

*Naked Trees*

by John Terpstra

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Reviewed by Sue Sorensen

This lovely book was published once before, in 1990, and Wolsak and Wynn has done an exemplary job in this re-release. The very texture of the pages helps lead us toward a distinct relationship with the bark, the rings, and the sound of the trees in John Terpstra's neighbourhood. Being a cabinetmaker, Terpstra knows the personality and feel of, apparently, every tree in his part of the world, and this book of prose poems is all heartfelt praise of trees, for which (or perhaps we should say, for whom) Terpstra feels tremendous affection, respect, and kinship. As he says in "Transpiration,"

As humankind is to fauna, the tree is to flora: we stand together at the top of our respective heaps. This is not to ascribe any native superiority to either of our two species, but in the tree we find our equal from that half of the growing world that is mute and immobile. (65)

These delicate ruminations are reverent but never sentimental, and their manner is, odd as it may sound, elaborately plain. The subject of tree keeps the poet intensely focused and (pardon me) rooted; at the same time he allows himself to range and wonder, to be awestruck and fanciful. There is a wonderful sense of place in this collection. He admires a tree for "learning all there is to know about that one particular spot: the composition of earth, the characteristic of each wind, the inquisition of water" ("Place," 52). Terpstra is endlessly inventive: he imagines saplings as adolescents and allows utility poles their place in his taxonomy "Varieties." In part this book is a serious but capricious dictionary of deciduous trees (a "deciduary," 7) with surprising entries for "Indifference," "Poiesis," and "Yes."

In my Winnipeg neighbourhood, Wolseley, we talk a lot about our trees. If we lost the elms on my street, I do not know if I could bear to stay. Terpstra writes movingly of the removal of old trees on his street, and his words struck near my fearful heart: "A loss of equilibrium. And the entire street feels less secure" ("On the street where she lived," 29). He traces individual tree histories, carefully and accurately naming them, an act of homage and a new kind of social history.

"For a tree says everything simultaneously," writes Terpstra in "Speech" (63). He does not translate for the trees, and he never condescends. But he casts their stories in different forms, in a familial and natural way. His poems are both intellectually stimulating and sensuous, and his profound knowledge of his subject makes *Naked Trees* affecting and delightful. ♣

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