

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Trevor Conway
Atlantic

Today, I touched America,
felt its sweat wash over me.
It stung my eyes,
and I became metallic blue,
slipped into the cool chill
with the smooth, neoprene skin of a seal.

Delicious.

Land thinned behind me.
Under water, you're inside a bottle,
quilted with the jostling clink of waves.
Nostrils fizzle.
Pre-born, we're fish,
but I hung more like a seagull,
ragged, flat and limp,
philosophical or dead,
drifting slow with eyelids fused.

All the birds must've thought me strange.

Commerce, culture, communication –
all these were skeletal things,
faces coated in metal and glass
beyond the grunts
of filthy engines.

And foam, engorged
with browns and greens,
dripped to nothing from my heavy limbs.
I had been beaten,
saved.
The salt on my lips made me long

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for something I'd tasted before.
I think it was – in fact, I'm sure –
deep-fried potato.

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Medicentre Meditation

I can see it now: my name called.
I'll rise and follow, sit, recite
the body's mumbling language of symptoms.
The gunshot snap of a latex glove –
as he probes, I might wonder
whether this man thinks of me
as a person (and all that entails)
or a case to be concluded.

He'll exhale technical terms
numb as an anaesthetic
to hold emotion at a distance,
his rough script for chemists' eyes
a mystery to set my mind wandering
through pills and progress,
the noisy rambling of an MRI scanner
like some oracle – oh, tell me my future!
Doctors can translate pain into numbers,
but bodies are such unreliable narrators:
they're much too fond of exaggeration,
and often loath
to confess their secrets.

Time is slow in this room
of magazines with wrinkled edges.
One man, checking his watch,
looks much worse than the others.
He's here alone, dry-skinned and pale
as a piece of chicken at the back of a fridge.
He sighs long like a just-boiled kettle,
and I can tell he has little time.

I don't want to haggle with possibilities,

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pills or pretence.

I want it straight,

as if he thought himself a Roman emperor:

one utterance, and you know your fate.

I hear it now.

My name called.

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Obituaries

Dodo
c. 1681

Without the boon of flight,
how could you flee
when they came on boats
that blackened across the horizon?

They brought with them
dogs, cats, rats and hunger,
a future lodged within their bellies.

Waddling through millennia
in peaceful isolation,
it never once occurred to you
that some species weren't to be trusted,

your dowdy body and slow wit
unacquainted with such teeth
as you fed on the fruits and nuts of forests
and heard the crack
of distant shells.

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Woolly Mammoth

c. 2000 BC

Sedges were tasty,
tossed between your twisted tusks,
and snow might have practised
its patient burial on your hairy back,
but you shook it off in that moment
when ground gave way to human invention.

You heard them,
with all their gruesome implements
fashioned from corpses that may well have been
once of your own herd.

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Thylacine

c. 1936

Tasmania.

Before they came, it had much to offer.

Its shadows were restless
with the quick arithmetic of lizards.

They placed a bounty on your head,
your striped back
and the pouch that housed your wrinkled young.

They had something to protect too,
with curls of wool as white as surf,
and they happily paid
to close the gape of your mouth.

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Impact

In some far country, though you won't know it,
perhaps on one of those pleasant evenings
of neighbourhoods seasoned with barbecue smoke,
a rock as old as the solar system
– a remnant of its molten beginning –
will pierce the layers of the atmosphere
and announce itself
with a deafening flash.

That place will be the first wasteland –
a storm of airborne objects, people,
with senses battered beyond their brains,
all human culture,
every drop of knowable history,
about to be lost.

Your demise – and that of a home
enjoyed by an ancient parade of species –
will come from one of the numerous masses
hurtling,
unnoticed,
through empty space.

You'll wonder why there was no warning,
but speculation won't quilt you, no,
and one of your last thoughts,
as you watch a confetti of cars and trees
stain the air to dusk,
will be simply to note:
how absurd.