
In the recently-published fourth edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*, Paul Kane describes Stephen Edgar as ‘a writer of unsurpassed technical facility’ (102). *The Red Sea* is Edgar’s sixth book and, in one hundred pages, this collection of new and selected poems formalises plaudits made by Clive James on the book’s dust jacket: ‘Here is the poetry of someone who has been granted all the gifts, including a sense of proportion so concentrated that it sings.’ Edgar’s lyricism acts as a harmonic force, and he follows that mode and tradition of poetry-as-a-supreme-fiction: this book of sonnets, madrigals, villanelles, and idiosyncratic forms is a songbook of ontologically-curious inquiry, a defamiliarizing exploration which extends across vistas both local and cosmic.

*The Red Sea* opens with ‘Lost to View’, which is not at all about loss but instead about that which we are able to apprehend with our human faculties. The lines step back and forth, iambically, in five stanzas each of five lines –

A film of what the day so far had done:
A wind that tries to scrape
The breaking waves up as they run
Across the bay
And shatter at the foot of Fluted Cape. (1)

This bears a slight resemblance to Peter Porter’s ‘Landscape with Orpheus’, which begins ‘It was as if the film had stuck, he was always / Back at the point where he moved up the latch/ And stood facing down the street’ and, indeed, there is something Orphic at work in Edgar’s poems: in ‘Lost to View’, each quintain is a perfect iteration of the next, as if the syllables (10, 6, 8, 4, 10) represent those natural shapes surrounding the poet – birds undulating across altitudes, waves that trough and crest – which Edgar, awed, stands and records.

He positions himself as apprehending shapes of the real but, rather than proffer a unity perceived by the narrator (who remains peripheral), ‘Lost to View’ proffers a blackbird as ‘The one who is required to see.’ Edgar is offering a singular way (viz. Wallace Stevens’ *thirteen* ways) of seeing self-in-context which remains intersubjective, sublime, and *almost* capable of revealing reality (as if that were possible). The poem ends with a segregated final line –

The spray will hang its veils and the trees sway. (2)

Beyond this, Edgar knows, all is indeed lost to view: just as that inscription carved on the ancient Temple of Isis (viz. ‘mother nature’) states, ‘I am all that is, and that was, and that shall ever be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face’, so too these carefully woven rimes tell stories of apprehending dimensions extra-human and non-logical. ‘Lost to View’ founds this *New and Selected* in wonder, which remains Edgar’s speaking position throughout: this is poet-as-Orphic-wanderer, able to both see and sing of shapes which contain and enact him.

We might say then that Edgar is a transcendental humanist; indeed, much of *The Red Sea* scans like the music of a particular kind of wisdom literature. These poems are meditations that take place under water, in air (so often filled with flight), and on *terra firma*: Edgar carefully connects zones at once real, mythological, perhaps even pataphysical, but the poet is...
always aware that his poems operate paradoxically, as connective tissue which both reveals and obscures the view, as in ‘Chiaroscuro’ –

I view all this behind a gauze, a scrim,  
As from behind a delicate waterfall  
That makes me want to wipe my eyes  
Of something caught in them.  
Pulling it back,  
I zoom to focus like a lens, or that  
First moment when,  
Awake,  
I put my glasses on. (32)

However, rather than making claim to some romantically-conceived destiny complex, Edgar’s vantage point persistently verges toward the eco-poetic: alongside privileging the participatory, instinctual blackbird in ‘Lost to View’, these are poems to defamiliarise the dialectical, infrastructured world: a crow crosses ‘the twilight in its silhouette’ (10) and elsewhere, the ‘absence that is afternoon is filling / The house again, like a substance’ (30); a ‘breeze fills up the manna gum’s huge lung’ (71). In this book, those solid and stable boundaries we are accustomed to blur (as in the final poem, ‘Coogee’)

The east looms heaven-high, black and horrific,  
A cloud of nothingness that holds no trace  
Of the Pacific,  
A maw that tells the sheer end of the world (100) –

where the blank watery seascapes echo with foreboding and alarm. Edgar is more forthright on vacuity when turning his gaze back toward the landscape, as in ‘Penshurst’ –

The great Australian emptiness: the men  
Away at work, the faceless wives indoors,  
Possessed by their invisibility,  
Streets in suspense, deserted like a scene  
From The Quiet Earth. (47)

A complex interplay is at work here: Edgar conflates those origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition – the crossing of the Red Sea – with a re-reading of the Australian landscape as a red sea: sand or perhaps the blood of vanished indigenous cultures? Edgar scans the horizon for meaning and connection, but finds only either a ‘Golden Coast’ or the strangely unreal, carnivalesque Coogee –

The sloping esplanade bends round the beach,  
Flanked by a row of golden globes on poles. (99)

Partly acknowledging non-emptiness and absence as a particularly Australian malaise, Edgar’s poetic is founded on principles of seeing yet not-belonging, a milieu in which further
disappearance seems distinctly possible –

They say the end might come with little warning,
The climate breaking and the ecosystem
Collapsing almost overnight to pay us
The recompense of our belated wisdom,
Presenting in the morning
The advent and the only light of chaos. (85)

Meanwhile, the role of the poet is apprised in ‘The Annexe’ – while television flickers, sound down but ‘flourishing its phantoms’ (the poet brandishes his talent for compression when surmising next that ‘history can perform only in tantrums’), he yet remains sensitised to the inner sounds of sense-making –

A subdued music plays
Its tireless permutations and upstages
Time in more subtle ways

and, to this unsurpassed lyricist, poetry yet sings particularly, universally, of strange connections –

The passages and stairs
wind through the middle of the night until
Their pattern and the night are ever more
Inwoven (3-4) –

so that again there is tension between common places when re-viewed by Edgar. This, then, seems to be his objective: to revitalise connection between readers and their instrumentalised realms which are not only preternatural, but which have also been terraformed with a version of reality that has only recently arrived, and which acts as a carapace covering older, disappeared connections.

This book, which is full of erudition and clarificatory gestures, may well formalise the dialect of the tribe if, by tribe, we understand humankind in the early twenty-first century as an urbanising, globalised, homogenising mash operating to the logic of late capitalism. This is a book to savour for its resonant sense-making: read its songs slowly, for Edgar is poet who would retune his readers notions of being and being ethical. Ronald E. Moore (poet and publisher at Baskerville) writes on the dust jacket that ‘This is magisterial poetry.’ The object itself – shining black vinyl hardcover, embossed gold lettering on the spine – implies authority, mastery, and a seriousness both of intent and content. This is a book that looks like it means the business of meaningfulness; its sounds are technically sophisticated and authentically-made, and require our closest listening.

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