Memory’s Daughter
by Alice Major

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Alice Major has eight poetry collections to her credit and was poet laureate of Edmonton from 2005 to 2007. Her latest work, Memory’s Daughter, does not disappoint.

On the cover is a painting titled Last Tartan of Will and in the centre is a square of light, as if to emphasize the light we will see when we read Major’s poems, the square of memory that brightens our lives and will eventually fade with time.

Filled with tenderness, vivid imagery and wisdom, the poet uses science, particularly time, mythology and metamorphosis to speak about the intricate and convoluted paths humans follow on their journey through this life.

There are several references to Greek mythology, one of them being that the god Zeus mated with Mnemosyne/Memory, and she gave birth to the Muses. And it is memory Alice Major concentrates on in her collection of poetry. Unreliable and elusive, yet vivid and startling, memory becomes the focal point by which humans survive. It is the answer to hopes and dreams, for the stability of society. It is also through the loss of memory that we fail and die.

In her notes, Alice Major writes, “The Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration held that forgetting was a necessary step in the transition to the soul’s next life” (129). If this is true, then memory is the instrument we use when we begin life, grasping at thoughts and ideas, adding them to our repertoire only to fade and die as we must.

The book takes us to the beginning, to Eve in the Garden of Eden where memory is bright and new as creation. Major starts her poem “Eve learns endearments” by creating her version of Eden. She moves from there to mythological times, on to the Industrial Revolution, through to her parents’ time and their memories to the present. Although Eden is considered a paradise, the poet writes that Eve is “locked in / to its stabbing loveliness” (5). She is not free to move but must abide by the rules of her imprisonment.
Major goes on to explain that humans survive by coping. We do this by adopting and transforming language; in this case, we lessen the harshness of life by uttering endearments. She paints a vivid picture of her father and what happens when his memory fails, how “a cup he will put in the freezer/a spoon he will lose to the breadbox” (6). And time passes, memories fail and are lost. The poet struggles to understand this loss and eventually learns to accept her father’s failing by “casting endearments— / our collective net / of love” (8).

In “The Accidental Snapshot” a child inadvertently releases the shutter on the family camera. As a result, “a loaf / of Weston’s bread” is “snapped / on a picnic at Riverdale Zoo” (79). This is what memory records. The science of photography creates an image that can be preserved on paper for future generations. But the image recorded is not necessarily the truth. What is real and what is conjured? And what is lost if we obliterate the human aspect?

Major’s final poem is a tribute to her parents. They are near death and she wants the kindest season for their passing: “Sweet May, July’s long day” (125). She speaks of giving her parents her last gift, that of being present at their deaths. Death, she says, is like the weather, always present. What we hold onto are the words: “Love. Remember. / Together” (126). There is tenderness in the rendering of this poem, a kindness and a love that resonates long after the reading.

In the wonderful poem “Eve’s children,” Major depicts a picture of her father as a boy “with lungs like cramped bellows” and his father who is determined that his son survive his infirmity. Such determination “Gave him a heart / for the next eighty years” (9). The joy at this remembrance is powerful; it gives us hope that there is a chance for all of us to conquer the ills of time. And that is a good memory.

Under the section Metamorphoses, the poet writes about transformation in various stages, about a girl whose body is trapped by disease. She visits a butterfly house and her wish to be free from her body is echoed in the words “to emerge / in all these costumes, / wardrobe mistress of wings” (101). By the end of the series, the poet realizes she is wrong “to turn her [sister] into the poem / she must write / herself.” Each person creates only his / her memory and not anyone else’s, no matter the circumstance (109).

The most rewarding portions of the book are Major’s remembrances of family. Whether bitter or loving, she remains truthful to memory and its aspects—awareness at
the early stages of life, reflection on family and marriage, the recollection of past events, and oblivion in old age.

This book needs several readings to glean all that it contains. Each time you read a passage, you discover something new. That is the beauty of good poetry. It brings forth elegance, excitement and wisdom. It brings forth memory, and by doing so, creates a new one.

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

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