



Review of *Habitat* by Bashabi Fraser

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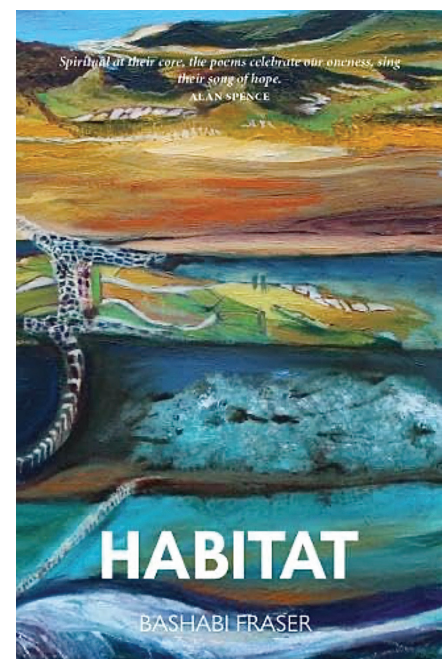
Bashabi Fraser. *Habitat*. 2023. Edinburgh. Luath Press. 127 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-80425-093-8

The book reviewed here, Bashabi Fraser's *Habitat*, is a poetry collection centred around our planet — its richness, beauty, and the necessity to protect it. Alternating simple, straightforward style and highly metaphorical poems, it oscillates between a fascination with the earth's landscapes, fauna, and flora and a more rational concern over dangers threatening it, like deforestation and climate change, or a preoccupation with other universally encountered problems, such as colonization and exile. Whether the tone is one of wonder or reflection, most of the poems display remarkable aesthetic innovation that combines unusual imagery, unconventional rhyme patterns, and an occasional recourse to intertextuality.

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It's all in the title. Bashabi Fraser's beautiful poetry collection titled *Habitat* is about the planet we inhabit: its mountains, its rivers, its forests, and its (animal and human) inhabitants. Composed of an introduction by Joyce Caplan, sixty-eight poems divided into four parts — 'Prologue', 'Birdspeak', 'Cattery', 'The Distant and the Near' — and an epilogue (which also comes as a poem), it is in turn, a warning about dangers facing the earth, like deforestation and climate change, and an ode to its creatures.

Depending on which of these two messages they seek to convey, the language of the poems can be very simple and 'to the point' or highly metaphorical. In 'Deforestation', for example, Bashabi writes:



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Every day you calmly clear
Vast swathes of virgin forests that stand
Between you and your destruction.
So twelve million hectares
Disappear every year
(‘Deforestation’, p. 22)

In this poem and many of those which constitute the part titled ‘Prologue’, aesthetic considerations seem superfluous in comparison with the seriousness of the issue raised; inviting the readers to reflect about this and take action demands straightforwardness and clarity. ‘Birdspeak’ and ‘Cattery’, however, seek less to raise awareness about the necessity to protect our planet than to elicit a sense of fascination at the beauty of animals. In ‘Birdspeak’, birds are in turn represented as poets (as in ‘Sonnet from a Crow’), thieves (as in ‘The Crow’ and ‘The Glasgow Thief’), or lovers trying to seduce their beloved (as in ‘Serenading a Peahen’); in ‘Cattery’, the feline pet to which this part is devoted — the cat — is compared to ‘a gymnast’ and a ‘ballet dancer’ (‘Mishti: Our Black Cat’, p. 91). The overall effect is something of the magic of childhood. To help create it, several literary devices are deployed, including personification and telling the poem from the point of the described animal, in the first-person singular:

See my quivering feathers lift
Delighted by this glamorous gift
As clouds swoop down to woo the sea
Which rings with their refrain
Come dance with me.
(‘Serenading a Peahen’, p. 65)

But magic can also be produced by a simpler sight than that of a peacock deploying its colourful tail to seduce its partner. In ‘The Curlew’s Egg’, the speaker, though an adult, is delighted by the discovery of a nest filled with eggs, as the title suggests:

I found this egg, large enough to fill the hollow
Of my hand, cold and abandoned by a curlew
Destined to be the star collection
Of my sawdust trophies – a lion king
Brushed beautifully by the light brown tales
Under dark brown splotches, awaiting unravelling
(‘The Curlew’s Egg’, p. 44)

Particularly innovative and surprising in this collection are the rhyme patterns. Though many poems are written in couplets or in free verse, others offer unusual and diversified rhymes. In ‘The Sprightly Sparrow’, the pattern moves from ‘abba’ to free verse to ‘triplets’ (aaa bbb ccc) and eventually ends on ‘imperfect’ couplets:

At a playful speck of life,
Which seems beyond their care and strife,
A presence which traverses the sky, heralds the dawn,
Titters incessantly, rocks the corn,
Whom footsteps astound and fireworks confound,
A loveable little symbol of caprice

Darting and flitting through life like a breeze.
(‘The Sprightly Sparrow’, p. 53)

Juxtaposed to the approximative rhymes ‘caprice’ and ‘breeze’ is the line that ends with ‘confound’, standing solitary, rhyming with no other. Other poems are written in simpler rhyme-patterns; with its tercets (aaa-bbb-ccc), ‘Come Robin, Come’ reads like a lullaby:

Eat Robin, eat
The crumbs at your feet
Before you retreat.

Go Robin, go
Before the white snow
Fills the hedgerow.

Rest Robin, rest
My little redbreast
Curled in your nest
(‘Come Robin, Come’, p. 42)

We are in the quiet magic of childhood again.

If, in its audacity and disregard of strict conventions, Fraser’s rhymes remind me of Emily Dickinson’s verse, the magic with which they are filled calls to mind Hans Christian Andersen’s tales. Like the Danish writer, who turns toys (like the steadfast tin soldier) into heroes of his stories, Fraser can transform ‘trivial’ details into enchanting moments; this is the case with the already mentioned discovery of curlew eggs, geese crossing the street (in the poem ‘In Holyrood Park’), or a cat failing to catch birds (in ‘The Unreachable Dream’). While there is no evidence that Dickinson and Andersen did influence the writing of this collection, Fraser does explicitly pay homage to other poets, including John Keats (whose ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ she inserts as an intertext in her own ‘Nightingale Poems’), Rabindranath Tagore, and Edward Lear, to whom she dedicates one of her poems each. Interestingly, however, Fraser’s dedications are not limited to writers or well-known personalities, more generally. In an egalitarian move, she addresses in turn literary and historical figures and mere friends or acquaintances. She thus seems to affirm that hierarchies are less important than the bonds of esteem, affection, and compassion that bring people together. Fraser extends these bonds to animals, showing, in poems such as ‘Toffee: Our Ginger Cat’ and ‘Pages from the Memoirs of a Battery Hen’, how care can save creatures from suffering, offering formerly mistreated animals a new and happy life.

Indeed, the frontier between humans and the other creations on earth is very thin in this collection. In addition to the already mentioned and recurrent personification of non-humans, several poems that are seemingly about animals are obviously allegories about human relations — particularly racial and cultural ones. A striking example is ‘I Am Not Your National Bird Here’, in which the words attributed to a peacock read as an allegory for the history of ‘dark’ races, a history made up of enslavement and painful exile:

My ancestors were lifted
To cruise across seas, the aristocratic gain

Protected and paraded as the badge
Of beauty and honour.
Today I come
A diasporic peacock in a packaged cage
Born and bred for generations on a farm
(‘I Am Not Your National Bird Here’, p. 67)

Just like exile, colonisation is a recurrent metaphor in *Habitat*. In ‘As the Ice Melts’, ‘[t]he sea colonises the land’, so that ‘Towns and crops are surprised’ (p. 23); and in ‘Seals and Shags at Plockton Firth’, although the ‘vulture-like’ shags are contrasted with the ‘aimless, purpose-free/ Existence of their “other” race neighbours’ — the seals — both ‘races’ are said to ‘colonis[e] the rocks/ With diverse yet unclashing missions’ (p. 114). While the latter poem subtly decries racial prejudice and calls for harmonious, racially unbiased human relationships, the former one seems to argue that peaceful relations between people go hand in hand with a well-cared-for planet. And, whether for a happy planet or for happy inhabitants, encounters and respecting diversity are key. Fraser who, as a Scottish woman of Indian background, incarnates these values herself, also celebrates this diversity in her poems, where the lochs of Scotland meet the Ganges, squirrels cohabit with Bengal tigers, and English words are juxtaposed with Indian words like ‘Mohona’ and ‘Godhuli’. Footnotes explaining such words are provided by the author.

If Bashabi Fraser’s collection had to be summed up in two words, these would be ‘variety’ and ‘astonishment’. The speaking birds and rivers, the beauty of nature and its fauna, the unusual metaphors and rhyme-patterns make us simultaneously realise the beauty of our ‘habitat’ and the necessity to protect it. In other words, Fraser’s collection enchants us while also making us think, thus fulfilling, to my sense, two central functions of literature.

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