



***Tree Space* by Maria McMillan. Wellington: VUP (2014). Pb, 80pp. RRP: \$25. ISBN: 9780864739285. Reviewed by Sue Wootton.**

*Tree Space* by Maria McMillan<sup>1</sup> is the follow-up to her intelligent and graceful 2013 debut *The Rope Walk* (Wellington:

Seraph Press). In both collections, events and conversations, along with historic or scientific facts, act as springboards for poems which, although always grounded in daily life, often also tackle tough intellectual or ethical concepts. In *Tree Space*, the thematic glue that holds the collection together is the science of taxonomy. The collection opens with “Song”, a poem whose syntax is deconstructed, its components teased apart, so heightening awareness of its constituent pieces: “My tiny / feathered chest. The heaving of.” The disconnected phrases seem astonished to be so revealed. Repetition pops out, suddenly highly visible. So too, rhyme and assonance:

...And we let the atoms sing.  
And the taxonomies. And me. I sing.  
As if song belonged. To me. As if.  
It always did. Sparrows and kind.  
As if the holy chamber were mine.  
The insolent box. A small parcel  
passed forth and back. The strum.  
Plum. The cocked ear.  
The discerning nomenclature.

Poets writing “about” science are sometimes more besotted with scientific language than with any serious contemplation of the concepts it describes. McMillan doesn’t fall into this trap. Instead, with every poem she tunnels into the question which seems to form the heart of her writing creed: what does it mean to me, to us? Her language is always her own, and her sometimes soaring explorations are always re-grounded in the material world of physicality and relationships. Most of all, she renders her considerations through a technically assured and wide-ranging poetic filter. The technicality is deftly integrated: this is lucid work which engages with the heart and the mind, whose rhythms pull

the reader forward, phrase by phrase and line break by line break. The straight-talking pantoum “The Kingdom of Life” reminded me of Ruth Padel’s 2009 collection, *Darwin, a Life in Poems*, while “Song”, and many other poems in the collection, brought to mind Wallace Stevens’s “The man with a blue guitar”, with its exhortation to play “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves”. The second part of “Song”, for example, which addresses motherhood, connects science with self via poetics. It is neither sentimental nor faux-scientific: “Your eyes and my eyes were eaten by the same seagull. We were, then, / the wet inevitable thing and / in being ourselves answered ourselves.” In “The baby is on the radio”, the concept of evolution becomes “We were both part of the sky. / You were the blue molecule and I was. / We zipped about. / Hovered. / Hung. Same note we.”

Douglas Adams wrote that, ‘the thing about evolution is that if it hasn’t turned your brain inside out, you haven’t properly understood it.’ Many poems in *Tree Space* call up a sense of amazement. The poem “Tree Space”, for example, is set in ‘Not a forest but the forest and infinite which is another word for indefinite’. It is a place where ‘We see things illuminated where they should not be and lie and stare into a small grotto.’ The poem ends: ‘What are the chances I say and you say we never did but when we stood up we too were glowing.’

In “Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc Cave”, it is amazement which ‘bangs / against the hard rock of my chest’ as the poet views ‘the earliest known drawings’, and recognises the horses’ ‘hot breath, their silent eye.’ This moment is also a recognition of the primitive artist as one of our own: a close relative. This theme of human family is contemporised and politicised in the prose poem “September 12”, where on that date 2001, ‘the Muslim family living in the white weatherboard house, 14 Clair Street, North East Valley, Dunedin, did not open their stiff blue curtains.’

The actual concept of tree space is a mathematical one, which the blurb describes as ‘all the possible ways in which species might relate to one another.’ McMillan’s accomplished poems in *Tree Space* cast a creative and perceptive light on this notion.

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