

Review of *The Sea & Beyond* by Laury A. Egan

by Colleen Powderly, *The Centrifugal Eye*, December 2013

An Extended Pleasure

... Laury A. Egan's new chapbook, *The Sea & Beyond*, uses extended sonic pleasures to create a fresh, new song about the sea and a powerful meditation on the unknowable; she fashions showpiece jewels of sound and rhythm which bring me new visions of these two often-treated subjects, and does it without a single reference to diamond-lit surfaces, sapphired depths, or any of the usual images I've read.

"The Sea"

In this nine-page poem, Egan uses personification and sound to reveal the all-consuming energy borne of the sea's vastness. She doesn't speak of its beauty, but emphasizes its unknowable power and humankind's insignificant efforts to encroach on it. In the poem's opening stanzas, Egan dashes old notions of the sea. She shows its vastness: "Some say there are five oceans and many seas; / there is One." She also uses the non-gendered pronoun it rather than the traditional she throughout the poem; this choice reveals the poem's intention to make a new, different definition of Earth's waters. She reveals a profound conflict between land's stolid solidity and sea's constant motion, summing it up with: "The sea includes. The land excludes. / War is tacitly declared."

Making the Sea "Be"

Egan creates her sea as a sentient being. Throughout the poem she endows it with emotions and the stealthy intelligence of a patient, knowing adversary. This sea plays "little games," like sinking the Titanic, finds amusement in maritime battles like the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and lunches on wrecks; Egan calls it:

A black witch hungry for
the taste of men and ships, whose maw spits steel,
timber, masts, and braces in search of
more tender human fare.

She goes on to say the sea tolerates fish and "doesn't mind that big fish eat little fish. / After all, in time, it intends to swallow the land."

The sea's patience is tried by human incursions on its edges:
And though we wish to think we tame the sea,
this is a huge folly for it is a brute attacker,
hacking with green cold fingers at docks and jetties,
dykes and walls, its hiss and moan a product
of its frustration.

.....

Flaunting our technological prowess, we nibble
at its edges until at last the sea raises its hand
and smashes, reminding us who's boss.

Indeed, the future Egan envisions for this sea is one in which waters will conquer Earth, will one day reclaim all land. Toward this end, the sea's primary mode is patience, which in turns forms its primary method of attack:

The sea has designs on Earth and is stealth
itself in its slow conquering.

.....

[I]t has secret plans for New Orleans, Charleston, Boston,
New York; the coasts of New Jersey, Delaware,
Florida, and the Carolinas.

.....

It knows there is no need to hurry.
Relentlessness, its primary virtue,
will eventually be rewarded.

Sounds of "The Sea"

Egan's gift for musicality is superb. She uses rhythm and alliteration to great effect throughout the poem; witness her Whitmanesque naming of the sea's winds:

It is fond of its breezy friends: Nor'easter, Typhoon,
Meltemi, Monsoon, Hurricane, Bora, Tremontana,
Foehn, Chinook, Mistral, Levante, Sirocco, Tornado,
Baguio, Buran, Santa Ana, Harmattan, Khamsin,
and Simoon; allies against the land.

Egan also creates striking rhymes. As I read this stanza aloud, I am delighted by its hard and slant rhymes:

The sea knows when to sleep, to murmur the deep
womb-like shushes that keep us near, that lull us
to hear the thrumming of its light-lipped snores,
that soothe the screech of our raucous lives.

Particularly well-done here is the repetitive S sound which ends the third and fourth lines; snores and lives contain very different vowels, but when spoken these vowels are not as strongly heard as the words' pluralizations because of Egan's rhythms and their occurrence at the end of a stanza filled with internal rhymes: sea / sleep / deep / screech, near / hear, shushes / lull us / thrumming / raucous, and for variation womb / soothe.

A True Poet's Choices

Egan's text is centered throughout the poem; this impresses me as a deliberate visual imaging of a shoreline. She also varies her stanza length from two lines to twelve, creating an echo of waves' variations as they come to shore. And her word choices are in some cases deceptively prosaic; the first time I read the poem I was annoyed by its often prosy wording, and I questioned her juxtaposition of images. But as I returned to "The Sea," I began to understand Egan's choice of mixtures as a mirror of the sea's seemingly endless variety. The more I read this poem, the greater my esteem grows for its author. By the time the poem ends, not with a climax, but with a final definition, Egan earns my respect as well as the poetic right to her final claim:

Paving the way to a meager understanding
of all that is beyond, the sea is our world's infinity.

Such a huge claim in the hands of a lesser poet would be nearly ridiculous. In Egan's hands, however, it is believable despite its stunning audacity. She is to be congratulated for this achievement.

More on Infinity

The final lines of "The Sea" create a perfect introduction to "Beyond," Egan's four-page meditation on what lies outside humankind's ability to know. Like "The Sea," this poem uses personification from both the natural and human-constructed worlds to make available what is profoundly incomprehensible.

Egan opens with the age-old reference to beyond the horizon, makes it concrete with an image of ships moving toward it, then moves in a new direction, attempting to define beyond in a new way. She renews many natural images to accomplish her goal; among them are comets, clouds, and the ancient memories of birds. She manages some delightfully fresh treatments; witness: "Fog proudly believes itself to be / a distant relative, and Autumn leaves intend to be buried / there forever."

A Kaleidoscope of Images

Egan continues defining the realm via natural imagery using wind and electrical storms, mountains, and the pairing of whales and dolphins. She transits beautifully to stanzas on the inadequacy of human-made ways of reaching beyond by juxtaposing oak trees with skyscrapers, then moving to telescopes' and microscopes' inadequacies.

Next she moves to a variety of images, each of which forms a kaleidoscopic piece in my mind's eye. The most surprising of these is:

From within a cage, everything is beyond.
Offices, jungles, and submarines are the same.

Stanzas on states of consciousness, the concepts of eternity and infinity, and the inadequacy of mathematics, geometry, and time tell what beyond is not. Egan favors natural phenomena like sunsets and moonlight to get to the edge of this unknowable territory. She also links sea tides and symphonies, makes them tools for near-understanding. Then she reveals the closest answers to this mystery she can imagine:

Air, weaving
through stalks of bamboo;
the absence that is a presence, lurking
in quiet places where we never look.

She suggests the beyond might be sensed by a poet “when he loses pace with his words / and is swept away as on a river.” Finally, she paints death as a movement toward beyond:

Perhaps when we are most weary
and have lost the shape and thrust of life,
in the moment between when we cease
and begin again, we will see beyond.

Beautiful Sounds

“Beyond” is clearly a sister-poem to “The Sea” in its use of personification and its accumulative imagery, and like the longer work contains some beautiful sounds. The most striking passage is:

In symphonies, the silent spaces
between notes, the rests and pauses,
sing its song, as do the tides,
who croon lullabies to the beyond.

The rhyming of song and beyond here is quite pleasing, but what elevates the stanza’s beauty is its consistent use of soothing S sounds. Egan’s sonics in this poem, while not as consistent as in “The Sea,” combine with her imagery to create a new and different attempt to decipher the indecipherable.

The poem’s sole failure is in its length; “The Sea” piles up images at such length the weight of their accumulation allows me to feel the enormity of the sea’s power. “Beyond”’s shorter length does not allow its imagery to accumulate as effectively, and so as a reader I am not fully carried away to the indescribable space where I think Egan wants me to go. Still, “Beyond” has much craft and fresh imagery, and is well worth reading.

Both Egan's chapbook and Merrifield's collection bear treasures for the reader. They bring new, different ways of looking at the world and its spaces. *Attaining Canopy* introduced me to a part of Earth I've known little about, "The Sea" redefined my notion of Earth's waters, and "Beyond" gave me a glimpse past earthly existence. How much more can I ask of an afternoon's reading? Not a thing, because these poets' jewels are enough.