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VOLTAGE ACROSS A MEMBRANE

Brook Emery

Voltage Across a Membrane

A ringing in the ears that could be cicadas
 or tinnitus. Outside, the muted din of silence,
 inside the silence of isolation. Flowering eucalypts
 peer in at the window as the clouds
 look down on them. A bird settles on a branch,
 his cheep breaks the silence. A hammer falls on wood,
 a child's voice pipes excitedly but indecipherably,
 a plane and a car cast their sounds to the air.
 Things move on, forward, but isolation remains the same:
 the shape of the body in a small space.
 The loud silences of the mind doing calisthenics
 in the arena of the skull. Kettlebells, dumbbells,
 barbells flung into space, dropped to the ground
 with a thud and an awareness of breath
 in the nostrils, in the throat, in the lungs, the outside
 coming in and going out raggedly to keep the body
 in this confinement. A leaf falls from the tree and spirals
 unevenly down. Then another. Then no more.
 Leaves cling to their branches and twigs as the wind
 swishes them here and here, together and in isolation.

~

Ptolemy could define the earth in eight thousand
 discrete points. Macrobius depicted a round, schematic world,
Terra Australis nondum cognita assumed to be. From his cell,

Frau Mauro stitched sailors' tales into his projections,
 then declared, 'it now exists'. James Cook, on the other hand,
 could approximate latitude thirty-nine to within a mile, his maps,

accurate, proportionate, a precision of India ink.
 Out to sea, waves run before the wind; nearer shore
 fish striped black and gold like tiny Bengal tigers

fidget nervously through the weed, long-nosed
 silver garfish sweep in a billowing cloud,
 and the groper, far below, grazes massively among the shells.

What holds all this together? Where is the thread?
 And now, ambiguously, rain marks its presence
 against the glass in imagined rhythms, tones and stops,

in blobs and runs. I see children skylarking,
 swimming like speckled fish through its ribbons.
 They pick blossoms from the trees, lasso clouds,

exchange songs with the birds, greetings with the wind.
 They wave to me through the window and I sing
 of an empty room, of silence, of a lack

for nothing in this moment, in this room,
 of the mismatched joys of inertia and peripeteia.
 Does 'need' imply both design and destination?

~

What is compulsion except the need to go on? Is it a search for equilibrium
 or its denial? A demonstration of the second law of thermodynamics?
 That's going too far:

stretching a milestone moment in physics and turning it into
 a cheap poetic trick. The limitations of my thinking, the boundaries

against which it butts! Entropy indeed! I start again. I start again.

I close my eyes. I look out the window, I walk along the cliff edge,
 my feet pressing firmly on rock, lifting easily into air, going

where I cannot. And I'm trying to make something out of this, something
 which it is not. It's windy today, overcast and gusty, difficult

to make out clouds amongst the many shades of grey
 except when they are harried by wind
 and their edges become ragged like fraying carpet.

~

Uneasily, duty and desire dance around each other

like evenly-matched boxers in a makeshift ring.

Their booted feet shuffle on the mat as they feint,
duck, swerve, cover-up to absorb imagined blows.

There is no blood, no spittle, no sweat. It could be virtual
but for the ragged breathing, the grunts, the sudden

expulsions of air. Is this shape without pattern, style
without substance or something else entirely. The refusal of meaning

doesn't mean that meaning fails to exist. That aphoristic quip
is self-conscious, its bravado disguises unease,

what I have neglected to disclose. The sea has no itinerary,
no intention. Nor do the trees though, in their way,

they each keep time, more or less like planets
circling the sun, twisting on their axes.

Neither have they intimacy or objective. Thinking about it,
shedding leaves and bark, soaking into sand, slapping at cliffs,

they at once scatter and cohere. This room
makes space, is spacious within its confines.

It encourages perambulation. I take my mind for a walk,
sense proportions, look out for junctures

and hints of filiation. Sitting at looms
in Pakistan and Afghanistan women weave stories

into carpets being born beneath their hands. Refugees
huddle in tents, wrap their feet in rags, stare at border fences.

In 430 BC, Thucydides tells us, plague devastated Athens.
It killed Pericles. And one third of the population. In 1665

the rich fled London to escape the plague. Left behind to die
were their retainers, domestic servants and the poor.

Conclusions may be drawn in a disjunct world but soon
they must be reassessed, discarded, re-configured.

~

What can 'alone' mean without a context?

What would it mean for Eurydice, for those solo
round-the-world sailors, for the crossers
of the Arctic on skis, for the lone explorers in that vast time
before phones, viral networks, global positioning satellites?

They're talking to themselves, listening for echoes,
sensing a something swirling outside the compass
of their conversation. Is this comforting or a threat?

Is there a plot in 'isolation'? When does the action begin?
(The instant bleeds into the hour, the hour into the day.)
We minor characters cling precariously to our lines,
and 'story', barely begun, casts round for its end.

A magpie dangles a worm from her sharp beak.
Does she have babies squabbling and screeching in a nest?
Can she know that a divided worm may become two,
two two-headed worms, two two-tailed worms?

In one sense this is true: life is voltage across a membrane.

You can see I keep shifting the argument,
but I'm trying hard to see what it is
that I'm not seeing, that flickering thing
whose seed is in itself. Does being directed to 'stay at home'
make 'home' an uncreated thing? Where is home
for the spared, the forgiven, the persecuted and forgotten?
What might time mean for them?

When time has ceased to have meaning,
Voyager may still be flying inter-stellar space,
its destination, a globular cluster twenty thousand
light years distant. On board, our voices, histories,
conversations, our equations, drawings, songs,

all the things that make us 'us'. Will anyone out there
understand what we, in our isolation, barely comprehend?

Writing 'Voltage Across a Membrane'

Around the time I was writing 'Voltage Across a Membrane' I had just read *Twenty Poems That Could Save America and Other Essays* (2014) by the American academic and poet, Tony Hoagland. In an essay titled 'Facts and Feelings: Information, Layering and the Composite Poem' he considers how, probably since the Romantic movement, poetry has privileged the inner life over the outer life, and

'sensibility' and 'inspiration' have pushed information and facts, and the language of information and facts, to the margins. He acknowledges modernist attempts to find techniques to match the tenor of the times ('The Waste Land', the 'Cantos', and so on) but argues that movements such as the Confessionals, Beats, New York School and Deep Imagists all implicitly accepted the split between fact and the personal lyric.

Hoagland goes on to identify a more recent and still minor type of poem which he calls the 'composite' poem. In his view the salient features of a composite poem include a layering of external and internal reality, the juxtaposition of unlike things, a recognition of the irregularity and illogic of much experience and a reflection of this in the language and form of the poem, and a certain dishevelment and disjunctiveness in structure as distinct from the coherence of the lyric. He argues that situating poetry within the world of information and situating worldly information inside the poetry is important if poetry is to stake a claim of ongoing relevance.

Hoagland's central thesis that this represents something 'new' could be contested. I have recognised for some time, over a number of books, that many of my poems, especially the longer ones, could be described by these characteristics. What is new, to me at least, is the naming of such poems as a distinctive genre. Have I been writing composite poems all this time? Be that as it may, the argument of Hoagland's essay had no influence, as far as I consciously know, on the composition of the poem.

Also around the time I started to write 'Voltage' we were in the first weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown but this, too, had no influence, as far as I consciously know, on the inception of the poem. In its first iteration the poem had no title and consisted only of the first eighteen lines. It was more a doodle on the back of an envelope as I lay on a couch looking out the lounge room window and, as such, was a simple, undeveloped, personal lyric. It only occurred to me when I looked at the 'poem' again a day or so later that it might be about being in isolation. It then acquired lines nineteen and twenty and the title 'Virus'. From this point on the poem had a focus but I had no real idea of what it was about or what I had to say about COVID-19 that hadn't already been in the media. I'm not an epidemiologist or a politician. Or even a real thinker. What do I have to say, what does poetry have to say, that might make it relevant to this crisis in the real world, the outer as well as the inner world?

I resisted writing any more because I had a horror of writing a worthy, banal, 'look how sensitive I am' poem (aside: I'm sure I have written plenty of these in my time). At the back of my mind as I write this paragraph are the lines from Jack Gilbert's sensational 'Measuring the Tyger' (1994: 7), itself a deeply personal poem and, arguably, a 'composite' poem which incorporates three sudden switches of subject and tone within a tightly compressed lyric: 'Newness strutting around as if it were significant. / Irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry.'

I found a way to go on by accident. While I was cleaning out my study I came upon a poem I had abandoned maybe twenty years ago. It had been about exploration and mapping and the development of knowledge and accuracy. I remembered I had abandoned it because it felt too neat, too informational, too 'closed', lacked any real spark or heart. But on this morning I recognised that a version of what was to become the next seven lines of 'Voltage' was in some way related to the first twenty lines. Related by way of contrast. The personal, known, limited juxtaposed to the expansive, the distant, the factual and historical. There was no conclusion, really not even an inference, to be

drawn from this. The contrast presented a puzzle which, if I were to go, I'd have to solve but, at least in my own mind, the juxtaposition had given the poem scope and spark. If I did go on, what did I mean by these lines or, more pertinently, what did the poem mean?

I did go on. Sometimes I was more or less in control, sometimes the poem went in directions and made leaps that I had not anticipated and only appreciated when I was editing and amending drafts. What I have achieved, if anything, is not for me to claim, and I won't go on to laboriously explicate every move the poem makes but in case it is of interest I can now, at this distance, describe what it is that I was trying to do (though I may be lying, or rationalising after the fact).

I wanted the poem to be loose and disjunctive but I also wanted it to follow a thread, to have coherence without obviousness. I found this in repeatedly moving back to and then away from the initial moment in my lounge room and my wavering thought patterns. I also found it in the metaphor of 'thread' itself. I wanted the poem to retain some qualities of the personal lyric and some of the more discursive qualities of disinterested prose. That is, I wanted it to be lyrical and compressed at the same time as it was loose, ambiguous, unresolved; I wanted it to leave room for unknowing, and for readers to experience surprise and puzzlement at the same time as they identified with the situation and empathised with my thinking and my attempts to understand the crisis. I wanted the poem to go beyond the initial situation, thus the jumps to various historical events. Thus, the title had to change: 'Virus' was too limiting, it directed and narrowed a reader's thinking too much. In different drafts the title became 'and it was so' (from Genesis: too pretentious; though there is still a phrase from Genesis in last section), 'Alone' (see 'Virus'), 'That Flickering Thing', and finally, I think finally, 'Voltage Across a Membrane', though where I came upon this phrase as a strictly materialistic and scientific definition of life I have no idea.

Is 'Voltage Across a Membrane' a 'composite' poem? I have no idea. Do I care? Not really. Definitions and categories don't really interest me and they are as likely to distort a poem as to elucidate it. I am, however, interested in how poetry can be of interest to 'the reader'. Of course there are any number of different readers and any number of 'tastes'. Personally, I have no trouble with the beautiful, short lyric. Personally, I do have trouble with the wilfully obscure or deliberately incoherent. That's just me. I am interested in how a poem can engage successfully with the enduring and sudden crises of this world and have something relevant to say that goes beyond the repetitious pronouncements of the politicians and the media. Perhaps I want something from poetry and life that is more than voltage across a membrane.

Hoagland does not argue that the composite poem is the only way that a poem can be 'relevant' in the strange, speedy world we now inhabit. He is, however, distressed by the neglect of poetry in schools, in the literature departments of universities, and in the culture generally, and many of the essays in his book, in one way or another, are trying to address or redress this situation. In the last essay of his book he nominates twenty poems, not all composites, which he thinks 'could' or 'should' be read because of what they offer to our understanding of our lives and society.

David Lehman has canvassed a related idea in his foreword to the 2001 edition of *The Best American Poetry* where, arguing that creative writing programs have made up for 'the neglect of literature elsewhere on campus' (10), he writes that if a creative student only 'publishes few poems

but becomes an avid reader we will have done the job that others have relinquished' (11). I may be wrong but my very limited experience of teaching in university creative writing programs is that the students were more interested in writing than reading but this raises a topic for a whole different 'rant' and, for the moment I'll have to content myself with wondering whether 'Voltage Across a Membrane' might possibly, for some readers, be seen to contribute to thinking about the nature of our world and our place in it from a perspective that is different from other specific (necessary) discussions of the current crisis.

Works cited:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brook Emery has published five books of poetry, the most recent being *have been and are* (Gloria SMH, 2016). He has won the Judith Wright Calanthe Prize at the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and been shortlisted three times for the Kenneth Slessor Prize at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

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