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The Names by Tim Lilburn

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An Ear to the Floor—the Posture of Thinking in Tim Lilburn's *The Names*

***The Names* by TIM LILBURN**

M&S, 2016 \$18.95

Reviewed by **JEREMY LUKE HILL**

There is a posture of profound humility to Tim Lilburn's thought. Whether in his essays (where I first encountered him) or in his public appearances (as I recently heard at a panel on Indigenous art in Guelph, Ontario), he maintains an attitude of gracious and grateful contemplation.

His most recent collection of poetry, *The Names*, is also characterized by this thinking, and in some places it goes further still, looking at the very question of what thinking is and should be.

In a poem entitled, “January 28, 2014: *De more*,” one of the earlier pieces in the collection, Lilburn writes, “Everyone who thinks must shake” (6), describing the act of thought as requiring a kind of trembling in the thinker, a kind of fear and awe. The shaking here is not at all a reluctance to think with vigour and resolution, as the rest of Lilburn's writing provides ample proof. It is only a recognition of the profound responsibility in thinking and in being the kind of creature who thinks. It is a humble gratitude for the very capacity to think and for a world that asks us to think it.

The word “must” in this line, in “Everyone who thinks must shake,” emphasizes that the connection between thinking and trembling is an essential one. If we are truly thinking, then we must shake. We have no choice.

The posture of thankful humility is inseparable from true thinking. It is not an active choice that the thinker must make but a passive gift that the thinker merely receives.

In a later poem, “The End of August,” Lilburn speaks further to this passivity in the nature of thought, saying, “a leaf falls from ocean spray, / this is thinking” (23). According to these lines, to think must not only be to shake (though certainly it is in the nature of leaves to shake). To think is also to fall, and not by volition, but through an entirely external agency. The leaf does not shake or fall by its own agency. The wind shakes the leaf, and the ocean spray causes it to fall, humbles it, makes it lie prostrate.

This understanding of thinking describes perfectly Lilburn's own humble and wondering thought. He seems always to be bowed in attentive thankfulness before his subject, listening and feeling for what there is to be thought. As he says himself in “Rosemont,” one of the collection's longer poems, “I would rise / to kneel and set my ear to the floor. / I heard most of what occurred” (11). This is thinking. It is being humble enough and thankful enough to listen for what needs to be thought. It is to rise only to kneel.

By thinking in this way—a way that shakes and falls, kneels and listens, which is to say, a way that thinks truly—Lilburn's poetry sees much that other poetry is too hasty and too certain to see. He listens for the words and the images that are difficult to find, that are unexpected, but only to show that they are proper to themselves. He does not force his words on the world, only discovers what is there to be said, what

may have been neglected or overlooked
but that has nevertheless always been
at home there. His poems merely show
us the words that are already being
spoken, if we would but consent to
kneel and listen.

Lilburn lays his ear to the floor,
he listens gratefully, and in so doing he
discovers that “The hoard of neglect / is
in the beauty-vault of things” (23).

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