

This Self Is Not One

Willo Drummond. *Moon Wrasse*. Puncher and Wattman, 2023.

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Midway through her debut poetry collection *Moon Wrasse*, in the poem “A promontory / A memory,” Willo Drummond uses form to mimic the shape of meandering thought, contained in a moment of encounter with the natural world as personified in “pink and purple pig-face / tailors of the coast / salt-resistant sentries” (61). The poem curls down the page like a path, and enacts in doing so the encounter of subjects. The flowers are active companions, overtly present: “Their gesture fills a space / that *walks with me*, / *walks beside me*, / treads here too” (61). The poem offers respect to their agency in making response.

Responding to Drummond’s collection ourselves, it feels apt to record our encounter with the work likewise with a consciousness of form, and framed similarly through the encounter with each other. The negative space shaped by our conversation, running down the middle of the page, enacts something of that same shape: perhaps, then, a review as the shadow cast by a brilliant piece of work.

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We both bought our copies of Drummond’s collection at Rabble Books and Games after you interviewed Renée Pettit-Schipp on her latest book, *The Archipelago of Us* (Fremantle Press, 2023). That latter title, a metaphor, suggesting we humans are a landform, seems so apt also to Drummond’s collection, which does not discern humans as separate from nature. The extended metaphor of the mangrove forest in the poem “Up to our knees in it”: “our feet / constantly wet” (13) places the speaker in the Anthropocene with rising sea waters amidst climate catastrophe. The resilience of the mangrove with its high tolerance to salt and ability to live partly and fully submerged, “No matter, / mangroves will take / our mishaps / down, turn them in/ to bluest carbon” (13), stands side by side the survivability of the speaker to cope with the grief of infertility.

In Pettit-Schipp’s work, the archipelago does double work—connecting laterally, and standing in simultaneously for the sense of things hidden, the sheer bulk of tectonic form below the waterline. There is a similar tension in Drummond’s writing, threat and denial equally rendered in silence, “keeping mute / like a consonant / that *suddenly stops the breath*” (13). I found myself paying attention to the delicate spaces of caesura enacted through punctuation and the movement of lines on the page. Like infertility, like all forms of grief, absence is made present. Drummond’s power comes in reworking and reclaiming that presence: “In the silence / this inscribes (the emergent / space between)” (52).

The response poem “Ways of seeing” in homage to Felicity Plunket’s “Underwater Caulking” is precisely structured in tercets (until the final fractured stanza), perhaps mirroring the third donor to enact conception and the metaphor of syzygy being the alignment of moon, sun, and earth and the final fractured stanza being the inability to achieve alignment aka conception. The astronomical jargon suggests looking skyward for guidance: “In ancient Egypt // these (the moon’s) intervals were understood / to begin when the waning / could no longer be seen” connecting the past with the present with the future in an ongoing “natural” preoccupation with continuity. The most delicate metaphor “My knowing / too slim; / a left-aligned filament // that cannot catch / and hold / a feather // let alone a ray/ or shimmering dust” is indicative of the entire collection which has a deft yet light touch that heartbreakingly communicates volumes. The fertile “radiant orbs—content” (19) seem to mock the speaker with their ability to align.

The conversational and seamless interspersing of other poets’ voices foregrounds the ways in which all literary works are in dialogue with other texts, both written and spoken. The opening stanza of the poem, “The one light is the light in all bodies” foreshadows the speaker’s trans partner with the “branch of downy birch” and their “new boy-hair” (51). The notes indicate that gender pronouns are the “new frontier” (82) and matter and even allies struggle to use them correctly: “two welcoming Sikhs / who speak of a runaway // trans-boy, lost, . . . “By his auburn hair you’d know him,” . . . without using those pronouns.” (52) In this poem, the season is signified as Autumn, “One light: all bodies / gold as changing leaves” (53) representing gender fluidity as natural like seasonal metamorphoses of trees in response to a change in climate.

The intertextual richness of the work as a whole is intriguing. The voices of other poets slip in and out, both as generative or instigative moments, often epigraphs, and as echoes within. The detailed notes show a depth of research and association sitting as integral to Drummond’s practice. In reading it felt more like a coming-into-being, an expansiveness of voice made complex through slippage, but simultaneously, undeniably whole. The poem “The waiting gesture,” coming at a moment of emergence, works from a Rainer Maria Rilke piece, but contemplates its own subsuming of these works: “*To drink would seem too much, too obvious*” (64) Rilke’s image is a starting point, and at the same moment, recognised, held as familiar and speaking to that which was already within: “A constant // spring is here—has been / here—even without you / finding it” (64). The play on spring (water) and spring (season of new growth) is carefully held, and the seasonal motif opens slowly across the work. The final stanza enacts the same dual meaning. Combining water with the clarity of the season, it suggests a drama of arrival (also the section title), unfinished but opening into potential, as “thought // is a splash like a sliver / of light / and all the day is words—” (65). This gesture, enacted over again in the following poem, offered in counterpoint and carrying forward many of the same images, sits in breathlessness and silence, as does work in the earlier sections, but irrevocably alters the experience of that space on the page.

It would be simplistic to suggest this collection is only about subjectivity. There is a constant interconnectedness with all living things as responsive to change.

There are visceral moments which are rendered abstract and/or queered by the interplay of literal and metaphoric associations. The language of bodies changing, so often assumed as part of the world of childbearing, is drawn away from any one context and layered with multiplicity. The sequence of three poems entitled “Axis of a shifting world” invokes the natural world—grass and then sky in parts I and II—before lifting that space in itself into metaphor:

And you
and now you: the axis
is shifting.

Although it is possible
I had you in mind
all along you

are
rewriting
me. My maps
are re-charting.
(49)

That multiplicity of identities (subverting the binary) culminates in the title poem, “Moon Wrasse,” a fish that begins female and transforms into a male and is symbolic of the partner “my Blue Moon . . . your new man suit” (59). The exultant embrace and love for their partner comes through the affirmative “I see you” indicating their partner’s truer self is realised with transformation into “blue” for boy. The poem sings and sparkles like bioluminescence, “twinkling your webbed toes / shaking your tail / crescent” (59) in my favourite simile “or as a fresh-made pair / of parrot fish / pyjamas.” (60)

The shift is not simply from one point of focus, one way of knowing or one rendering of body to another, but into multiplicity as well, unresolved and resonant of so many ways of being—including the multiplicity of carrying a child, and the evolution of self in bringing multiple identities into a deeper cohesion. The ambiguity of “all along you” (49) does significant work here.

Following from the line before, read according to the enjambment, it would be understood as a hinge between two phrases—in mind all along, you are rewriting me. But combined in the line, and without that break made, the “you” coheres to the poetic “I,” becomes a new space to inhabit, one which rewrites past self, complicating the poetic address

which has been assumed to that point. It is a beautiful and resonant moment.

I haven't been able to get this image out of my mind, in "Axis of a shifting world, I": "like moths / rest warm bodies // on tall grasses. / Each slender blade / bends in gesture of giving. // So many bodies / up here" (48) That final phrase—"So many bodies"—disrupts the anthropocentric view of the individual alone for a walk. Rather it focuses awareness of our place amongst many lives, seeking warmth, supporting each other in symbiosis. Perhaps, from an ecological perspective, it signals the necessity to work within nature rather than against it (us) and to understand what it is "to be" in a surrender of sorts (48).

I haven't been able to get this image out of my mind, in "Axis of a shifting world, III": "Faces— // not only on subways / more than *petals*— / wings / material, immaterial" (54). I read it as a resistance to Ezra Pound's line—a rejection of the way in which Pound employs the natural world figuratively, and pushes human being away from it in doing so. In Pound's configuration, the natural metaphor reapproaches the mundanity of the human scene, makes it strange. For Drummond, this separation, material from immaterial, is not possible. All things exist definitively in interrelation.

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