



This City by Jennifer Compton. Dunedin: OUP (2011). RRP \$30. Hb, 64pp. ISBN: 9781877578106. Reviewed by Susan Kornfeld.

The great sixteenth century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, taught that God made room for the world by pouring the plenary Divine Light into vessels. But some vessels shattered, trapping sparks of sacred light in their shards. Humanity's task is to find and release that light: *tikkun olam*, restoring the broken world. Just so, in *This City*, poet Jennifer Compton looks for the lost and cast-off in expeditions of discovery and salvage. Success might be found where "you are scanning the pavement for a useful paper clip. / Or something extraordinary. Something that will keep you safe forever" In "The Gleaners" she gets a crick in her neck looking for old buttons on the sidewalk. "I think of people / with their clothes agape," she says, as if the agape world might be refastened.

This is a woman's *tikkun olam*; indeed, many of the poems' tropes – sewing, knitting, ironing – are proudly located in the traditionally feminine realm. The poet as knitter unpicks yarn from a sweater to knit up something new.

On another outing the poet finds buttons, a paper clip, a hairclip, a balcony, a shimmering man, and a taxi for a girl shivering from cold. There is a progression here leading to, "I found a torch and then / a rose garden, and the will to purloin roses. // And I found this." Poems, like sparks of light, may be found amid the shards of the city.

In "The Dead Woman's Button Box" the poet discovers "A nail clipping, just one. ... (A) precious relic, containing all her secrets, her lineage and her character." Such emanations configure the wholeness of creation, but the poet is sceptical about our ability to properly repair the world. She writes in "Keeble's Bush" that the duff of this

"Forest Restoration Project" "holds the secret we can't crack."

Nobody knows how to put it all back together again.
We don't know, can't know every element it contains.
And on my muddy boots might be the spore that splits
the crystal of this ecosystem apart.

"It is somehow all my fault," she adds with the sardonic humour that leavens many of the poems.

This high quality hardcover volume is attractive, inviting, and feels good in the hands. Compton, an accomplished playwright as well as poet, wrote the collection as writer in residence at Randall Cottage in 2008. In 2010 it won the prestigious Kathleen Grattan Award for Poetry. There are three sections – "In Italy," "In New Zealand," and "In Australia" – although most poems are about New Zealand and Australia. Having spent decades of her life in both countries, Compton has a sure hand for their inner and outer landscapes.

In "Palmy," for example, the poet juxtaposes the missing past for "the father of my first grandchild" who was adopted – "the link is broken, everything is lost" – with missing forests:

The wind blows through, in rolling gusts,
baffled, and almost angry.
The wind is searching for the Papaioea Forest.
How beautiful it was.
Tonight, behind the necklace of glittering lights
below, is the darkness
which is the hills. Upon them, when it is light,
like many crucifixions,
the wind farm. Then the long, ungainly arms
swoop and seem to bless.
I will admit, to you, that I have found
Palmerston North disconcerting.

Besides a few detours, the poems take us, as promised in the introductory poem, to "This City" where the poet is "travelling away from my life, towards my life," and where there is a tram, "lit from within, waiting at the end of the line."