



Industrial Oz: Ecopoems by Scott T. Starbuck

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Review by Phillip Barron — Published on December 13, 2015



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Industrial Oz: Ecopoems by Scott T. Starbuck. Fomite Press. \$15.00, 128 pp.

In an epistolary keynote address delivered this past June, poet Aaron Abeyta tells the Association of American University Presses “perhaps we are all here to trace and collect words, to sow meaning; we collect that thing which people discard as ordinary and bring it to a page of life where it can flourish and be the map of human struggle and therefore an instruction as to how we can all survive.” When I read his letter, I am interested in who “we” are. On one reading, Abeyta includes himself with the academic book publishers he addresses, thinking of writers and publishers collaborating to bring pages to life. On another reading, Abeyta identifies with his high school teacher who, to address his unruly classroom behavior, gave the freshman the key to the cabinet with seniors’ books. In the cabinet he found Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, learned that he would “love books and their saving power”, and discovered his own career path to university professor. On yet a third reading, perhaps Abeyta’s “we” speaks of writers and specifically poets. Writers are, after all, the ones who collect language, that “which people discard as ordinary.”

The speaker in Scott T. Starbuck’s poem, “Speaking to a Street Person about the Problem with North America,” attends a house party where dancing and music rage on even while the house begins to burn. Smoke enters

through door cracks
and no one can hear the sirens
because music and laughter
are too loud for all
except us dogs to hear.

Once again, I am interested in the “us.”

We could read “except us dogs” literally, which would tell us (readers) that the speaker of the poem is canine. To be a dog at a house party thrown, presumably, by human beings is to be a domesticated dependent. A dog at a party may be able to detect some danger but would be unable to do anything about it. Or we could read a human speaker identifying with dogs. The poet has an ability to detect danger in the midst of people, perhaps friends, who are deaf to it, just as dogs hear beyond the range

of sounds that resonate in a human cochlea. There are some problems so intractable, systemic, and massively distributed that they are easier to ignore than appreciate. *Industrial Oz*, Starbuck's first full-length collection, is a book of such problems, with poems on global warming, toxic rivers, levitating turtles, and suffocating smoked whales. Their complexity and their prognoses alarm us.

Maybe the sirens indicate rescue, the fire truck and ambulance on its way. But in light of the book's other poems, poems concerned with capitalist greed and the environmental exploitation it breeds, the sirens are more likely just an alarm to which some are deaf. As Ed Roberson tells us in the brief poem from which his chapbook *Closest Pronunciation* draws its title, "The word closest in pronunciation / To an ambulance's siren is 'wrong.'"

But the dogs hear it, and poets are dogs.

Industrial Oz: Ecopoems combines poems from Starbuck's previous three chapbooks with new poems. I think of the "us" in this poem as a prism, through which we can read the other poems arrayed. What is it that the poet can hear? The call of the oracle? The siren over the party? The absurdity of modern life? For me, poems in Starbuck's book fall into three subjects: wisdom, parables, and absurdities.

Some of the wisdom the poet shares comes from unexpected sources, as implied in the titles "Speaking to a Street Person about the Problem with North America," "Bumper Sticker: Extinction is Forever," "Coyote's Prediction," and "San Diego Swap Meet." In "Essex, 1820," a Hopi elder speaks. "Erratum" opens by apologizing that the "cave paintings at Altamira, / palm-sized Venus of Willendorfs / were so misunderstood... Most of us never intended / gray breakdown / of our blue jewel."

The parables in *Industrial Oz* are rife with echoes of June Jordan, who says of activists "you do / something, rather than nothing." Often in Starbuck's poems, the powerful and the vulnerable trade places. Because they do something rather than nothing, "At the Nevada Nuclear Test Site"

grandmothers
are arrested
imprisoned
to make way
for the blast.

A sheriff explains
the old women
are dangerous.

Other parables take the form of dialogues. In "Peter Went Fishing," "The Master said to throw in a hook and line / then to remove a coin from the mouth of the first fish." After Peter returns to the Master, thwarted by a game warden requiring a fishing license, "'I sent him too,' said the Master. / 'Who has more weight with you?'" "Rain Forest Poem" imagines a conversation between the liver, the brain, the stomach, and the rest of the body. "Listen, it said, if I go / you all go," the liver tries to reason. "We'll see about that / said the rest of the body," which might as well be the industrial world who can not hear the siren in the rain forest's collapse. In "Levitating Turtles of Sauvie's Island," an unspecified "she" tells the poem's skeptical speaker "these beasts / are like poems // and never fly / if

you directly look.”

Threaded throughout *Industrial Oz* are poems that unpack absurdities. Most of these begin with epigraphs from the twenty-four hour news cycle. In “Listening to a Banker Talk About Losing [Only] Two Billion Dollars as Schools are Closed,” Starbuck hears a 2012 news report on finance capitalists saying “It was a fish with the head of a lion / or maybe it was a goat’s head / or maybe it was the head of a rhinoceros. / It’s hard to say. / But it had fins, I’m sure of that.” The colors of the U.S. flag become blood, racist identities, and the frozen corpses of massacred Cheyenne and Arapaho people in “Reflections on Sand Creek, Colorado.” The poem “What If One Night a Big Solar Storm Went By?” imagines the primitive state in which “Doctors had to relearn doctoring. / Parents had to relearn parenting. // Farmers had to relearn farming / Builders had to relearn building,” after an “extreme CME [coronal mass ejection],” described in the epigraph, disables all electronics. Starbuck highlights our dependence on electronic technology by shining a light on just how deeply this dependence permeates daily life in the twenty-first century.

The insightful, mysterious poem “Snowflake Immortality” brings *Industrial Oz* to a close. It may be hard to conceive of each snowflake’s unique crystalline structure “gazing across / this wide valley,” yet what Starbuck asks us by leaving unsaid is just why it is so difficult. We are sure of our own uniqueness among a population of billions. Then, why can we not afford other species or other phenomena the same characteristics that we admire in ourselves?

Starbuck lets these absurdities sit uncomfortably in his poems so that, the longer we look at them, we recognize that we are looking at ourselves in a mirror. There is that “we” again.

Industrial Oz is rich with layers of modern life, environmental alarm, and oracular wisdom. As in Abeyta’s letter, poetry in Starbuck’s book plays the gnostic role recording and sharing “instruction as to how we can all survive.”

Phillip Barron’s first book of poetry, *What Comes from a Thing*, won the 2015 Michael Rubin Book Award and was published by Fourteen Hills Press of San Francisco.

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