

Poems

Pete Hay

Presence

There is a tree-way of dreaming
that is known to the sun and the birds.
Its energy is known and its anima is known.

In the flux of roistering evolution is the presence of life.
Its discrete particulars are thrown and brief,
as fleeting as a shape at the smeared edge of sight,
yet assertively real, and comprehended
in their one slippery moment.

Presence configures the world—
it is a cosmic insistence,
the force that mandates 'I am'.

There is a way of tree-dreaming
that is the peculiar way of the white gum.
The lerp in the high wave of the wind knows it,
and the 40-Spot knows it, knows it palpably,
bows to its presence.

Comes wind, and a white gum,
root-shrivelled in drought,
falls in the forest,
unremarked by human sensibility.

Did it really fall?
I look to the 40-Spot,
this tiny bird chained to the white gum's imperative presence,
and know the question ludicrous.
In the relations of life presence is affirmed.
Take a cosmos, though, with one living thing—one only.
A tree, say.
That falls.
Then, only then, does the question merit the contemplation
of a serious, non-existent intelligence.

* * *

Presence suffuses all,
composes the score of being,
a discordant symphony of springing life—
perhaps, indeed, of all that is particular,
all that takes the shape of a meaning.
It rubs what it rubs,
constructs, and is thus constructed.

But I am an item of life—
I have a species and a gender.
In the swirl of eternal is-ness
extending to the rim of a vast, blind universe,
 of what portent is my 'I'?
What does presence mean—my presence—
 in this cramped town
 on this island with its own florid, ambiguous presence
 on this planet
 in this chaotic now?
It is a question too large,
the void to which it points too forbidding.
I retreat from mind, its brutal calculation,
trust the electric intelligence of the skin,
stand open, ready for anything,
the presence of my 'is' folding, unfolding,
 bucking, buckling, renewing,
 renegade and slave,
my intimate familiar, alive.

* * *

I am too exuberant.

Here is my place,
the place in which I presently am present.
It presents me to the world, and I, it.

But presence has no fixed point.
It is an erratic butterfly
 that cannot be pinned.

I look upon the place that grounds
the 'is' of my life, my time,
and of the lives on which I rub
 to co-create presence—
 mine, theirs, its.

In its changefulness is a sadness.
Place vanishes from me,
becomes what it was not—
becomes, it may be, something poorer.

There is a vital presence and a diminished one,
and they defy our choosing.

We will, I know, each present item,
each present assemblage,
each person, place, thing,
animate and mere lifeless matter,
pass from the realm of presence
 into the void of once-was.

I mourn those whose loved presence is no more—
 I would retrieve them if I could
 from the implacable abstractions of memory,
 restore their shape, their assertion in the world.

Comes a day and I will join them in non-presence.
I will enter the oblivion of absence,
lose insistence, force,
 my renewing 'is' stopped in its tracks.

Just so, the slow cooking of the earth
will shatter the white gum's tree-dreaming,
 the quick of its presence will pass from planetary knowing,
 and the 40-Spot will flutter with it
 into absence.

A new presence, new presences, will rise,
assert, insist.
I will not know them.

Goethe, by Sea

The general and the specific are one; the specific is the general arising under varying conditions
—Johann Von Goethe

We are girt by sea. Rejoice.

The sun lies low on Cap du Nord.
The west wind bullies its cold way
round Bligh Point.
Pacific gull, kelp gull, alike to the eye
elide their specific difference.

To know this is to know it slowly,
a respecting, imperceptible mergence
of all where I am
with all that I am.

The ocean butts and nuzzles the beach,
a vast mystery slapping back, forth,
a metronome tuned in space.
This fluxful edge configures the earth.
To stand here is to know the humility of unknowing.

Land-sea-air twine in restless interchange—
yet here, in fruiting, tidal dynamism,
is the most emphatic of the planet's bounds.
Surely this is the greatest paradox—
how, then, to know, to render abstract
this hard and porous meniscus, the skin of the sea,
the light lamina that divides life, that meshes life,
that constructs in mind-eluding roil
these site-unique, these irreproducible
biologies, geographies?

I tread the earth's primal ecotone.
I note small shifts in the composition
of wave-sieved grit,
the calcine mix slipping, unbound,
from this calculable assemblage
to that.
It tells me— should tell me—
of the flow of things in the briny realm
just out there, yet denied me.
Currents shift, reef lines shift,
nutrient enclaves shift in mysterious, endless swirl.
We can know the planetary principles
that explain this in the raw—
but the detail is infinite;
is found simply here,
merely here.

It precludes the reduction that coherence demands—
but not the wondering electricity
of the implicate imagination.
I know the sea in the senses' bright verve.
I transcend the limits of the reasoning voice.
I become what I seek to know,
the eternal in the transient.
I know, and am dumb to the knowing.

Rejoice. Rejoice, then.
For we are girt by sea.

The Real Island

For an islander there had to be natural limits, gaps, demarcations, not just artificial ones on a map
—Wayne Johnston

Space hemmed within waves,
declared 'island'.

The rock hard, knee-barking.
Sand rasps within sandalstrap,
scores my foot with rough pain.
Sea is cold, implacable,
a summoning enigma.

The island is mobile, palpable, breathing.

A *thing*.

* * *

Crusoe *was* an island
(before the footprint's mind-assault)—
though no mere man *is* one.

Entire of itself.

The hard island dissolves to metaphor—
our crisis of faith
aligned with this metaphor
turned in upon itself.

'I am a rock, I am an aye-aye-a-a-land...'

Donne gets my bleak cheer,
for Defoe and S&G fix my island
to the pursuit of uncountable wealth
as the planet bleeds away
and we hymn an end to fellow-feeling,
mything anew capital's heroic individual,
that self-contained, selfish 'island',
that Shrugging Atlas, minted as the hero of our time,
its aspiration, its envy,
its tabloid darling.

* * *

I will not have my hard-limned island appropriated
to shoddy ideological service.
I claim my bones,
my rock, my sand, my sea,
and I stare down
those blind traders in metaphor
who would steal the gritty 'is'
of my existence.

* * *

The sea's the thing.

It confers particulars upon this island, that island.
It decrees peculiarities of access, weather, other-realmness.

At this liminal interface converge evolution's traffic
and the poetics of a precise geography.
Here where land flows to sea
are crossings, and failings to cross.
Here is the borderland of possibility,
of becoming something that for now is not,

of opening a world bounded in abrupt ways,
inscrutably porous in others.

Yes, the sea's the thing.

* * *

It is easy on an island.
Life flaunts in ridiculous, marvellous riot,
takes its idyll in the sun as a given,
embraces a sedentary, un-winged,
island-bound trust.

The sea is not, after all,
a free highway to here, from here.

Comes disturbance and the sea,
this permeable membrane,
closes off, becomes a prison wall.
What chooses island life flares for a moment—
merely a moment—
takes its ordained place in the queue
behind thylacine and dodo.

It is tough on an island.

* * *

Tough.
But this doomed and flinted love
is the knowing that creates me.

I flow into rock, sand, sea.

Saturate an island ground.

You will turn me to metaphor?
While I live this real island life
you will not.

Pete Hay is author of Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought, published by Indiana University Press in 2002; he won the Tasmanian Book Prize People's Choice Award for the co-authored Last Days of the Mill (with Tony Thorne) in 2013.

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