



*In Vitro* by Laura Solomon. Wellington: HeadworX (2011). RRP \$19.99. Pb, pp53. ISBN: 9780473181994. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

Laura Solomon has published several novels. *In Vitro* is her debut collection of poetry. The collection takes its title from the processes or reactions taking place in a test-tube, culture dish, or elsewhere outside the living organism. The poems in this collection are on a wide variety of subjects from in vitro experiments, vampire bats, Janet Frame and earthquakes to Pythia and Guy Fawkes.

As I read and reflect on Solomon's poems, I realize how the many layers of meanings of the title are embedded in this collection, adding to its depth and the way the poems work on the reader's imagination. These are long poems, with long lines and need to be read carefully and with thought.

The book opens with the title poem "In Vitro" and ends with "You Will Know When You Leave." In the first poem, we are told about the manufacture, in vitro, of the birth of babies: "My children are made by me, but borne by others." By the end of the closing poem, the poet is fully aware that in the end

It is a place of choice. The deep black fissure in  
the rock  
Glistens like an open wound. Or some fanged  
mouth of hell.

These are not the only poems that look beneath the surface of things. In "The Tiger Tamer's Lament" Solomon shows us the past that's always there beneath the surface of the present:

First day on the job,  
I discovered that the guy employed before me  
had been brutally mauled.  
It was one of the acrobats who whispered in my ear;  
she followed me into the ladies' room and hissed,  
*He didn't make it. He languished in hospital for  
three long weeks before giving up the ghost.*

In "The Vampire Bats – A Conversation" the poet assumes the voice of the bat and takes us from

It's never easy. It would have been so much  
better to be  
nothing more than ordinary.

to

Did I hear somebody say, some time tomorrow  
or yesterday –  
the chosen eat the feeble. The forgotten few  
will rise again;  
the chosen chomp through everything. The  
chosen eat the feeble.

*And blood, my friends, will have blood.*

In the amazing poem "Tectonic" Solomon writes about the instability of the country, which "rests on two great plates." Her grandfather looks out of the window and says, "*Let's never forget that terrible earthquake that devastated Napier back in '31.*" She goes on to describe what happened in the beautiful Art Deco city:

Some spent the night in the open air.  
Kind people in nearby towns opened up their  
homes.  
Most hotels were destroyed –  
the Masonic collapsed completely, a wall at  
the Empire crumbled,  
leaving the rooms on one side exposed. Guests  
awoke – looked out into empty space,  
fresh vacancy in their eyes. They'd lost their  
city, a lovely one.

The devastation described in this poem is something that will be familiar to many people and will be fresh in the minds of those people affected by the Christchurch earthquakes.

In "Janet Frame's Adversaries Have Their Way. Janet is lobotomised and Spends Her Life Selling Hats in Oamaru" the theme is the supposition of what might have happened if Frame has been lobotomised. In "The Latest Lighthouse Keeper" Solomon's topic is the ghosts that wander at night in the lighthouse:

On this first night, at midnight they show up;  
as predictable as clichés – the pale ones in  
billowing white nightgowns,  
the multi-coloured guys – green, purple with  
green rings, green with yellow rings,  
any combination, in fact, of ring and base  
colour, you might care to dream up.

And there are ghostly presences, too, in "Arrivals":

Way past midnight they commence their march.  
To lock the door against them does no good –  
they are not restrained by something as simple as  
ordinary wood.

The poems in this collection range across many subjects, from those of day-to-day events such as being locked out of one's home to the extraordinary poems about the Wicker Man, cartographers and Guy Fawkes. Solomon is a tolerant, compassionate observer of nature and human nature. She is able to look into the lives, hearts and minds, not only of people, but of animals – using their thoughts and voices. She is able to draw the reader along with her, as she does in “Blighty Wounds” and “The Poet Leaves the Table”.

These poems give us vivid glimpses into grief and pain. They are deeply moving. Yet they are not sentimental. Whatever she writes about, Solomon always remains connected with the natural world and is sustained by it; the sense of wonder it inspires shines through her poetry. She used language powerfully to make us experience the world as she does. Together, the poems in this collection form rich and thought-provoking material.