



Trace Fossils by Mary Cresswell. Wellington: Steele Roberts (2011). RRP NZ\$19.99. Pb, pp63. ISBN: 9781877577321. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

Mary Cresswell is co-author of *Millionaire Shortbread* (University of Otago, 2003) and has published a collection of satirical poems, *Nearest and Dearest* (Steele Roberts, 2009). Her book *Trace Fossils* was chosen by Fleur Adcock as first runner-up for the inaugural Kathleen Grattan Award (University of Otago).

Dense, intricate, and beautifully crafted, *Trace Fossils* is a book marked by a very strong personal aesthetic. Cresswell has found very much her own way of creating poems that bridge tenderness, inventiveness and a fairly traditional taste for highly ordered verse. This is a poetry I found it easy to warm to with its emotional overtones and human insights.

The collection is divided into four sections: "The age of trees", "Changing sea levels", "Cloud" and "The age of salt". The opening poem "Book of hours" is written in a slightly arch style. The regular pattern of 3-line verse before the closing 4-line stanza is unobtrusive, entirely suiting a poem that might have become boring in a lighter vein. It leads to the warning lines:

Your hunters press on
lost in a thousand pines
down careful rows
of transparent afternoons.

Another very fine poem is the prose poem "Swan song con vongole" where its connections are explored in a way that is at once playful, strikingly beautiful and very powerful. The tone and style of much of Cresswell's verse could be gauged by the concluding lines:

We are but shadows of our former shells,
circling the light faster and faster, giving an
illusion of motion. It is time to move on. The
sea bottom is rising every day, unsinkable and
unaskable, and there is no depth in us.

The poems in the second section use images of the Pacific and focus on the poet's admiration for

islands (tropic through subantarctic). In poems like "Aurora australis" and "Hurricane wranglers" Cresswell finds ample scope for her spirit of playfulness and wit. "O.E." is an engaging look at taking tours:

Though there is something good in taking tours,
it's best if we forget the package tours:

You're game? I'm set to move again.
The sirens call – I hear their overtures.

In "Nantucket dreaming" a surface of references is made to reveal a powerful undertow of memory:

They drank and talked of whales. Old maps
spread in front of them (there was a war on
lithographs of rigging. I couldn't believe
every rope had a name. Sour mash and
sailing ships. In the Pacific, landing craft
crashed in blue lagoons, turning them red
with algae, rust and blood.

One of the highpoints of the section Cloud is undoubtedly Cresswell's moving poem "Navigation without stars". In this poem Cresswell produces a masterpiece of poise. There is wonderful power of condensation in such lines as

One crab stopped and changed direction. The other
dropped into the mud and sank still, only its eyes
showing. I leaned forward, gripping my paddle as
hard as I could.

The time spent in the Happy Isles frames the poem in real, everyday context. Perhaps the triumph of this poem, as with several other poems in this collection, is the fusion of a natural everyday tone with a varied style and form.

A poem in the final section, The age of salt, that deserves praise is "Waiting for the barbarians". The chill of this prose poem, its image of officialdom, is woven in lines of balanced humour and anxiety. Cresswell's writing in this poem is concise, the simple words taut and clear:

Clouds arose when we considered the clothes, a
mountain range of hats and caps and trows and
petticoats. They were too much to cope with, as Big
Alice had guessed, so we left them in the cornfield for
the duration.

Bearing mice, the cats sneaked beneath the folds.

The final poem “The track to Angel Falls” is a simple, but beautiful poem about a walk to a glacier:

Above us floats the vapour trail
the angel left when he fell
splashing the pines with melted lead

We scramble over crumpled snow
that blocks the glacier’s snout
ribbons of scree clutter the path

Mary Cresswell’s *Trace Fossils* is undoubtedly a poetic achievement. She has developed a patterned style of her own, without sacrificing humour, compassion and intellectual sharpness.