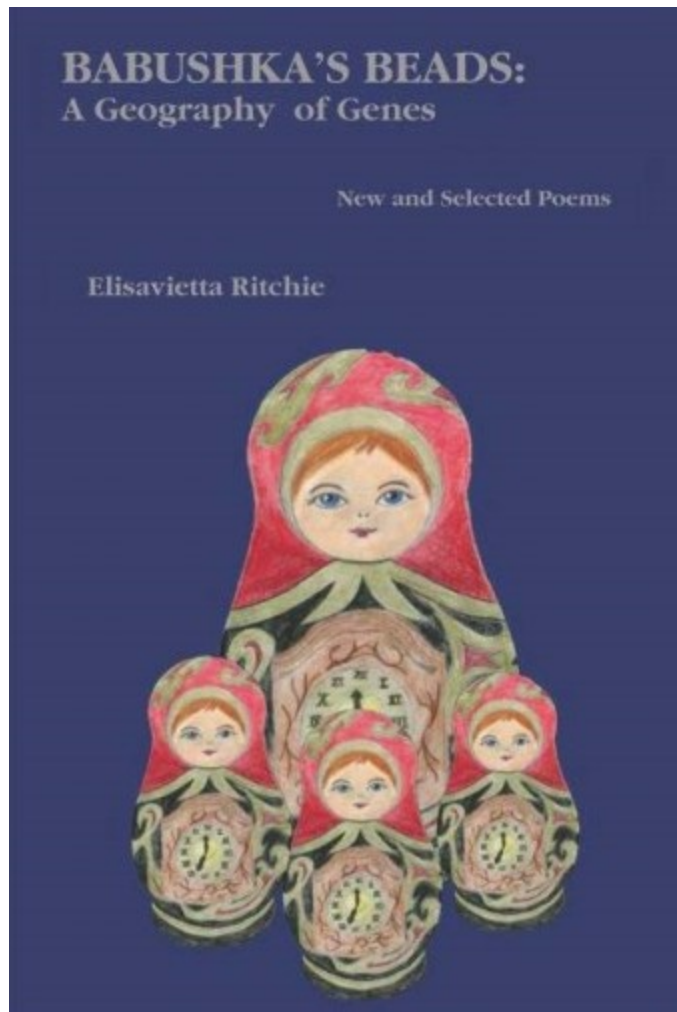
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