

CATCH AND RELEASE



Beverley Bie Brahic

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Poems

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I am grateful to the editors of *PN Review*, *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Yorker*, where 'On Vancouver Island' (as 'Cordova Bay Road'), 'A Shell' and 'Apple Thieves' first appeared.

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Apple Thieves

In his dishevelled garden my neighbour
Has fourteen varieties of apples,
Fourteen trees his wife put in as seedlings
Because, being sick, she wanted something
Different to do (different from being sick).

In winter she ordered catalogues, pored
Over subtleties of mouth-feel and touch:
Tart and sweet and crisp; waxy, smooth
And *rough*. Spring planted an orchard,
Spring projected summers

Of green and yellow-streaked, orange, red,
Rusty, round, worm-holed, lopsided;
Nothing supermarket flawless, nothing imperishable.
Gardens grow backwards and forwards
In the mind; in the driest season, flowers.

Of the original fourteen, five trees
Grow street-side, outside the hedge.
To their branches my neighbour, a retired
Statistician, has clothes-pegged
Slips of paper, white pocket handkerchiefs

Embroidered with the words:
The apples are not ripe, please don't pick them.
Kids had an apple fight last week.
In September, when the apples ripen,
Neighbours are welcome to pick them, even

Those rare Arkansas Blacks that spill over
The hedge. Yes, I may gather the windfalls.
Mostly it's squirrels that throw them down.
Squirrels are wasteful. Squirrels don't read
Messages a widower posts in trees.

World Book

Is it the object lessons:
The *World Book's* umpteen volumes
She as Quiz Kid won
Devising a question

Deemed worth *Asking Andy*
Syndicated with the funnies
In the Sunday papers?
How do spiders spin their webs?

But when the carton arrived
And her secret was unpacked
She was forbidden
To keep them on her private shelf.

It'll teach you a lesson.

On the contest entry
She signed her kid brother's name.
Resentment? You bet.
But their domes and orbs still lure her

(Like the sex of mushrooms)
Into her damp forests,
And their hammocks beckon
Her to unkempt corners.

A Shell

The earth mother forms
Of this chalky shell
Belong to a sea snail

Exoskeleton
I pulled from debris
Upchucked by a tide

On my shoreline of memory:
Rain-haunted,
Littered with logs the storms

Rip from booms
Southering to sawmills
And lumberyards.

I touch the too-solid
Flesh,
Finger the elegant

Mathematical spirals,
Slip into
The voluptuous interior

Of this empty house
A nudge will set rocking
Almost indefinitely.

On Vancouver Island

Not forgotten, the place grandfather built
Facing the mainland across Georgia Strait;
Like a long-house it was close to the ground
With a bucket of fuchsia bells to ward
Off the primeval: unlogged, undivided;
Surrounded with plants grandmother favoured,
Old World species, gladiolus, sweet peas.
Granddad's fishing tackle hung in a crawl space
And when I visited he took me out
For a day of silence in a hired boat.

Bark

You never know what kind of pain
The body will crave—sound of rain

On the roof, the patter of love.
All by itself your hand wants to touch

The oak tree's rough trunk.
When shy birches shed white bark

Starlings settle on their shoulders;
You can start fires with the slivers

Of that, it's one of those out-in-the-woods
Night-coming-on survival tips kids

Are taught, like which leaf calms the sting.
First strip the outer layers, seeing

How underneath the bark's
Dry as tinder. Only takes a spark.

Mythologies

Oh! It is draining poorly, this shower.
The bottom viscous, snot-blob green.
Each time I enter, it's as if I've been
Translated to a hobbit wood and stood
Buck naked on a musty rock, a flood
Around my ankles, prelapsarian species
Of rush and fern stuck to my knees.

Oh! It is draining poorly, the shower.
But don't, repeat, don't turn off the downpour:
We'll be up to here in brackish water,
And don't look down! There, reflected,
Are embryonic stumps, kelpie heads
Leering up—or down?—I'm baffled—
Can this be me, this half-formed creature?
If only I could turn into a flower.

Creosote the Preserver

Up over the level crossing to the railroad cutting
Where the grandfather has them wait on the bank
While he slithers down to greasy ballast, ties sweating
Creosote into August heat, Salish fireweed,
The blood-draw and over-ripe smell of blackberries.

Unpockets a good-luck copper he lays on the rail
Then clambers back up. Hand in hand they watch
The train bear down, blinding headlamp
Sweep them and recede to a dimensionless point
Still in the future, never free of fear.

He's dug a plot of ground along the tracks
Sowed with crops he harvests all summer long
To the last tomatoes, still green, in autumn.
What the children love are gold suns, burning west,
Turning east. Later they will cut one, heavy with seed,

Carry it back to the house on the ocean's verge.
But first, the coin of memory.
Down in the cutting they peel the penny
From rust-red iron, smell creosote,
Wonder at its flatness—the face utterly erased.

Aftermath

Behemoths rerouted
Mid-Atlantic jumbled
On the apron—Paris,
Charles de Gaulle.
Soldiers paced the tarmac
Stopped cars stopping.
Move on, they gestured
With barrels of guns.

Suddenly
Her small silhouette
Without baggage
Dashed into the pickup lane.
Home to the suburbs,
Autumn's fruits
Still on the table,
September 12th,
The sun is rising.

Today again I wait at the airport
For a child to return from a voyage,
One of the lucky ones,
O ye gods of camouflage,
Home to the suburbs,
Summer's fruits on the table,
Apricots, peaches—
Small acts of propitiation.

The Mahabharata

Peter Brook, Avignon, 1985

Afterwards they filmed the epic
That reverberated all July
Off the walls of the disaffected quarry:
Tales within tales of dynastic
Quarrels, a family's loyalty
At odds with virtue and morality.

Thirty years later in Paris
In the Bouffes du Nord Theatre
The film stamps its larger
Than life images on our retinas
As lights are lit, mismatched chairs
Carried onstage for the actors
Who will talk and take questions.
Arjuna, Krishna, Youth Eternal
Old troupers, wizened veterans
In t-shirts and jeans, jovial.

The brain does a double-take,
Loath to resolve the sleight-of-hand—
An epic's superheroes changed
In no-time
To their shrunken avatars:
The illusionist's party trick.

It is autumn, 2015,
In the old vaudeville theatre
And a voice calls down from the gods:
'Dharma, what is dharma?'

Catch and Release

Douglas fir and cedar,
Megalith-sized boulders
The river shoulders past
Spraying stone with light.

Upriver steelhead leap,
Fall back and try again.
Can I call that
Anxiety, I wonder—

Watching him click into place,
Fly-box on the bank,
Olive-green hip-waders
Planted firmly mid-stream

To cast, reel in, repeat
Calligraphies of line
Handwritten and effaced.
Does it even matter

The hit and miss, the life
Under the surface, white
Water, spools of quiet
But never not opaque?

Tango

Waiting for the porridge pot to boil
I practice the Argentine tango,
Extending first one leg, then the other;
And the silver kettle's gravid belly
Mirrors me, in my blue nightgown:
My back is straight, my arms curve in
As if to hold a beach ball,
Or that red balloon, the sun, just
Rising from the puzzled rooftops.
One street over I see a girl
Reach for the string she never thought
Could get away from her so fast. . .

*Mind what you're doing or you'll fall!
Slide your right foot forward,
Brush your left instep; flex
Your knees, the way Natasha said.*

Natasha Ng from Buenos Aires
Who will not teach us to *Embrace*
Or dance *Cruzada* and *Boleo*
Until we learn to walk. *Caminar*.
Sun fills the room in the kettle:
Slotted spoon, mugs, the copper scales
To weigh and measure
From my husband's mother's Marseille pharmacy;
This could be a painting, I think,
'Portrait of a Woman in a Kettle.'

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This pamphlet is set in Centaur, now considered a classic Serif typeface, originally designed by American book and type designer Bruce Rogers for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1914. With a beauty that sacrifices nothing to readability, its functional elegance makes it an excellent choice for the setting of poetry.

Beverley Bie Brahic's collection *White Sheets* was a finalist for the 2012 Forward Prize. Her latest collection is *The Hotel Eden*. *Catch and Release* is the inaugural winner of the Alastair Reid Pamphlet Prize.

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The Alastair Reid Pamphlet Prize was established by Wigtown Festival Company in 2019 to commemorate the local poet who was one of Scotland's foremost literary figures, renowned for poetry, prose and translation.



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