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Calendar or Catalogue

Ringling Here & There: A Nature Calendar

by **BRIAN BARTLETT**

Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2014 \$19

Reviewed by **JOEL DESHAYE**

Brian Bartlett's *Ringing Here & There* is billed as his first book of prose, but poetic it definitely is. He has seven poetry collections, including *The Watchmaker's Table* (2008), which return again and again to ecocritical themes. (For the sake of full disclosure, I should mention that he has served on the executive committee of the association that publishes *The Goose*, but I've never met him.) His book is subtitled *A Nature Calendar*, and the structure of the book poses a special challenge to reviewers. The "calendar" has one entry for every day in every month, the months forming chapters. The entries are remarkably consistent in tone and emotion, with exceptions such as a comic June 8, surprisingly maudlin July 5, funny Christmas Day, and syrupy-sad January 13. The consistency means that there is no obvious plot to the year; there is no cruellest month. Partly because of this, the book might be enjoyed more at a leisurely pace, perhaps even one entry a day for a year. To read it as a reviewer, in a relatively short time and on a deadline, is to defy the structure—but also, liberatingly, to compress time and thereby recognize that the past and present are subjectively not far apart.

And so, even though Bartlett's imagination includes yoga and other signs of Western modernity such as Facebook (which provided him with the length-limit for most entries), cell-phones (31), satellite dishes (87), and listservs (163), his speaker

is rooted in pre-electronic nineteenth century naturalism. His settings are regionally diverse (e.g., Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Nebraska, Ireland, Manhattan), and his sources too are from around the world (e.g., Japan, Russia, and the Canadian North), but he often returns to the papers of the naturalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson to assemble collages of their sentences. Botany, biology, and geology inform his work.

His naming of flora and fauna becomes a motif, and in fact this "calendar" could almost have been a "catalogue." Bartlett observes the Methuselah's beard lichen (110), the kingbird (57), the saltshaker earthstar (42), the wolf snake (138), and the horse-fly (58). He wonders if the latter's name "mean[s] it hangs around horses, or has the bite of one" (58). He also reflects upon "the narrowness of our naming" (140), which is often so literal: "Red-necked Grebe, Rough-legged Hawk, Long-tailed Duck" (140). But there are also the horse-flies, kingbirds, and wolf snakes, named with metaphor and metonymy. Given the metonymy of spider's web and World Wide Web, he points out a Baudrillardian vision of the future re-naming of the spider's web based on the internet (106). Soon afterward, with simulacra on our minds, he thinks he sees a saw-whet owl, but it is in fact "a branch stub mimicking an owl, as the owl mimicked a branch stub" (111). Imitation is not a feature only of hyperreality, but also of nature. The breakdown of categories that separate owl and tree, and the examples of metaphor and metonymy, work against the impression of a catalogue. Funnily, nature itself can be a little postmodern.

Postmodernism is more familiar as a style of human perception, attitude, and

activity, including the regretful example of litter such as “a torn t-shirt with a cartoon hawk across its front” (15). Bartlett seems worried but not overly concerned about waste: “The only species that thinks it needs zippers keeps on making ones that don’t work” (133); “Once I found a lost watch in a park: in this oceanside realm of oxides, rust was gnawing on the hands of time” (34). In geological time, even steel will be reclaimed through natural processes. Nevertheless, Bartlett wonders about the here and now of animals in captivity and the health effects of genetic modification and omnivoracious diets.

Speaking of health are the entries based on folk sayings. The imaginary folk sayings of August 11 and 13 are not initially very curious—“If you stare into a raven’s eye for more than a minute, you’ll get a sore throat” (68)—but the two parallel entries based on Hildegard von Bingen’s twelfth-century Latin *Physica* are fascinating because someone once believed them: “If a tumour is swelling on your body, you should dampen an amethyst with your saliva & touch the tumor [*sic*] all over with it” (59). The inclusion of potential comparisons like this one is a sign that Bartlett is wary of the label of “pseudo-scientist” that is conceivably applicable to amateur

naturalists by modern scientists of big data; it might be akin to the pre-emptive designation “geopoet” in his counterpart Don McKay’s *Deactivated West 100*. The humbly geopoetic image of fossilized traces of water droplets (138)—significance in the tiniest thing—is one of the most powerful in the book.

Aligning with the humility suggested by geopoetry, Bartlett can be refreshingly self-deprecating and comic: “My daughter eagerly hands me a shining, intangible gift: being imagined as Father Who Writes Poem About Sock Monkey” (125). The entry for June 8 describes a “feisty bantam rooster” named Leonard with a “motto: *Be Leonard*” (41). What might once have been read as anthropocentrism is now more likely to be read as a recognition of personality in many animals besides humans. Ironically, our anthropocentrism was to blame for that earlier reading. A good book can inspire minor revelations effortlessly, as Bartlett’s does here.

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