

Francis Gilbert/Writing in Education/April 2022

Review of *Out of Time: Poetry From the Climate Emergency*
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Kate Simpson writes in her introduction to this important collection of poetry which she has also edited, '*Out of Time* engages with the power of poetry to ask questions, subvert expectations and raise awareness in 2021' (p.30). She points out that the anthology has been very definitively 'date-stamped' as having been brought together in 2021, because it explicitly rejects the notion that poetry can be timeless, relevant to all eras and audiences. For Simpson, the poems here invoke the true power of 'ecowriting' which is 'about using language to relearn our direction on the planet not as one of sovereignty but of responsibility – of co- and inter-related existence with the non-human' (p.20).

Out of Time: Poetry From the Climate Emergency is grouped around specific themes and concerns: emergency, grief, transformation, work, rewilding.

The first section, entitled 'Emergency', explores in a visceral, eye-opening fashion 'unimaginable ecological realities' (p. 24). The opening poem of 'Emergency' (and the whole collection) is 'New planet who dis?' by Rishi Dastidar. It is a stream of consciousness riff on our destructive behaviours:

'stone pebble that Galileo dropped next to the feather like that straight down spirit level down plumb line down lift shaft down oh maybe Tower Inferno is somewhere in this mix too remember all the flames up the lift shaft Faye Dunaway's eyebrows shoot up anyway the point is down i'm going down...' (p. 37)

For me, the most telling poem in the 'Emergency' section is Cath Drake's 'What I'm Making With the World' (p. 45):

I'm making a handbag out of the hide of the world
I'd been hunting for something contemporary, unique.
It gutted and skinned fairly easily: the soil, rivers, oceans,
seams of hot tar, broken glacier chips and molten yolk
fell out into a pile that I'll take in a sack to the tip.

The almost playground quality of the first line takes a sinister steer as the poet embarks upon a 'hunt for something contemporary, unique'. Throughout the collection, there is a deep sense amongst the poets about how complicit we all are in the earth's destruction.

Hannah Lowe's 'The Trees' (p. 46) is wonderful contrast to Philip Larkin's bucolic poem of the same name:

All summer the trees in the park
have been plummeting down.
Most wait until dark, when the skaters
and smokers and dealers have made their way home

Lowe's Anthropocene urban pastoral gives agency to the trees, which 'wait' for their moment to plummet. Many of the poems in the collection similarly personify the earth, but there is nothing coy or Disney like about this personification, it's more that personification is used to provide agency to nature. It indicates a new sense of holism in nature writing; the poets do not perceive themselves as separate from nature but rather they are in it; immanence is the name of the game here. It's as though the Cartesian dualism of mind/body, humans/nature have been emphatically replaced by the idea that we are all intimately connected in both knowable and unknowable ways. This outlook provides many of the poems with a richness and originality which is often absent from much nature poetry.

In the 'Grief' section, Gboyega Odubanjo writes in 'Oil Music':

we in the black, we both in
a barrel. call it a village.
we both in the pumping. the people
no get no nothing

The themes of social justice and the climate emergency are admirably represented in the collection. As in 'Oil Music', the voiceless are given voice, the powerless are taken seriously, they conveyed the power of their experiences. Equally, the non-human is focused upon. There are poems about butterflies (Fiona Benson, p. 64), the origins of the modern rose (Sarala Estruch, p. 68), and ones that also feature fishing as an imaginistic thread (Romalyn Ate, p. 55; Andrew Fentham, p. 57). The closing poem of this section by Linda France is about the Giant Sequoia in New York's Natural History Museum (p. 69). The last two lines are particularly compelling:

I swear I can smell the forest where you were felled –
ancient and piney, earth's incense rising.

This is what these poems do to the reader as a whole, they provide a kind of 'incense' from the earth; the smell of our planet rises off most of these poems. In the section on 'Transformation' Raymond Antrobus asks at the end of his poem 'Silence/Presence' (p. 75):

What would the trees say about us?
What books would they write

if they had to cut us down?

Again, there is an important personification going on here. The reader is invited to imagine a world where trees can speak and write, and have the power to 'cut us down'. As with many poems in the anthology, we are drawn into a parallel world where the non-human are conveyed a capacity rarely accorded in any other forms of thought. This is what poetry can uniquely do; set us thinking in different pathways.

Ella Frears undergoes the most profound transformation in this section in her poem 'Becoming Moss' (p. 92):

I lie on the ground
I open my mouth.
I suck on a spoon.
I embrace a stone.
I empty my mind
I stuff it with grass
I'm green, I repeat

I love the insouciant humour and mystery here. Frears poem both debunks 'greenwashing' and celebrates it. In poems such as these, we are permitted to think two contradictory thoughts at the same time: to see the futility of much of our attempts to 'connect' with nature, but also to perceive and feel the necessity and elliptical meaning in it.

In the next section, 'Work' Inua Ellams' poem 'Fuck/Humanity' curses modern life (p. 97), and Will Kemp appoints David Attenborough as his PM when he goes abroad (p. 100). In 'Geography Lessons' (p. 102) Mariah Whelan poetically explores her teaching about soil erosion and Fair Trade, and concludes:

...extinction might not be the world
ending but a correction, righting itself of its heavy, human tilt.

Quite a few poems do express this anti-humanistic approach; they pulse with humanity's self-hatred and self-loathing. They are difficult, sobering poems to read.

In the final section, 'Rewilding' Martha Sprackland goes beach combing and remembers:

...When I was younger, desperate
for a place to call my own, I'd scour the pavement

on the way to school, head down, scuffing,
for money to add to the shoebox

under my bed.

The poem is entitled 'Savings' (p. 113) and explores what can be saved from the earth in the era of the Anthropocene in a poignant, oblique fashion. This poem really works in the way it combines personal description of a beach littered with both human and natural 'savings'. In 'I am a person' (p. 125), Dorothea Lasky talks about how she told the afternoon she is a 'person from the future':

It was the afternoon of the world
The window winter light an endless ravine
Outside the window...

The poem evokes a definite sense of the uncanny as does the last poem in the collection 'Leaf' by Send Hewitt (p. 126). These two poems also share a mystical optimism in their endings. 'Leaf' concludes:

For even in the nighttime of life
it is worth living, just to hold it.

It is a fitting end to a triumphantly potent and cogent collection of poems. This is a truly wonderful anthology; it contains poems by some of our finest poets, weaving very well known names with poets I hadn't encountered before. For me, it takes an admirably 'decolonised' approach both in its choice of poets and its thematic threads; you won't find colonialized visions of the English pastoral here; the self-serving nostalgia for the 'good old days' or an imaginary golden age of ecological utopias. Rather you will uncover a constant interrogation of what it means to be part of web of life on earth in 2021. I really appreciate the care that has been taken to construct this anthology, even though it is 'date-stamped' I feel it will be relevant for many decades to come.

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Biography:

Dr Francis Gilbert is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has published articles about ecoliteracies in 'Writing in Education', (2021: Issue 83):
<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/30308/1/Whats%20Next%20Ecoliteracies%20FGilbert%20March%202021.pdf>

He is the Principal Investigator for the Parklife Project, which aims to get young, disadvantaged people to research their local parks and change them for the better using creative, innovative research methodologies. He has published three novels and writes poetry.