*Dark and Tender Principles*, Mike Ferguson (Gazebo Gravy Press)

It's autumn, the sun has disappeared beyond clouds, it's melancholic and it's raining; in fact it's been raining for days. Even though I mentally wake up a bit as the temperature drops, I can't escape the fact that winter is on its way and a few depressing winter months wait ahead. Listening to the new Lloyd Cole album, *On Pain* (the titles says it all) and reading Mike Ferguson's new pamphlet don't help, although the latter – sonnets and other poems: July-September, 2023 – contain glimmers of optimism and light as it grapples with notions of memory, old age, darkness and uncertainty.

The narrator of these lyrical poems finds himself 'beyond our precipice' ('July'), knows 'what is missing but not why' ('Missing') and takes refuge and delight in simple things around him: sycamore 'helicopter' seed pods in flight, fishing boats on the Devon coast, visits from a stray cat, ducks flying above the river estuary, the distant sound of hymns drifting from a nearby church. These are real, carefully observed and recalled moments, but they do not hold back the decline into the future:

The sails are taking us nowhere

('Sails')

It gradually dawns on the reader, or should, that these poems are not writing as a gendered or regal plural, but about the narrator and a partner, a long term relationship and marriage. There is one discreet mention of 'a progressive disease' ('Calico in Waiting') which suddenly sheds light on what is underpinning these uneasy and gentle poems:

This is

our bifurcation, together and apart on journeys

then and now. It is that plunge into darkness

again and the rattles and moans and shudders.

('Roller Coaster')

So, this poem is not only a memory about only one of a couple going on the Santa Cruz *Giant Dipper* whilst the one other one 'stayed on land', but it also vividly recalls the physical sensation of the ride whilst at the same time using it as a metaphor for separation. The text also comments on what the poem itself is doing:

Feeling existential

this suffices when stripping away an emotive

rise and fall to leave behind wood and its

thunder and an awareness of age, these old-

fashioned realities [...]

Ferguson's speaker, despite himself, is struggling in that darkness he has plunged into. There is no self-pity here as he offers up

further evidence of forgetting

how to behave as if there is no change.

('Sometimes')

although there is pertinent and considered reflection, particularly in 'The Tenderness Principle':

We can all rise to our own level of ache

when facing the paradoxes, and tenderness

will hurt most. It is in those shadowy

conflicts where remembrance and feelings

break through, and in a moment of pure calm

it is rebuke and retribution for the doubts.

Incompetence registers too, dumb to the

futility and fury: how it is unfair to treat

your own pain with more pain.

This perhaps confessional writing, very different from Ferguson's recent concrete texts and satirical political commentaries, takes its place alongside poetry collections such as Thom Gunn's *The Man With the Night Sweats*, detailing the effects of AIDS both physically and mentally, and Douglas Dunn's moving and mournful *Elegies*. It is emotional, clear-sighted and original without ever being self-indulgent, 'a reminder of what would otherwise be lost.' These studies of forgetfulness, despair and desperation, studded with jewelled moments from the past and present should definitely not be misplaced or abandoned.

Rupert Loydell

(580 words)