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Rag Cosmology by Erin Robinsong

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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.