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## Rag Cosmology by Erin Robinsong

Camilla Nelson  
*Singing Apple Press*

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**Review of *Rag Cosmology* by Erin Robinsong**

***Rag Cosmology* by ERIN ROBINSONG**  
BookThug, 2017 \$18.00

Reviewed by **CAMILLA NELSON**

The cover image of Erin Robinsong's debut collection sits somewhere between spore print, ink blot, and fossil. In fact, it is a chromatogram: "a self forming image" that is "the result of organic and inorganic compounds combined on filtered paper and exposed to sunlight" (back matter). This description provides a stunningly accurate metaphor for the alchemical work of *Rag Cosmology*. Robinsong realises this connective excavation in a poetics that draws words out of the

succulent  
world of fragile

living-in polyrhythms  
("INTENSE HEAT DEATH AND  
HAPPINESS" 28-30)

that constitute our cosmos. Defying clear boundary, equivocating human and other-than human, combining organic and inorganic compounds, Robinsong expresses her findings as ink on paper, exposing her words to the light of day for our benefit. This is a poetry that explores the overlap, interweave, and exchange that becomes flow, that becomes airborne dispersal, that is buried back into life.

*Rag Cosmology* is divided into six sections, each with its own formally experimental inflections. Out of these six sections, two principal themes emerge—sex and currency—each of which is a transmogrification and re-description of

the other. Sex: the sensuous co-mingling, merge, and mutual alteration of bodies ("VIBRATIONAL DESKS"; "ETERNAL ATOMIC SUPERFICIAL"). But, it is not always like this. Nothing in this collection remains the same for long. Words recombine, double back and open out in marginally different directions.

Currency is a close relation of sex: the flow and exchange of coins, knowledge, or value is both a crude surface description of money changing hands and a fundamentally ecological issue. As Robinsong's frequent revisiting of "the river bank" and its place within the collection as a site of converging values suggests ("TRANSFORMER"; "SWANS BEAT POLICE"), currency cannot flow through something else without being transformed: "symbiotic coin" ("VIBRATION DESKS" 102). Money is quantum here. That which is deposited does not cease to flow. Forces of influence don't stop; they change. In this *Rag Cosmology* there is no stability, only relative speed.

In contrast to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where nothing connects with nothing, Robinsong's writing connects everything with everything, no matter how hallucinogenic or absurd the outcome. This inescapably material reflexivity is introduced and celebrated by the very first poem of Robinsong's collection, setting the tone for the rest of the book:

I love brown days when green  
leaves have gone black. Down  
to the future.

As a tree mulches itself. I could  
bag it away

on the curb on Thursday but I  
shan't. There are

minerals and gases and the  
ways that everything

knows. To get to the future.  
Born for this funeral.  
(4-9)

We could discard the dead leaves.  
We could regard them as rubbish. But this  
would be to misrecognise their value and  
their transformative potential. It isn't just  
that dead leaves have material value; they  
have knowledge value too. These leaves  
have power. They know and continue to  
know and be known in death. Their  
knowledge converts. Death is a converter.  
It is from the riches of these dead leaves  
that future trees grow; we "die into life"  
("EMILY" 24).

Robinson's writing explores the  
comfort and horror of a radical  
connectivity where everything stimulates,  
copulates, vibrates, eats, digests, moves  
through and fertilises everything else in an  
"anarchy of the most sensuous kind"  
("CURRENCIES" 13). "POSEUR" examines  
this interpenetrative progress from a  
vibrational perspective. In this poem, "a  
sound like music" (2) is identified as  
distinct from music because it asks

permission that music does not it  
just comes in  
and helps itself to your

thoughts  
fiddles with your energies and

leaves

its unasked for surgery half  
complete[.] (17-22)

This is just one of the ways in which our  
radical porosity and its routinely nebulous  
grasp of consent informs and others with  
only a vague sense of its range of impact  
and influence: "Touch extends six inches  
from the body" ("IT IS NO GOOD AND I  
CONTINUE" 11).

"POLYGON 43576326" presents  
another mode in which this connectivity is  
realised. This time it is the sonic  
resonance of certain letters and fragment  
words whose meanings slip sideways. The  
"D D" at the end of the first line  
produces a thudding sound that becomes  
sonically illustrative of the opening clause:  
"The invention of resource goes D D"  
(1). Or, "the invention of resource" is the  
sound of trees being felled for timber. This  
is the sound of life forms being broken  
into component parts and converted into  
cash. The saw moves through the tree,  
"fore and aft / WOO SAW WOO" (2). The  
sound of sawn wood is simulated by these  
broken words that simultaneously model  
the breakdown of these trees. Words  
open up and out. Meaning expands  
polysemantically as these trees break  
down: trees that will eventually break  
down into pages upon which these words  
are now printed.

*Rag Cosmology* languages a model  
of radical connectivity that is not a blissful  
euphoria of surrender but a complicated  
wriggling, breaking, misunderstanding of  
one thing into, through, and by way of  
another partly realised and only vaguely  
understood: "A communication occurs  
between the self and the self, not a split /  
but a knitting" ("IT IS NO GOOD AND I  
CONTINUE" 12-13). But a knitting with  
several stitches slipped and slipping,

because a self “isn’t a self it’s a dripping harlequin of hair in a sequin dress without end like the universe or those holes in the ocean” (“SEQUENCES” 45-46). Poetry is a way of thinking through connection with no attempt to master but rather to approximate by way of examined inhabitation. This work forges new space-time possibilities by way of polysyntactic and polysemic innovation. The poet or poem (for one is an extension of the other here) is an oyster—a bottom feeder (“I’M WORKING ON IT”)—gorging on the excremental compost of the world and presenting its pearls to us, the reader, as a raw delicacy for our consumption. Poets and poems are part of this continuous process of transmutation. Nothing is exempt.

**CAMILLA NELSON** is a British language artist and independent researcher whose work explores the intra-action of human and other-than human organisms through page-based poetry soundwork, installation, and performance.