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We Come Uncontainable:  
The Multivalent Body Politic in  
Beyer's *We Come Elemental*

*We Come Elemental*, by Tamiko Beyer. Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2013.

In Tamiko Beyer's substantive, experimental early work, most notably 2010's *bough breaks*, notions of conception—i.e. conceiving in poems both ephemeral and emotionally salient—were explored. Where *bough breaks* circulated the ideas and imageries of motherhood and infancy, her new title, *We Come Elemental* enacts an exploration of water as metaphor. The poems sweep along, showing various themes on their surface that somehow layer, chime and reflect each other in their watery characteristics: desire, environment, decay, change. Though her poems urgently inform a present moment that is indistinguishable from the future altered planet, the world the poems portray declines the recognizable real. Instead, they shift, surround, and show how meanings fill the body politic as well as imagine the unrecognizable realities of the (future) environment, change, and interconnectedness. They do so with surprising lack of panic, with mutable definitions, and the improvisational, the uncontainable.

Beyer's volume establishes a tone of huge ease and ecstasy in being through voices and play. This equanimity insists on the beauty of the flooded world, the water that is and the waterscape that will be, and insists on the watery nature of desire. Instead of angst, despair, grief, Beyer's observations range over the experience of catastrophe, immersion, domestic harmony, desire, garbage, and ruin with sly affection. Much of this élan affirms the earth's essential place in the speaker's sensual life as in "The Rainy Season":

Loosens mud.  
Now it's all sex—  
green heads, buds,  
the spider trembling  
in her web.

\*

Sweet, the river  
rolls and rolls,  
such skin  
for the thorn-bush grows.

When we whip  
like this in wind  
our bodies' kite thrills.  
Quick—pin tight  
the double knot,  
recite the alphabet  
and climb up  
the diamond tree—

it's all panorama  
and bark-scraped knees,

love, from here on out. (76-77)

The title implies the water so ubiquitous in the text is staying, is bigger than regular life. The first mention of mud helps us think through the natural imagery as the muck of bodies. And the "bodies' kite" boosts the idea of coupledom into something entirely imagined as if in play. Beyer continues this childlike vein by bringing in and reciting the alphabet, climbing a tree. But the panorama—once reached—isn't an achievement towards something pragmatic, a view onto the future, or neighbors. Instead, it's the view of an ecstatic diamond tree and the all-feeling nature of desire. The bark-scraped knees conflate the childhood imagery with something about desire's wear on the body. Somehow there's something utterly safe here, and the idea of it being a rainy season and not a deluge allows the "I" to exist and exit the poem emotionally undamaged.

The insistence on the pulses of desire that course through the poem layer into what is elemental about potential disasters to the landscape. Beyer knows that re-framing the landscape will help her reframe all: calm ease with what is, desire, and the future catastrophe of new terrains. Her poems don't so much ask questions about what will be and how they can be, but depict the person who can survive them, who can take the shape like water of whatever may happen. This includes a kind of erasure of the recognizable world in the aes-

thetic Beyer builds here. Sometimes one imagines what a poem from the present day that could be understood in five hundred years would look or sounds like. Who can say, but Beyer takes this cultural moment and shows already it's been flooded out and what remains feels mercurial, eternal in "Dear disappearing":

:: keep it coming cowboy. Keep the club  
white and manned. Keep it all from showing

its crackup into disaster :: as if they could  
:: as if what comes around. Here's how we do

:: dig deep into. They excavate we'll dance. (46)

"Dear disappearing," the longest poem, the volume's nine-page mid-section, meditates on the installation art seen on the book's cover, the sculpture "Another Place" by Antony Gormley. In its entirety, the installation erected at Crosby Beach in the UK places one hundred galvanized iron statues cast from the artist's own body in the shoreline facing the horizon. Having heard Ms. Beyer read her work, I would say ideally, we could stand on the shore where these statues erode and hear the poet read the poem. Her reading voice is subtle but looking onward. There's no drag of grief. The cover helps stand in for the art, and the moss growing on the statue marks the way Beyer's poems are noticing the sweet green of life or a sign of life that also is irrevocable change. The loss of recognizable forms, the loss of the artist's self (the sculptor who placed these 100 statues used his own body to cast the figures), matters because Beyer sits comfortably with inexorable changes, the prospect of which have had environmentalist poets grieving for years. She continues:

Children of pleasure we make and take we spectate.  
Jelly-jar history:: this wave and wave

Of capital-A landscape. See it cinescope into undeniable desire  
:: that soaring cliff :: dawn's endless sky :: roiling orgasmic waters

shot ecstatic. (47)

I am hard pressed to recall the last time I read an environmental poem that unironically called humans "children of pleasure" and the generosity suggested there takes leaps into the idea of roiling orgasmic

waters ladening onto a watery place. What appears on the surface are fine rivulets, different temperatures of ease. All this feels an appropriate manifestation of the ability to change shape, to not create friction or resistance within the voice, but to overcome, wear down, shape ideas and catastrophe as water does.

It's easier to articulate what these poems are not: brooding, sarcastic, biting, rigid, final, full of summation and inasmuch lend themselves to multiple slippery identities and politics. Specifically there's some use to approaching the negatively constructed in *We Come Elemental* as it highlights the queer vision. The context or explanation for the we/domestic couple is absent or else given representation in the arbitrary waters of destroyed natural environments. And the destruction is not given the weight of something broken, but seen as is, lightly and accurately. A lushness of imagery, of letting bigness and the spilling of detail onto detail re-enact a generosity of the sea and demonstrate the generosity of Beyer's imagination. There are a few I-thou poems where the I seems to or does take on the voice of water, or perhaps water is the uncontainable lover as in "The Water in You":

"I in the seams of your skin.

Eighty-three percent of blood-  
Deepest water. Transference.

\*

Every night, drain. Suds spin away  
Under tile; the pipe  
Elbow-bends to treatment.

All wet within. Surface tension,  
Bubbled lung.

Blackwater froth freezes  
Against concrete walls in holding  
Tank to tank until clear.

\*

I under your nails I in the navel cup  
I grime in all the places  
The world enters your body. (22)

Something objective and third person omniscient creeps into the description of where water can be, yet "I" exists as the voice of the poem too, creating a subtle play and ubiquitous aspect. To imagine that all is "wet within" can feel ghastly or sexy or matter-of-fact all at the same time here, and that note of the body is shored up with the stanza in which the "I" without verb is "under your nails" and "in the navel cup" and finally has action in the verb "grime," or is it the noun? At any rate, the world enters your body mostly as water and the lover water can be The Lover, the most complete and permeating lover.

Beyer also shuffles the uncontainable through meanings and definitions in the poem "Flickering towards Definition":

when the light hits the crosswalk::  
rain soaked :: there's a dog-not-dog :: its definition  
a no-where :: there was a where

and there was a here:: Manhattan on a cold spring  
night:: wolf at the crosswalk a wild no-  
where its coat of light and rain on asphalt shining

Off a ways the train makes its station over the bridge  
::our icons gone fract . . . (68)

By showing things as they are and that they are an illusion of a version of themselves at the same moment, by using the :: which implies analogy or equivalence between these moments, Beyer shows that the groundedness water seems to obliterate isn't the right investment for getting ones bearings, for being in the world. Instead, she mentions how she could make a "Marxist reference" at the start of the final stanza, but that "it, you, me—are the only ones left standing, / our tongues elaborately tied bows, our skin wet with city drizzle" (69). Utterance that may be beautiful is futilely knotted in the same moment. Language can't keep up with this slippery context. And it seems the people represented by the pronouns end up bearing the weight of meaning under a relentless, permeating life force of water.

The book invents, portrays, and imagines water: these conversations help us see what is not "the world" but what binds it, what can have any of us at its mercy. It's astonishing to see throughout the volume that Beyer celebrates and reveals the untameable as a pleasure, as language, as desire, as the literal thing the elemental. There's serious vision at play, one that merges the present and the near future and shows what fearlessness is needed to understand and even accept that future more fully.