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AN INTERVIEW WITH THE POET V. PENELOPE PELIZZON ABOUT HER RECENT BOOK A GAZE HOUND THAT HUNTETH BY THE EYE

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This interview with the poet V. Penelope Pelizzon about her most recent volume of poetry, *A Gaze Hound That Hunteth by the Eye*, focuses particularly on the theme of exile, in all senses of the word. The conversation ranged over a number of topics. The poet reflected on the question of cultural inheritance and the problems a female writer may face, who feels deeply attached to certain literary traditions, which are at heart deeply misogynistic. She pointed to the need for maintaining a certain alienation when a guest in another culture, and how that sense of distance can become a space for reflection and writing; this constant alienation can be "the barbarian's luxury". While discussing poems in the book that deal with the effects of climate change, Pelizzon touched on the sense of exile that derives from the fact that we are the first generation no longer able to take comfort in the notion that nature will outlive us. With reference to the poems in the books about animals – particularly dogs – Pelizzon speculated that perhaps animals do not feel exiled from emotion in the same way that humans do, and suggested that observing them may allow us to access our own emotion. The conversation concluded with her thoughts on the connections between music and poetry; while music is the fastest way to be brought up short by our emotions, poetry is perhaps the next thing to that, offering the realisation that one is not always exiled from what one is and what one feels.

Keywords: Lyrical Poetry, Exile, Synaesthesia, Climate Change, Animals.

Introduction

V. Penelope Pelizzon's fourth book of poetry, *A Gaze Hound That Hunteth by the Eye* (2024), is a *LitHub* recommendation for 2024. Her first, *Nostos*, won the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award; her second, *Whose Flesh Is Flame, Whose Bone Is Time*, was a finalist for the Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize. She is also coauthor of *Tabloid, Inc.*, a critical study of film, photography, and crime narratives. Her recognitions include a Hawthornden Fellowship, the Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship, a Lannan Foundation Writing Residency Fellowship, and a "Discovery"/*The Nation* Award (Penelope Pelizzon).

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The poems were written over a period of ten years and draw on her travels and her experiences both during and before this period. She is married to a diplomat, and because of this she has had extended stays in such countries as Namibia, Syria, Italy and South Africa, as well as her home country, the USA. These places, their landscapes, their people, their languages, and – perhaps equally importantly – their animals provide the inspiration for the dazzlingly varied poems in the book. Penelope and I met on a Friday afternoon in Venice to talk about the book; our conversation focused in particular on the theme of exile, which, in various different senses, underlies many of the poems.

Interview

Shall we begin with the title? It's a rather obscure quotation; of course, you do give us the indication of where it comes from, but it's not something that people are likely to recognize. It's definitely intriguing, but I feel it could be seen as a little misleading, since the book is about so much more than just the eye. It seems to me it's a book which involves all the senses. So can I just ask why you chose this as the title?

The book was originally titled Animals & Instruments, after the longest poem in the collection. But several other books in recent years had titles involving ampersands, and so, you know, it started to seem a little clichéd by the time I was assembling the collection. "A Gaze Hound That Hunteth by the Eye" was one of the last poems in the book to be written. And it seemed to me that the gestures of that poem actually do encompass a lot of the book's larger issues, such as inheritance. For instance, what does it mean to come up through English literature and to be deeply attached to Shakespeare and deeply attached to that dramatic tradition, and yet also to know how misogynistic that tradition is? I mean, we know this, but what is it to feel that afresh, right? What do I do with the fact that this tradition that I'm deeply attached to would not necessarily be happy to have me in it? So, it felt like that gesture of talking back to the past is something that comes up in a lot of the poems. A lot of them take their titles from other works of literature, as you've noticed, I'm sure. A lot of the poems are kind of speaking back to or redirecting questions about older literature that has been formative to me. Those questions of inheritance that "Gaze Hound" prioritizes really felt important, and ultimately it felt to me like the title of that poem actually did work as a title for the whole collection.

This question of inheritance: you've talked very broadly about it. I'd like to connect this maybe with the notion of exile. Is there a sense in which it's also an

American's response to European literature – or perhaps to English literature specifically?

Yes, of course. Henry James is somebody that I go back to a lot; he's certainly an informing voice in the back of my head. As an American writer, I can absolutely relate to his questions about what it means to be the inheritor of a crass newer culture concerned primarily with money when confronted with the cultural richness of the old world. But then I also think about the epigraph I chose for the book, a quote from Edmund Jabès translated by Rosmarie Waldrop: "The foreigner allows you to be yourself by making a foreigner of you". You know, I'm the spouse of a diplomat and I'm constantly in these situations where I'm privileged to be a guest, or a foreigner, in other people's culture… And if you're a guest in another person's culture, you always want to remain a guest, you always want to remain a little bit foreign, because to not be alien is to – well, if I make your home my home, then I've just colonized your home, right? It seems like this idea of alienation, this remaining in a kind of intellectual or emotional exile and maintaining that distance – this is a very rich space for reflection and writing. And then, as you know, when you're out of your home country for quite a while and you go back, your home country's become weird too. Your home country is strange and you're something of an emotional exile there as well. I cherish the experience of being constantly a little out of step with the places I love abroad – and then I relish the privilege of being out of step with my own culture and being able to see how weird American culture is – and only more crazy every day. This is really the biggest gift for any writer, to have that sense of constant alienation.

You refer to yourself a couple of times as a barbarian: "The barbarian's luxury is to relish / new languages first as music" and "I was the barbarian, loving the luxury of being / the shortest footnote in / someone else's epic.

Yes, yes, yes. And it's true, right? I mean, that is the barbarian's luxury. That footnote line perhaps relates to a kind of exile, a corrective exile from the idea of American exceptionalism. One advantage of being an American living in places like the Levant that have history going back thousands of years: you're constantly reminded that you're not the center of everything. But on the purely linguistic level, it's so great to just listen and to hear these incredible sounds of another language and feel like I have no responsibility to figure out what that means! In a week I'll have to start figuring out how to get around in it. But for now, all I can do is relish it.

Yes, I think one of the greatest virtues of this book is the relishing of sounds. If you'll allow me, I'll quote a few lines which are so beautiful I just had to copy them out. "Why sounds so often /soften me, I don't know." And then that wonderful one when you are describing the gypsy moth:"The woods around me rustle with the patter / of countless soft digestive tubes raining fecal matter…" You're there describing something pretty troublesome, actually, what these gypsy moths are doing to the forests, but you make it sound so beautiful. And here's another line: "Susurrating in wind / and silvering their silky freshly-woven sleeves". It's gorgeous. But what you're describing is, as I say, pretty worrying.

It's devastating, totally devastating. So, there's always this question about the problem of aestheticizing disaster, right? And we're at this moment where, as you know, if you're paying attention to climate change news, there's just so much disaster. It sort of feels like, well, what more can we say? The doom is apparent, and it seems clear that no-one is going to do anything about it. No leadership is going to do anything about this. So we're really – to put it bluntly –we're really screwed. I just don't know what's going to happen. There is no good outcome here. But at the same time, you know, language wants to play. That is what it does. That's a genuine impulse of the brain that feel lively and that's how it engages with the devastation that might otherwise silence it. It's hard to write about these really devastating subjects. Thinking about the forest near my house, the oak trees that have been destroyed …

Something similar is happening to the fir-trees in the Dolomites.

Yes. I've seen that. They're getting gray and just sort of losing their needles – things like this are happening everywhere, but it just seems like, you know, we can wring our hands and wail about it, but – how much more can poems do? One impulse in a poem is to figure out what's really been lost. In the "Gypsy Moths" poem you just quoted, for instance, the tree, the trees, are dead. But what is it that's really lost? And part of it is, of course, the future. Since lyric poetry began, there always been this idea that nature is this recurring comfort. We individual humans are going to die, but the trees will continue. The earth will continue. But now it really feels like we're this first generation (or handful of generations) of humans who don't have this comforting assurance. So, thinking about exile, it's as if we're exiled from that idea of nature's predictable continuity that has been a comfort to humans for thousands of years. We are the first generations that can no longer think of nature as something permanent, something that's always going to be there.

Yes, yes. Can I just pick up on the word you talked about earlier, playing with language? I mean, there is also a good deal of word play. I noticed you do have a fondness for puns.

I do. I like them very much.

For example, "My hike become / an appellation trail". And then that lovely description of your "favorite colleague", the one who gives the blow job in the crusader castle: he "Tongued the dish to soft-core pun / with camels oiling the eyes of needles and needing / rich men's needling, till he'd broken laughter's back / with straws of horn." It's beautiful and very funny too. And I like the dog called Chompsky. Is that, was that a real dog then?

No, there was a real dog, but his name was not Chompsky.

Right, I mean, there are a lot of dogs of course and at one point you yourself seem to become a dog: "I'd nose the souk, a labyrinth / complex as my solitude." So that raises another question, related to what you were saying about attitudes towards nature: how far can we actually enter the mind of a dog? What would you say about that? Do you think it's somehow intrusive to try and do so? Robert Frost has this worry in some of his poems.

Yeah. Well, that's like the idea that, you know, we don't want to anthropomorphize too much, right? But to say that we don't want to anthropomorphize doesn't mean that we can't actually assume that creatures who are wired quite similarly to us and who have quite a bit of the same shared DNA don't have similar experiences and sensations and perhaps emotional states. I am not an animal psychologist, of course, but the sort of popular reading I can do around this suggests that scientists are now thinking that actually dogs probably do experience a lot of the emotions that we experience. And, you know, you can see a dog's facial expressions; they have a more complex musculature on their facial system than we do, they can move their ears and their foreheads in different ways. If your dog looks worried, your dog probably feels whatever for a dog is akin to worry. It's always struck me, when you read some report that lots of money has been spent on animal tests to figure out that animals can sense something, and you're like: "have you never just spent fifteen minutes with a dog?"

Exactly, yeah.

All you need to do is, like, go be around a herd of cows for an hour and just watch how they interact with each other. Either they're really good actors or they actually are in communication with one another. It's always seemed to me that the idea that we're smarter than animals – well, maybe I'm better at chess than my dog is! But it's very clear to me that my dog is much smarter about some things than I am. Maybe smarter about emotions, much more perceptive

to danger and to threat, right? So, there are all of these ways in which being around animals continuously reminds me of the limits of my own five senses.

You have that lovely quotation from the Auden poem, "Their Lonely Betters", which is relevant here. That particular poem, why is it entitled "Fado"?

So, do you know about Fado?

Fado – well, the Portuguese songs...

Yeah. So I'm just thinking about this, this dog that is so, so vocally expressive in this way…

Sorry, right, "Fido" – "Fado". Okay. Of course, I should have got that one.

This idea of this incredible vocally expressive music, but it's not words that are doing it, right? When you're listening to, say, Amália Rodrigues, it's not the lyrics themselves that are crushing you. It's something wrenching in the tone of her voice. With "Fado" – actually there is a video that I can send you of my dog doing this exact thing, playing with his toy chicken and singing! So in some way, that poem is just a description of something that would regularly happen. But I was struck by this idea that this wordless creature is having some profound experience; you just watch him and clearly he is. I don't know what's happening, but possibly his experiences are more profound than mine because he cannot fully articulate them. We know how awful it feels to be inarticulate, right? To be in those situations where we have so much that we want to express and we cannot express it. What if that's what it's like being a dog?

Right. Actually that's something you notice with small children; sometimes you can tell they really want to communicate something, but they just don't have the words and you can sense the frustration they feel. And then that doesn't go away entirely as you grow up.

Absolutely. And that can be tied back to the exile theme too. This may be stretching it a little bit but there is the idea that we are so often exiled from our own emotions as humans – and we are so often exiled from a way of expressing those emotions. Maybe we can speculate that animals, wordless as they are, might be more in touch with their emotions? Maybe that's what animals allow us to do – they don't feel exiled in the same way from emotion, and they allow us to access our own through watching them. So it's absolutely opposite to the Auden poem in some way; what if it's the dog who is having the profound emotional

experience and we humans are the ones who are exiled from understanding the deep sense of whatever it is?

Right. So, the long poem, "Animals & Instruments', is, I think, just wonderful. I've read it through several times and keep finding new things in it. I'm struck by the lines where you say: "What a curator / the mind is, restless, can't stop building these scrappy / cabinets of curiosities when walking for an hour." And that, I suppose, is a kind of a key to how the poem comes about. What would you say to that?

Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. That is what the creative act of poems for me often feels like, right? You build up this sort of sense of images and sensations and sounds and it's not clear that they fit together, but at a certain point it starts to seem like there is some kind of energy between them and there is some kind of connection between all of these things that seem disconnected. And, you know, I'll often have the sense that from one country to another, there's some kind of a cultural echo or there's some kind of societal "rhyme". Maybe it's a visual rhyme between the way that two very different cities look – or just the way that two different cultures respond to something in ways that are very different but also have this connectivity to them. So it's like all of those little things… it feels like they start to build up and, with a long poem like that, it feels like I can tell that there's different stuff that's connected. I can see that some things about my experiences in Syria are very similar to my experiences in Namibia and that they are connected in some ways to Connecticut, but it takes a long time to figure out what they are. That poem really took me eight years because I just, I could tell that these things fit together, but I just couldn't tell how. The speaker in that poem is obviously similar to me, but it's not me. It's a lyric "I" who is biographically aligned in some ways, but it's a persona. So I had to figure out what were the things that this persona needed to have as part of her world for all of these pieces of the poem to come together and make sense? Like, what was she doing walking around in Namibia? Why was she doing this? And who was she talking to? That actually took a very long time to figure out. At first the speaker in that poem was just walking along and sort of thinking to herself and it didn't work. It wasn't until I really figured out that, oh, of course she's talking to her students because this is who she is; she's a teacher, she's kind of in her head talking to them.

And why are they "my chickadees"?

Oh, just for fun. I actually do this with my students, I might have some silly name that I call the whole class. "My chickadees, how do you feel today?" And they're like, oh, you're such a crazy old lady. It also seems like this poem is about

history in many ways, right? And again this issue of legacy and what you inherit comes up. And so it felt like, you know, the chickadee-students are the future. They're the on-goingness in the poem. Once I figured out who the speaker was talking to, that she was talking to the future, some things in the poem that had been really recalcitrant finally came together.

So are these American students?

No, the way that I conceived them is they wouldn't necessarily be American students, they would be international students, right? Actually, I did have some very specific students in mind because I had been teaching in Namibia. So they're actual people and they're these amazing Namibian students who are all much smarter than I am because they're there in, you know, their fifth language writing poems.

Right, right, right. Yes. Sorry, not American students, clearly.

I mean, it's a dense poem, it moves around a lot. So there are multiple points and that was one of the things that was a concern; like, God, this poem is so long; it shifts time; it goes through a bunch of different places… how will the readers not get absolutely lost? So if there's some getting lost, that's my fault, not yours.

No, I never got lost. I did do a certain amount of Googling for some of the words and names; you're not afraid of throwing in words that we're not going to know.

I love that.

Musical instruments, for example. I learned a lot about musical instruments that I'd never heard of.

I talked about that the other day with students. It's very strange to me that with so much contemporary American poetry, the idiom has narrowed, and part of it's because, our English is dumbed down by the absolute stupidity of the media and the inch-wide band width of social media. It's like, you know, we have this enormous language and we use this much of it [*indicates half an inch with finger and thumb*]. And it's really odd to me because we're at this moment in time where it takes you five and a half seconds to pick up your phone and Google anything – and my students are often reading things on their phone, right? So you're reading on your phone, but you didn't want to look up the word! All you have to do is tap the word to find out what it means! So I feel like that's one of my missions as an English language writer, to savor the breadth and the temporal elasticity of English. You know, words like "Orts and Slarts" –isn't

it terrific that you can have weird Anglo-Saxon diction and you can have it next to, you know, something very Latinate or something very pop cultury. It feels like these things actually can all go together.

Yes, the titles are one of the things I love about the book. Leaving aside "Fado", the joke of which I'm afraid I missed, they're beautifully chosen. "Ill-starred" is another wonderfully chosen title.

Titles are hard, yeah. They take a long time.

You know, the connections in that poem between a skiing accident and a star-fish. It's not an obvious one, of course, but it worked – and then there are also connections between the poems themselves; as with the description of what happens to the star-fish. I see connections with the wonderful long poem about your mother – and the scene with the oysters – the sensuous experience that recurred.

I'm glad that you saw that. One of the things that was interesting as a process was to sit down and put this collection together as a book. And to figure out where certain poems would go, because I don't tend to write with a "project" in mind or, you know, a specific "question". Rather, I tend to write for a period of time and then I assume that all those poems – because they're coming out of the same mind in that period – will have some connection. It's just not always obvious to me what that's going to be. And so then I've got this book's length worth of poems. I feel like I'm sort of done with something, but I'm not quite sure what that "something" is – and so I'm laying it out and saying, ok, does it actually work together? Is it just a miscellany or is there actually some common thread that's tying things together? And if there is a thread, what are the ways to make that resonate in the most interesting ways? There are imagistic connections which are not intentional at the time of writing, but that afterwards one sees them and it's like, oh yes, there's all of this marine life that I didn't intend to put there, but there it is.

I'm looking at influences that might be behind them, and one that struck me is, – well, are you fond of Tennyson? Because I feel there's a Tennysonian richness here, even if the only actual quotation I could see was the phrase "the rainy Hyades" from "Ulysses".

Yeah, you know who saw the Tennyson connection here first is Joshua Mehigan. So yes, I love Tennyson, I love the big experimental guy poets of the late 19th century – you know, Tennyson and Browning, and a little later on Hardy. I think Hardy's influence is probably not very obvious here, but Hardy is some-

body that I go back to over and over again. But I would say, the thing about Tennyson and Browning as influences is that for me here they're channeled through somebody like Anthony Hecht.

Okay.

What interests me is the way in which a lyric poem can be also dramatic. Anthony Hecht talks about this in a really lovely way in the book-length interview that he did with Philip Hoy, in the Between The Lines series published by Waywiser Press. Hecht talks about his own experiments in poems like "The Venetian Vespers", trying to figure out what to do beyond the lyric. Like, what could a lyric poem do other than simply express a sensibility having this, you know, epiphanic moment? And that's something that, of course, we see in Tennyson, of course, we see in Browning. And that to me is a really interesting question because again, it's like, how can you get all of the emotional intensity of connecting with a lyric voice in this vulnerable moment of experiencing something, this very human moment. But at the same time, how can the poem do more than simply say: I had this realization about myself. How can the poem be something that is dynamic and builds and maybe goes back and forth in time?

Yeah. Yeah. Venetian Vespers is a wonderful poem, isn't it?

It is! Walking around here in Venice, I keep feeling like I'm sort of bumping into Anthony Hecht's ghost, and of course bumping into Brodsky's ghost. As one does.

Did you ever meet Brodsky?

No, I never met him. I met – I can't remember, maybe I told you that I met Anthony Hecht? I was a student and my husband and I drove him and his wife to the airport and it was a little terrifying.

I have a great debt of gratitude to Anthony Hecht because it was through him that I got involved with the West Chester poetry conference. Because he, when they had a seminar on him, he gave my name to the organisers – and then he – it was a seminar, as I say, and for the first session, he sat in on it, which was a little intimidating.

I can imagine.

Then I think he realized that and didn't return the next day.

Yes, I wish that I had been, you know, more articulate, not just a star-struck graduate student and had been smart enough to ask him intelligent questions...

I know what you mean. And now I'll do my best to conclude this conversation with a reasonably intelligent question. Another thing I was thinking of asking you – we've talked about sounds, we've talked about a dog's sense of smell – there's a great deal of playing with synesthesia in your poetry. You know, the way you describe music, sometimes it's as if it's a meal. "The golden-fleshed / Bosc pears of Bach, each bite of the Goldbergs / releasing a little gush of nectar / into my blood stream". So music is obviously important to you. Do you want to say something about that?

Well, there's this toss-up for me: am I more drawn to visual arts or am I more drawn to music? My father was a visual artist and so as a child I think there was always this sort of feeling that I would probably be a visual artist of some sort as well. And it was not until I was older in life that I really started to listen to music more seriously. And my husband is a pretty serious weekend musician, so I have the pleasure of living with somebody who knows a lot about music and he plays well and, you know, plays guitar frequently and is always listening to new music and many genres. I do feel like I do have the experience of being a failed musician. I'm not a piano player, but I did go off to musical school; I went to conservatory for two years as a singer and actress and – and I flunked out. So in some way it was this – this kind of heartbreak. It was actually at that point when I turned to poetry. I had flunked out of musical theater school basically and I was like, well, here I am, nineteen years old, all washed-up! And what will I do now with my life? And I started writing bad angry poems… and that got me to reading more poems … and that's how it goes. So I feel like in some ways, music was the thing that I wasn't good enough for. It's always held this appeal to me for this reason. And who can explain how music works on us, right? We just don't know; it really is the most mysterious thing. We listen to a piece of music that is moving to us and it reduces us to tears. I mean, this happens to me frequently. What is happening? Is it just my parasympathetic nervous system being triggered in some way? So I think, you know, the mystery of that response is really wonderful and beautiful to me and meaningful, and it feels like there are ways in which poetry can approach that. How is it that some combination of words can take us to this place where we're just absolutely moved? How can that happen? Maybe we can step back from that and reach back to that idea of exile. We're so frequently exiled from our own emotions, and everything in the world conspires to make sure that we are ever more exiled from our emotions every day. It seems to me that music is the fastest way to suddenly be brought

up short by our emotions. But maybe, maybe a poem is the next thing to that. A poem can stop you and suddenly flood you and make you realize that yes, I do feel this thing and, you know, I'm not always exiled from what I am and from what I feel.

A good way to end our conversation.

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