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Not a Dream: the Murmur of Poetry in Catastrophic Times

Abstract I: Il presente articolo intende rappresentare una breve meditazione sulla poesia della fine dei tempi e sostenere che essa sia il mormorio, spesso inconsapevole, di un'intensa afflizione e angoscia. La nostra risposta all'imminente catastrofe di scala planetaria è, paradossalmente, intensamente personale e fondata sul diniego. Parte di tale risposta – tale diniego – è costituita da un crescente mormorio di sublime poesia, ispirata e di grande bellezza. Essa non può essere politica, perché la poesia riconosce che non c'è nessuno che possa parlare schiettamente di tali argomenti, ma è piuttosto foriera di sprazzi di intensità selvaggia che emergono dai suoi suoni.

Abstract II: This article, a brief meditation on poetry in end times, proposes that poetry is the often unwitting murmur of intense grief and distress. Our response to a coming catastrophe on a planetary scale is, paradoxically, intensely personal, and based in denial. As part of this response – this denial – there will be a growing murmur of sublime, inspired and beautiful poetry. It cannot be political, for poetry will recognise there is no one to truly speak to about these matters, and this will bring flashes of a wild intensity to its sounds.

... that earthly life, that miracle of being,
that poetry conserves and celebrates
(Levertov 1973: 115)

Denise Levertov wrote that she “can carry burdens from forest to sea as sagaciously as the elephant” (quoted in Hollenberg 2013: 2). Her elephant is the elephant of long treks, endurance and wisdom. We know that there are many

kinds of elephant, and one of these is the elephant in the room.

Let me turn to that elephant in a book by the Melbourne poet, Andy Jackson, who has a way of not only conjuring for us that elephant in the room, its monstrous comedy, but uncovering its curious, particular existence both within and outside us. We are strangely alive at the end of his poem, though the elephant has not left the room. The first stanza goes like this:

There isn't much room left for us.
When we need to eat or collect
the mail, we inch sideways
along the wall, two-dimensional (Jackson 2014: 2-3).

The poem is a little longer than his usual one-page limit in his book, *The Thin Bridge*. Though the elephant does not leave the room it does expand across two pages in this tiny book, already so short of pages. The final two stanzas go:

I thought I heard sobbing last night,
sensed your hand stroking the globe
of his belly. It's not a dream

when I wake to feel his hot breath,
his trunk hovering over my body. He
nudges my chest and head, reverently
lifts my arm, as if it were a tusk, lifeless (Jackson 2014: 2-3).

The lines of free verse have the classic rhythms of English poetry, slipping between iambic and anapestic, across 4 or 5 beats per line, a length long enough to have the dramatic or subtle stop along the way. I love the line and a half that goes, "little grunts escape our mouths,/involuntary confessions" (Jackson 2014: 2) – for the way it turns the tables on us, giving us the animal sounds, but then suggesting that these grunts are after all the stuff of poetry, the true confessions that truly

celebrate and conserve this earthly life.

All this of course is to avoid talking directly about the elephant. But after all, what would we be if we didn't have an elephant in every room where we gather? We would not be the social, duplicitous, fearful, clinging and grunting creatures that we are. Like Andy Jackson's elephant of gentle reminder, there is one here in this planetary room with us, threatening to squeeze us up against the walls. In 2014 Bloomsbury published a book by George Marshall, titled, *Don't Even Think About it: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Since the global agreement to do something about climate change at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, the world has done very little about climate change. Twenty-two years later, in November 2014, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has produced a report in anticipation of the 2015 summit in Paris, declaring that the window of opportunity for action is closing, and that if we do not bring human-caused emissions to zero by the middle of this century, we face 4 degrees of warming by the end of the century, with mass human deaths, a 10-metre sea rise, weather chaos, and forty per cent of species and plants facing extinction. We don't want to remedy this situation, George Marshall suggests, because we don't want to believe it is really happening.

The problem is that each of us experiences the weather, the natural world, our environment, suburb and neighbourhood on a personal level. And what we experience on a personal level seems always to accord with our assumptions about the world and our place in it. I have worked for this, I tell myself, standing here in my garden in my backyard among the birds that have never had such a thought, but never cease themselves to work. In a review of Marshall's book, Paul Kingsnorth quotes Daniel Kahneman who won a Nobel prize for his work on the psychology of human decision-making: "No amount of psychological awareness will overcome people's reluctance to lower their standard of living" (Kingsnorth 2014: 18).

If science will not be heard, if politicians can only manoeuvre for position, can poetry be heard raising these most pressing questions, in its often slant, sly, or

even unwitting ways? We know that as all seven and more billion of us move about on this planet, there is a growing sense of the imminent loss of the very ecosystems that gave rise to us and bore us into history. We are suddenly curious about that divide between ourselves and the animal world. Students are writing theses about the species divide, novelists are turning out novels about it, not least Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals* (2014). Philosophers won't stop talking about it. In this month's *New Philosopher*, Professor David C. Wood from Vanderbilt University makes his thoughts plain: "We cannot, however, continue to favour our own species in the ways that we do without hypocrisy and inconsistency. The failure is one of logic, or imagination or moral sensibility" (Boag 2014: 80). And if this state of affairs signals a failure of imagination, then at least poets are writing poems like Andy Jackson's "A Language I didn't Know". The poem is a series of thin bridges in longish couplets on the page, and each line-ending hovers over a gap, as though the poem wants to tip us out of ourselves. It is a clever and real poem. It touches upon the melancholy knowledge of the insouciance with which we dismiss species after species from the planet and from our conversation. The poet has found a waterfall and sits by it, by its sound, then notices near him a bird:

... clearly he has seen me and knows
my intent, standing now right before me,

having flown across a gulf of rock, air
and species. The silk of his black breast,

his eyes rivets of rust-red, wings
suddenly arms folded to barely conceal

something obscure we have in common.
He makes a sound like a stone

being dropped into a small, deep pool.

I try to make the same sound, feel

absurdly human, but straight away he walks
forward, like I've said yes to a question (Jackson: 24-25).

Like the sound of a waterfall, sound that seems to collapse into the churn of water that produces it, poetry murmurs to itself the sound of panic as it turns to the world around. The world is hurling a question at us. Even in a poem with the anodyne title, "Garden Poem", the Australian poet of the natural world, Robert Adamson, follows the trajectory of a day in his garden, noting in passing,

at midday
the weather, with bushfire breath, walks about
talking to itself (Adamson 2014: 99).

Here, briefly, is the madness we are inside, and is soon to be inside us. Panic replaces nostalgia, anxiety replaces peace. Sometimes a whole book of poetry turns to the question of climate change, as John Jenkins does in his verse novel, *A Break in the Weather* (2003), but what I am hearing now are these moments of fissure, this terror in small places inside poems, this fear that poems are talking to themselves. With climate change now clearly unstoppable, the panic will, I predict, give rise to a poetry of extreme tension and extreme beauty and tenderness, a poetry of grief and love. There will be more and more of it, and we will wonder at it, read it, but we cannot easily hear it.

Can you hear the beautiful lament for the death of Gaia, mother earth, and the further eco-feminist note that links the oppression of women with the destruction of the planet, in the poem by Sharon Olds that almost ends her book, *One Secret Thing*, her book about her mother dying? It is a lament that is also a denial. Perhaps the only way to truly feel the finality of what has happened is, sometimes, to deny it is happening at the same time as acknowledging it. I know that the poet did not intend this poem to be read as a response to earth's

ecological catastrophe, but it happens to read perfectly and perhaps not entirely unwittingly as a poem for our end time on this planet:

It was like witnessing the earth being formed,
to see my mother die, like seeing
the dry lands be separated
from the oceans, and all the mists bear up
on one side, and all the solids
be borne down, on the other, until
the body was all there, all bronze and
petrified redwood opal, and the soul all
gone. If she hadn't looked so exalted , so
beast-exalted and refreshed and suddenly
hopeful, more than hopeful – beyond
hope, relieved – if she had not been suffering so
much, since I had met her, I do not
know how I would have stood it, without
fighting someone, though no one was there
to fight, death was not there except
as her, my task was to hold her

... Winds, stems, tongues.

Embryo, zygote, blastocoele, atom,
my mother's dying was like an end
of life on earth ... ("To See My Mother", Olds 2008: 93).

Sharon Olds is the poet of the personal, private experience, but poetry can never be anything but public, and its move towards imagery will always broaden its murmur towards the most urgently important matters, those matters we can barely speak of and would prefer to drown out with sound, like the drowning rush of a waterfall or the rumbled crackings of a magnificent thunderstorm. When Saroya Copley ends a recent academic eco-feminist analysis of that explicitly political

Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, with, "the future we want to see must be fought for and brought into being through both individual and collective political action, the penalty for political passivity being dystopia" (Copley 2013: 53) the muddled fall of this rhetoric brings her article quickly to the sudden, wistful finish of, "it is time to act wisely" (Copley 2013: 54). Yes, and how does one act wisely with a whole elephant in the room?

In 2007 I was in the town of Haridwar on the Ganges in northern India, wanting to see wild elephants. We met a Mr A. K. Singhal of the government tourist bureau in the street by chance, and after asking us what our good names might be, he promised us 'One hundred per cent elephants' if we took a tour of the local national park with him the next day. We were pleased, and signed up, and went out into the park in a jeep with him the very next day. For hours there were no elephants. We might have seen a tiger print in the dust of the road, but I did not believe it. Finally My Singhal admitted that one usually only sees elephants 'by chance'. Then there were four elephants in front of us in the forest, stripping a tree, and one infant being fed by its mother. Later in the dusk we saw them crossing grassland in a valley. It was the full 'one hundred per cent elephants', the elephants of treks, endurance, and the carrying of burdens. We were pleased to have been even that close to the real things in something like a natural state, even if it was its own illusion of wildness.

Those elephants seem so far away now, and so dreamlike in my memory. In this room of the mind, they are small, but I must remember their size if they are to prompt me into that zone of unbearable discomfort that is upon us.

Every time a poet goes to write a poem, there will be the unwitting song of it that will sing of its time to some future time. But when there is no future, and the song is swallowing itself, then perhaps that murmured song on the page, the song that lifts into the mind of the reader will be beautiful or terrible, it will be like the earth being formed again.

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