

Poetry, Philosophy Activism Nature 15

Edited by Tom Bristow

So often it happens that the time we turn around in
Soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run aground in.
And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea
We must reach the shallows before God cuts us free.

John Ashbery, 'A Worldly Country'

Poetry recovers what is lost through automatism. The 'resistant phenomenologist', Tracy Ryan, as Marion May Campbell has it, delivers poems of 'arresting image economy and tensile musculature'.ⁱ The poems '(H)edges' and 'Request' that we share with you here are part of the project that realised the Whitmore Press publication, *Hoard* (2015); a collection surveying the bogs of Ireland, which Campbell discerns—in the 'slow fuse of the image-work', and in the rhyme elements and soundscape—as a practice of co-respondance reviving 'the tremulants repressed in our habitual rhetoric and ecocidal practices'. These poems of hedgerows as remaining habitat play alongside flower poems published in John Charles Ryan's 'Plants Poetics' feature in the Australian journal *Plumwood Mountain* (7.1, 2020) and alongside *Hoard*, which opens with the 'elsewhere' of being that is the condition ignited by 'old speech left off in a colonial generation / for expedience' ('The changeling addresses Ireland' 43-44). 'Co-respondence' is a Heideggerian term of art that finds fresh articulation in contemporary writing that erases the modernist subject-object relation: following Campbell, 'an open, interrogative approach, an auscultation' of what the world might say for itself, 'its appeal, material and sentient'ⁱⁱ.

Listening in to the internal sounds of the body (auscultation), is a useful ecocritical nuance to literary studies of the song of the earth that demonstrate faith in radical non-duality, especially useful for critics wishing to exercise our discipline's capacity to feel out the borders between description and analysis. But to clarify literary merit in the making of a contingent diaspora finding a provisional foothold within a newly found homesickness (where the Earth is sick and unhomely) is bourgeois; Tracy Ryan writes of 'damage', 'enclosure', and of our incapability of 'taking on/ for even a moment' the viewpoint of the other in '(H)edges' (10, 15, 33-34). I like the destabilising of my reading practice and I would like to read the English poet John Clare against and with Ryan who asks in the poem 'Request' for 'whatever you wouldn't look twice at' (37-38). This request comes as speaker turns to the 'little and liminal' (34) as does Clare; both poets, in reading 'the natural barrier' (32) of hedge that is on the edge, find a real phenomenon spelling out: 'last-left places / for something to live in: anything, / shielded from larger forces' (8-10). Poetry's defences here write of defences that need saving:

You'll only see them	right on foot: that hurtle,
that hot, overwhelming	forward engine
is a large part	of the problem

(20-23)

Hoard's first section ends with the line 'I cannot come home' (27) breaking up the pattern of couplets that precede it, and working towards more white space that floating initial and terminal caesuras first slice out of the poem's natural rhythm. Contrasted with the cadences of bog, its smoke and rain, the *admission* adds both cognitive precision and fluid stammering to the finding of feet, as it were. As above in '(H)edges', the cutting of the line speaks to the act of cutting and to the manifest cuttings; the natural rhythm at once broken by enforced punctuation—here of the medial caesura as in Old English verse, which curiously provides slackening to any stiffness that might result from the tension of formal metrical patterns. The hard edge of the 'forward engine' is magnificently contained by the concretism of the prosody for it can be seen itself at odds with yet within a softening, disconcerting fragmentation that is less of power, more of poeming. Such is the worldly poetry of Ryan's intonations, each of which, 'churns up something somehow known' ('The changeling address Ireland' 45), demonstrating a range of intelligent indications of attitude and emotion apposite for our plight.

What happens is of our making. 'Bird Death', 'Bushfires and Driza-Bones' and 'Floods in Chennai' are poems excerpted from Prithi Varatharajan's publication *Entries* (2020) from Cordite Books. Varatharajan does not underscore the connection between language and ecology in lyrical form; his synthesis of diary entry, blog post, anecdote, and newsflashes from a self-reflecting personal lifeworld offer understatement on our complex entanglements with others: birds, animals, partners, institutions, climate, the military. Gentle and honest, there is something in the sharing of experience that expands the witnessing of life to a broad audience, content with prose poetry's creative reportage. Panic at the sight of vulnerable life in our hands, an awakening to the other's perspective, and everydayness wracked by problems further afield that places pressure on our means and modes of communication: in these three poems, respectively, Varatharajan orchestrates contracts that thrive on clarity that is the idiosyncratic measure of sympathy and reflection, universal in its relevance to our strange times that has brought praise to *Entries*.

Campbell's words for Ryan might be repurposed for appraising the works of Vera Fisiban: 'a concrete thinker undoing routine concretions and confluations'. The invasive species cluster of poems, 'Mitten Crab', 'Wakame Watch' and 'Wireweed' report from investigations into the boundary between species that might be porous or divisive as in the hyphen that resides twice in 'more-than-human' writing, which we must take as it presents itself to us in each case. Fisiban provides a micro essay for her selection that will remind *PAN* readers of her unique and exciting contribution to the extinction elegies project, selections from which were published in *PAN14* and disseminated along the underground train network in Sydney.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another phenomenologist, Luke Fischer, has an eye for urban ecology, an ear for synaesthetic language, and commitment to the poem as an event. 'Coastal Idyll' might tease the reader into a Romantic slumber, for it speaks of fisherman standing on the edge of rock, 'their rod lines glistening strands of cobweb / bending in the a breeze', while a 'flock of gulls alights on the shore / with the synchrony of a ballet sequence' (11-12, 14-15); but this is a poetry of radical absorption: a practice that entails disciplined observation to see ourselves within or party to the bodies that persist. We read of 'a smudge of reef' and 'leagues of plastic' and ponder on what we

truly see before our eyes as phenomenon, event, and disaster, is reified into cognitive clarity through the modern fragmented ocean and its union of 'strangled turtles, seals':

Through the cracks you eye forests
of bone-white coral—a submarine cemetery—
and the deep sea beyond where an iridescent
slick smothers scales, penguins and albatross
undulate limply among leagues of plastic,
a super trawler rests: nets bloated
with ocean-floor fragments, fish populations,
strangled turtles, seals. (26-33)

Such is the control of sound shapes in Fischer's lyricism that 'eyes' the world philosophically. The lament for the sight of phone towers in 'Mountainous Island' combines a creaturely vocabulary—the towers 'fasten webs of communication' (50)—with a metaphysics of presence turning on the totality of facts that the world presents to us. Our intelligence is bewitched by means of our language; poetry and philosophy seize situations as grounds to escape the 'panorama of idiocy and greed' as Fischer has it in 'Our Times' (1: 2). While visual metaphors scaffold a sense of the world that lies within the world, there is something beyond our ken that the poet keenly reports to us in terms of the 'threads of life' that are 'coming undone'; the patterns of this undoing occur 'so quickly' as to elude 'the rate and range / of our perception' (2: 11-13). To address this difficulty, to unconceal the elements of undoing, we are taken into the workings of the realm of perception; sometimes this realm is presented as the stimulation of human sense experience, and sometimes as interpretation. When stanzas combine these modes of organization in 'On the Organic Form of Art', a clearing in the processes of identification and communication is disclosed:

... you remember
the concert where within the air, the reverse
side of space, the vast rooms that open
behind the closed curtains of your eyes,
rhythms and melodies became pulsing images,
expanding and contracting forms
like breath or tides, buds and
blossoms...
true as lizards, koalas, cicadas, eucalypts,
similarly unique in their dynamic ratios—
tempo, time and rhythm, their heartbeat and breath
melodic phrases

(7-14, 35-38)

So much depends upon the simile.

Notes

ⁱ Campbell, Marion May, 'Marion May Campbell Launches Tracy Ryan's *Hoard*' *Cordite Poetry Review* 15 September 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ With support from Red Room Poetry.