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BEEKEEPER: PAULA MEEHAN IN THE POET'S CHAIR

In the summer of 1974, Elizabeth Bishop rented a house on the island of North Haven, off the coast of Maine. It was the time of the Nixon impeachment hearings and one of her friends, also staying in the house, kept the television on so that he could follow what was happening. 'If this is "witnessing" history – I'd rather not', Bishop wrote in her journal. She had carried with her the Peterson *Field Guides* to birds and wildflowers and a book on beach pebbles. 'I want now – now that it's too late – to learn the name of *everything*', she noted. But it was not too late.

She began to list in her notebook the wildflowers growing in front of the house – yellow goat's beard, lesser stitchwort, Queen Anne's lace, white clover, ox-eye daisy, red clover, rabbit's foot clover, lobelia, blue-eyed grass, wild radish, creeping bellflower, wild lupine, mullein, purslane, chicory, common morning glory, beach pea, white rosa rugosa, rosa rugosa, fragrant bedstraw, cow or tufted vetch, common St John's wort, eyebright, lesser pyrola. The following year, on her return to the island, she added other names – common evening primrose, bladder campion, harebell. By the summer of 1976, she was staying on the island for a whole two months. She, who had lost so much, had now gained a haven.

During the summer of 1978, when Bishop worked on her poem 'North Haven', her elegy for her friend Robert Lowell, who had died the previous September, she went to her notebooks and her *Field Guide* for ways to withhold the news, from the early stanzas of her own poem, that it was an elegy for her friend. By invoking what she could see and list, she held the world still in her favourite month of the year, invoking also a song from *Love's Labour's Lost* in which Shakespeare uses the phrase, 'paint the meadows with delight':

> This month, our favourite one is full of flowers:
> Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,
> Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,
> the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars,
> and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

Thus she used guidebook, notebook, and Shakespeare to make her poem, but she also used her eyes as she moved the flowers from nature to culture, from random, wild presence to highly-wrought use. Soon, in the poem, she invokes birdlife, as she holds her breath before moving the poem's attention to her friend who has died:

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.

In her poem 'Death of a Field', in which she dramatizes a battle between nature and culture, between the untamed field and the housing estate, Paula Meehan also invokes birds as abiding presences, whose sounds and rituals are untouched by what is going on below them. She names:

... the woodpigeons in the willow
The finches in what's left of the hawthorn hedge
And the wagtail in the elder
Sing on their hungry summer song

The magpies sound like flying castanets

And then she names what will be lost as the field gives way to concrete – scentless mayweed, dandelion, dock, teazel, primrose, thistle, sloe, herb robert, eyebright.

In the following poem ('Not Weeding'), Meehan also names 'Nettle, bramble, shepherd's purse' as versions of the untamed world that do not need to be resolved or assuaged. They flourish where they live; they will persevere without her forgiving or wondering eye.

Her poems set elemental things – sea, sky, bird, tree, weeds – against, or beside, human concerns and complex experiences, almost as Miró placed his elemental shapes and suggestive symbols against the luxury of flat painted colour.

In some of her poems, culture dissolves back into nature often of its own accord, often by the quality of her lyric dreaming, as in 'Number Fifty-One', from the sequence 'Six Sycamores', where the 'red bricks / dream of the clay pit', and 'the iron railings guard the memory of fire', and:

... the shutters ache

for the woods, the greeny light, the sap strong
in bole, in branch, the undergrowth quick
with life ...

This idea of life, life before certain and uncertain things unmade the world, animates Meehan's poetry and makes her own voice come to life, as though she were operating as a sort of wry, self-contained, fully-alert

chorus to a world both tainted and untainted. She wants nature and culture to become aware of each other's fragility and strength.

Elsewhere in her work, when she wishes to cast a spell, her voice is all modesty mixed with carefully controlled power, the cadence rising, ready to soar and heal.

Against this, she is also concerned to people her poems, to mark moments in history, or in her own emotional life, with precision, sympathy, care. Her own gaze as a poet is political, tempered by knowledge and nourished by history, or more likely what has been left out of history, such as:

> the stretcher-bearer, the nurse in white,
> the ones who pick up the pieces, who endure,
> who live at the edge

There is a sense, too, in her work that poetry is a sacred calling, with an ability like no other force in the world to deal with grief and mystery and the space between – the ordinary, the daily, what is remembered and lived through. So that even when she evokes swallows as 'those stitchers of land to sea, those grafters of sky / to the dark earth', she is allowing language this power also, and perhaps even a greater one, with more magic in it and greater force.

Her book, *Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them* (University College Dublin Press, 2016), transcripts from the three lectures which Meehan delivered when she held the Ireland Chair of Poetry between 2013 and 2016, attempts to offers clues and suggestions about her life, her spirit, her reading and thinking, and her imagination, so that her poems and her poetics can have some slanted light cast upon them.

Her bees in the first lecture live in nature, but Meehan has no trouble with them once she observes how naturally they move into culture. They can be preserved in amber, or can move into language or into memory or into poetry, as though by a natural process.

She wishes to evoke her own haven, the island of Ikaria in the Aegean Sea, one of her own personal or cultural habitats. But she has many other places to recreate and remember, including central Dublin, Finglas, Baldoyle, North America, and Scotland. These *loci* are as important in their contours and what they conjure up for her as the other realms she is capable of inhabiting, the imaginative ones.

Her bears in the second lecture will allow her to ponder on genetics, our origins and the origins of words and myths. They allow her to summon up her own classical education, her early reading, the life she lived when she was beginning. She moves easily, almost stealthily, from precise memory to images and quotations from a well-stocked mind, to moments when she needs to insist on the autonomy of the poem, the pure space that the poem must inhabit if it is to mean something, or do something. When she offers a paraphrase of what her old professor, WB Stanford, thought of poetry, she does not demur. It is clear that this belongs to her too: 'Poetry is not sociology, poetry is not history, is not the sum of the lore and logic it contained, interesting though these things might be; poetry is a way of telling the truth about what it is to be human, a product of the human imagination and a sovereign condition onto itself, coded in measures that are close kin to music and dance.'

Meehan's prose is close in tone to her manner as a poet. She is modest; she allows her voice to remain ordinary and then soar only if the occasion has been hard-won and the new tone is needed. In these lectures, she makes her reading an essential part of her life, as indeed she makes reading her life an essential part of her poetry. There are no false notes, or moments where her confidence has outrun its source. She is always rooted, and then ready to muse and remember, ready to use everything she knows to see through, see into, see beyond.

Words for her are like the body itself, or the city, or anything in nature, or indeed in culture, they are filled with memory that they conceal and release: '*Poetry is memory hungry.*'

In her third lecture, Meehan muses on water and wonders about poetry itself. When she describes living on one of the Shetland Islands in all its wild beauty, she writes: 'I nearly didn't write poetry at all, it seemed like such a puny act compared to the forces of nature shaping and energizing this place. There could be no competition in craft terms. Could I harness some of this power? Was there a lesson in it for my poetry?'

In order to answer this, she calls up a poem by her old teacher, James McAuley, which begins: 'I learn again to take pains / With simple things'.

But in the paragraph before she poses the question, Paula Meehan manages by implication to answer it herself, and indeed reply to the very demands she makes in some of her poems when she, in a visionary moment, wants nature to become a more pure and a less lost space, the soft space from which we come and to where we will return.

In the meantime, there is the untidy nature of the world, its broken culture and cultures, which Meehan evokes in her poems and here in these lectures almost as lovingly, or at least almost as sonorously and energetically, as she does her weeds, her wild flowers, her untouched places.

On another island, Papa Stour, one of the Shetland Islands, she notes: 'There, too, the detritus of western civilisation, colourfully pooling in coves. Plastics. Blue beach bottles, green toilet ducks, plastic bags riding the currents like jellyfish, plastic fish-boxes, the odd boat fender and other items of good honest pruck, an oar, a well-made box, old glass floats, occasionally a beautiful piece of sculpture made by the sea herself.'