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A New Index for Predicting Catastrophes by Madhur Anand

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Too Exhaustive to Survey Here

A New Index for Predicting Catastrophes

by **MADHUR ANAND**

M&S, 2015 \$18.95

Reviewed by **ANDREW JEFFREY**

The dénouement of a work of tragedy is described as the catastrophe. Catastrophe theory describes how small changes can lead various systems to suddenly shift behaviour, generating sudden and dramatic change. For this theory, catastrophes are everywhere. In Madhur Anand's lively and formally varied first collection, poetic and scientific investigation of plural "catastrophes" tempers the tragic imagining of any final, inevitable, singular catastrophe.

"The New Index" appears almost half way through the collection, exemplifying the kind of serious play with which poetry enables Anand to engage. The poem begins by seemingly describing an ideal New Index: "It should have the circumference of a wild blueberry / pie, vinyl record or hubcap or a Mercedes / / truck" (1-3). It is tempting to read the sentence allegorically (as an index, pointing toward). The index wittily updates Emerson's circles: should be encompassing, picked from the "natural" world but processed, contain information that can be read and be a form of transport. However, the 13-syllable lines—which, according to the notes, make up "the majority of poems in this volume" (99)—destabilise assimilation of the images: there is a large difference between the circumference of a wild blueberry and a blueberry pie! One of Anand's scientific papers about the limits of complexity science in ecological modelling notes,

We believe that measures and models from classical CSS [Complex Systems Science] will have limited applicability for ecology in the future because ecologists' perception of complexity invariably includes diversity, interactions that cross many spatial, temporal and organizational scales, ecological memory (historical effects), and heterogeneous and fluctuating environments. (40)

We note that "The New Index" is defined by circles from heterogeneous environments that are heavily influenced by historical effects: "wild" blueberry is now "cultivated" and vinyl records have been made obsolete.

The poem's second sentence reveals that the circumferences are being used as metaphors to give a sense of the size for felled tree cross-sections used to create "The New Index" by examining growth rings, the reader being forced to slow down and revise their earlier interpretation. In an interview, Anand notes that a slowing down in a system's dynamics may signal that a sudden or dramatic change is going to occur:

This critical slowing down, these expanding moments, weeks, months or years, might be an opportunity for closer and closer observation of a recovery process and for learning. ("Questions")

The third sentence describes a scientific interpretation of the tree rings, picking up on reading backwards, "The wide, early / / phase of growth, release, or a crowded economy / where time is compressed, and we can only read backwards: / / *The condition of postmodernity*" (4-7). David Harvey's book

interprets "*The condition of postmodernity*" as a cultural index of time-space compression due to changes within the capitalist system. It is also tempting to "read backwards" and reference Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*: the efficacy of the new index will only be proven by the catastrophe taking place at a specific time in the future; it exists in a state Lyotard calls the "future anterior"—it can only be proven by reading backwards.

The poem ends by mixing scientific study with personal reflection as it is revealed that the poem has an addressee, presumably the speaker's child: "How the bouquet they sent for your birth / dries up with sequence: hydrangea, rose, carnation" (11-12). The scientific compulsion for "learning, learning" (10) enables a stoic approach to living but also reveals that "Even death / / has its seasons" (10-11). The poem concludes but is also circular as we re-read in the knowledge that the "you" is a particular subject.

I've slowed down with this poem, as it demonstrates what the poetic index can achieve, but the delightful thing about this volume is the sheer variety of subject matter and poetic form with which Anand engages. There are poems about plants, forests, science, family life, travel, cultural difference and economics, all dealt with using lively wit and scientific sensibility. There are poems in syllabic couplets, quasi-sonnets, free verse poems, poems that use page space. As the volume progresses the reader feels that a catastrophe is coming as the writing becomes more fragmented, sometimes losing punctuation. This fragmentation is exemplified by the series of impressive poems where Anand takes scientific works she has co-authored and uses them as source text for collage poems that push

the source toward catastrophe. The initial collage texts develop strange narratives whilst giving the reader an idea of what the original paper was about. By the final poem in the volume the extractions have become more furious, non-narrative. Placed in a block paragraph, a series of two word descriptors initially seem to affirm that the index is "simple beneficial, effective statistical" (2), but these descriptors soon become contradictory: "last initial, periodic critical" (4). This happens because "We do not aggregate" (7), the index living in the tension of "future/empirical" (3) and "incorporated/individual" (4). The final line's pointed use of "We" demonstrates Anand's ability to weave science, politics, individual perception and ironic self-critique—"We assume all are equal" (8).

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