
The Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize is a coveted one on the poetry scene, with the winner seeing publication in limited edition chapbooks. The books run to around fifty pages, so I lean toward calling them full-length collections, though small ones to be sure. And that’s a lovely thing about this prize: the production of a thin volume of poetry. *Thin*, so filler-poems are weeded out, and all that’s left is great care. The award for 2014 recognised joint winners, both women, whose books couldn’t be more different.

Tracy Ryan’s *Hoard* defines and dissects the Irish bog and what lies beneath, while Ryan herself deconstructs it. ‘What lies beneath’ the peaty earth is history in the form of tools, jewellery, bodies and boats. As the bog creates its own organic habitat, it also covers and preserves, making it a safe place to bury things. Some burials were for safekeeping, as the owners of the objects fled for safety, planning on return. Sometimes what was buried was never meant to be found.

What riches lie in the hoard, both as physical manifestations and as metaphor. Think of the hoard as somebody’s past; each artefact lifted from the bog is somebody’s memory, somebody’s story. And what happens to that past when the hoard is uncovered and lifted from the bog?

no one has rights to a hoard
yet a hoard by definition
once brought to light
is essentially stolen (11)

I’m reminded of Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’, in which as soon as a person tells her story, the story is no longer hers. Because the story belongs now to a listener who has taken that story and accepted it as something newly possessive, the original teller of the story as ‘author’ is dead. Such is the person who buried the hoard as soon as the hoard is uncovered:

Now whether it wants out or not
it is returning piecemeal as your surface wears thin
at first no more than a glint a bright projection
tantalising all of a sudden one who out walking
had no more intention of dragging it up
than the sun means to bring on flowering
It speaks to you from another life
as if it were yours or as if you were god
and it were an offering somebody willed
into the ground… (15)

In conceptualising the hoard as a person’s identity at a singular moment in time, where each object is a rare memory, proof that the person existed, Ryan writes with both empathy and awe. Stealing a torc (an ancient neck ring) is paramount to stealing the owner’s story:
if you steal away it is heavy
in your bags (16)

If left untouched, the hoard (as story) would remain buried and intact – no appropriation taken place, no disrespect shown. It’s a lesson we can learn and one we should practice. But curiosity and greed being what they are, uncovering hoards are Irish sport, and Ryan’s quick to return the metaphor to something more pressing: environmental break-down.

Peat is used as fuel in Ireland, so turf-cutting of bogs is as rampant as the destruction of the uniquely complex habitat found there. Just as the ethics of historical appropriation begins and ends with ownership, it is also true of the ethics of land exploitation:

You will say Don’t come in here & tell
me how to run my own bog okay

I know my bog better than anybody
Haven’t we lived together all these years
Hasn’t she always faithfully
furnished my necessity

Don’t I handle her respectfully

Don’t I always  like my father taught me
put back the surface layer
to cover over what’s taken (32-33)

_Hoard_ begins with a long poem entitled ‘The changeling addresses Ireland’, in which Ryan (presumably it is the author speaking) hints at _why_ such a passion for bogs. There is ancestry, a confusion of longing and, yes, ownership. But there is a pervasive questioning, an acceptance of mystery and a reluctance to dig her feet into a place that is not hers:

I tell of desert
of dust & gravel
to ground & justify

this unsettling
obsession  must flag
each bog we pass

and call it mine
like an explorer
doling out names

without regard for
what came before
the bogs go deeper
And so with the inclusion of this one poem – the opening poem, an important poem – *Hoard* seems to be about a buried ethnicity Ryan cannot get a handle on. Uncovering it would be to unsettle, then claim and, finally, kill the author.

As with *Hoard*, the question of identity in Jill Jones’s *Breaking the Days* is there (is it *always* there in poetry?) yet it is approached in a less metaphorical way. Jones uses the hard and overt objects that give meaning to her days, such as emails and yapping dogs, matchboxes and fences, and what grounds her seems to be her own front door. Yet what’s contained within the closed doors is equally as telling about who we think we are as is the possibility of what’s beyond the open doors. Doors define places of belonging as much as they provide a means of getting beyond belonging, so that defining home becomes an inclusive act and we can begin to muddle up the pronouns.

> There are measures out there  
> beyond your door, you start counting  
> but lose birds past dawn  
> too many in that thankful way of abundance. (1)

What is ‘yours’ when you consider life outside the door? With this as a basis for interrogation, Jones extends poetry’s age-old consideration of how we live in the world to how we live with the world. Some might say it’s about having faith – in humanity, in God – but what if faith is transitory? Perhaps we live by forgetting:

> Air is colder today, but you forget it.  
> Forgetting would be good.  
> Progress is better with forgetting. (21)

Or maybe it’s through ambivalence:

> Some bug is eating the violets.  
> But we didn’t plant them, anyway. (21)

Perhaps it’s through wasting time:

> Goodness, what’s all this time doing here!  
> Let’s waste it or at least  
> list the things we’ll do  
> with it, cook soup with infinite slices  
> worry about gluten which appears to be in everything on the shelf, or consider  
> how to fillet fish because  
> you have to gut them  
> or watch ten seagulls flying  
> low across the gulf.  
> They swallow fish as if

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there are fish below.

And here we kill pumpkins
or weeds
or the living.

Traffic is particularly stupid today (48-49)

Her approach seems to be a heady mix of acceptance and irony, something Jones excels in, something I’d consider to be ‘playful’. And by asking the big questions with such playfulness, the answers are more apt to be slippery, dangling things, just within our ability to grasp and just within our reach.

Though Jones writes with an urban sensibility, make no mistake she’s an eco-poet.

The sun is here.
Look out! We’re tripping over it, don’t be suspicious of the footpath. (23)

This concrete is what we have (this bitumen, this noise, this Wi-Fi signal); why blame it by extolling the sun (the birds, the ocean, the song)? There is so much complaining in our ecological and environmental awareness and what *Breaking the Days* does is offer an alternative: a symbiotic relationship to this world-as-home; advancement through observation and awareness.

The book was mostly written while Jones was poet-in-residence at Stockholm University and I have to wonder how the change in hemisphere, climate, culture and habitat speaks to the work as a whole. I’m of the mind that this book is as much about place as it isn’t. When she writes:

Festivals of bullshit
prove nothing
prove everything (38)

she could very well be referring to her home in Adelaide, city of festivals, but the lines come and go quickly – the poem was never about festivals nor about home. But the previous three lines read:

Rats and white ants
cling to the years
and the constructions. (38)

so the poem is about home. The next three lines read:

Not all choices
can be tracked.
Love isn’t all you need. (38)
So it’s about choice (and home). Hers is a cheeky way of moving from image to philosophy. There’s dismemberment yet there’s strong narrative. Because Jones embraces the ‘I’ we see that she’s the protagonist of the narrative, and I’d have to say the overall arc of the narrative is largely about persisting, coping, getting on with living in this busy, beautiful world. There are the book’s final words:

I am moving things around.
I am considering pencils.
I see thirteen ways I can pile up papers.
I realise where the mistakes will fit.
I get anxious about moving things around.
I wonder if at night things move around.
I can think of seventeen things to do with mistakes.
I understand anxiety is normal.
I hear the night – it’s night already.
I don’t know what to say about night.
Is my anxiety insanely adorable?
I get up and go home. (57)

After six consecutive years, the Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize has been ‘put on hold’. I sincerely hope it’ll return because, as I said earlier, I love a thin book of poems, especially if what’s inside is good. Hoard and Breaking the Days are exemplary.

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