

I first came across Joel Weishaus's work when I joined a Yahoo group called WebArtery in 2002. It was devoted to "discussions of Web art or Net art", and had been established at the end of 1998 by Jim Andrews. I joined it because of my growing interest in new media literature, and I found there numerous experimental writers – Jim Andrews himself, Alan Sondheim, Jason Nelson, Lewis Lacook, David Daniels, Reiner Strasser, Millie Niss, Mez, Dan Waber, mIEKAL aND, August Highland, Michael Szpakowski... and Joel Weishaus.

At first, Joel struck me as an anomaly. Other people were producing work that really grabbed your attention, with all sorts of clever interactivity, visual acrobatics and sound effects, whereas Joel's projects seemed dense and crabbed by comparison. They had animated elements to them, but the animations were small-scale, low-tech and quirky – a black bird circling at the top of a page; an ugly mask-face shifting uncomfortably from one bloated expression to another; or perhaps a single word detaching itself from the middle of a poem and floating away into the distance. They occasionally had sound-effects too, but the sound-effects were rustly and hissy, as if you were hearing them on an old valve radio.

Above all, his projects were text-heavy. Lots of pages, each page with lots of words on it, and the words required an effort of concentration. There was an odd mixture of styles in the text: bits of poetry, descriptions of dreams, bits about Joel getting up in the morning or going for a walk, intercut with extracts from academic books, snippets of history, or musings on mythology, philosophy and geology. Sometimes one thing would interrupt another right in the middle of a sentence – then, after the interruption, the original sentence would resume where it had left off. "Invagination", he called it when this happened. Who were these projects aimed at? Who was ever going to read them?

Little by little, I started to like them. As I got to know new media literature better, it became apparent that some of the attention-grabbing sound-effects and in-your-face visuals were actually either inappropriate to the written content, or concealing the fact that nothing much was really going on. Joel's work was just the opposite: it wasn't showy at all, but there was a whole lot going on once you started to get attuned. It was a help that each project was published one section at a time over a period of months. It made them less monolithic. And Joel's "voice" came through more and more distinctively as each instalment arrived: musing, reminiscent, intellectual, philosophical and poetic; with a particular way of apparently setting off to talk about one thing, but then talking about something else instead; a particular way of developing a subject by wandering round and round inside it, turning things over, picking things up to examine them and then putting them down again, instead of attempting to pierce right to the heart of the matter along a single line of logical argument.

Coming to the Collected Poems from the new media projects, perhaps the first thing that strikes you is that by and large they are much easier to digest. Many of them are very short, and they're often based on observations of the natural world:

*As trees become bare, thin grass
appears, damp earth blossoming...*

or this:

*One rainy day at lunchtime,
a tiny grasshopper appeared
at my table, a good-natured,
respectable, quiet friend...*

The weather, the time of the year, trees, stones and small animals all make frequent appearances. These are subjects which often appear in haiku, of course. Weishaus is interested in Buddhism and Japanese culture generally, and he co-authored a book called *The Healing Spirit of Haiku* in 2004. Many of the poems in this book are haiku, and many more show a haiku-like sense that poetry doesn't always have to strive for big effects or build up to a memorable last line – sometimes small things are enough:

*Small ants, by the million
on the counter;*

*large ones climb the walls,
silent, like ninja.*

*What do they want?
How'd they get in?*

Contrast this with D H Lawrence's poem "The Mosquito" -

*When did you start your tricks,
Monsieur?*

*What do you stand on such high legs for?
Why this length of shredded shank,
You exaltation?*

or with Ted Hughes's "Gnat-Psalm" -

*O little Hasids
Ridden to death by your own bodies
Riding your bodies to death
You are the angels of the only heaven!*

Both Lawrence and Hughes are anti-intellectual, and in their poems about the non-human world they often make the point that the brain development on which Man prides himself, which he fancies makes him superior to the beasts, actually disconnects him from the natural environment and traps him inside a dying shell of self-awareness. But their poetry is also an attempt to overcome this sense of separation: they adopt an incantatory style, the aim of which is to work both themselves and us into a state of imaginative sympathy with the creatures they are describing.

In Weishaus's poem, by contrast, the ants remain perfectly distinct from their observer the poet: in fact the real subject of the poem is that moment of noticing-and-bafflement with which the non-human so often confronts us:

*What do they want?
How'd they get in?*

Hughes and Lawrence would have tried to suggest answers to those questions, but for Weishaus it is the questions themselves that matter, and the moment to which they point, that moment where the self finds itself challenged by the not-self.

Interestingly, Weishaus, like Hughes, is a student of shamanism, and writes about it in one of his poems, "Bear-Doctors":

*"Come!" The she-bear led the frightened young man to a cave.
There she revealed her human form...*

For Hughes, however, the shamanic belief that humans could transform themselves into wild creatures is an example of the kind of magical transformation poetry should be trying to achieve – he sees poetry as an alternative to science, an alternative to the dominance of the intellect, a means of reconnecting ourselves with nature. Weishaus, although he too admires the shamanistic connection with the natural world, and credits the bear-doctors with real transformative powers, does not attempt to claim those powers for himself or his poetry. His attitude towards the bear-doctors is that of a fascinated observer rather than a fellow magician – he wants to learn about them, not become one of them. It is essentially the same attitude he adopts towards the ants, or towards the weather, stones, trees, or raindrops other poems.

It would be wrong, however, to say that the entire collection is characterised by this same sense of poised observation. The tone is more varied than that. There are frequent glints of humour, moments of sexual attention, and perhaps most strikingly sudden eruptions of fury and disgust:

Upon seeing a Victim of the atomic bomb

*I can't look
without wanting to vomit
into the President's face*

One of the most shockingly memorable poems in the book is "Battle of Bloody Island", which recounts the slaughter of a Native American tribe by whites in 1850:

*Then earth split beneath my feet, people swam through the air,
I ran, heart punching my chest, eyes and ears sealed
to the screaming bleeding bodies.*

*...A soldier was staggering towards me gripping
a long thin knife on which was skewered **my sister!**
Laughing, spittle dribbling from his lips, he tipped
the blade, and her small body slid to the ground.*

The rawness and vividness of the writing here is reminiscent of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*; and it's an unusual note for Weishaus to strike, without any parallel I can think of in the new media projects. It does point, however, to a sense of moral engagement with history which is an important element in all of his work.

There are other elements in this collection which may come as a surprise to those who know Weishaus from his online work. There is a slanginess in some of the early poems -

*...well damn it anyhow, we was just there doin nothin, you know, standing around doin
nothin...*

- and throughout the book there is more direct speech than we might normally expect from this author:

"You live up the trail, don't you?"

*"That's right."
"Didn't rec'nize you.
Must be the hat."*

There is also a strong interest in the details and processes of manual work, especially in the section entitled "The Garden", which describes the creation of a Japanese garden in California:

*With pick and shovel find the broken
cast iron pipe, pry out old lead,
knock off rusty joints.
20' of 4" 40-schedule ABS sawed
and coupled with rubber collars...*

Elsewhere, however, those who have read the online projects will find a good deal of familiar material: Japanese art, Buddhist teachings, Native American mythology, geology, prehistoric archaeology, environmentalism, references to academic authors, and even, in some of the later pieces, the "invagination" technique.

By and large these poems are easier to read, less densely-written, than the online texts. They are less experimental in form, and correspondingly there is less sense of fragmentation and interruption, fewer sudden shifts from one style of writing to another. Having said this, it is noticeable that the last section of the book, "New Mexico", has some of the most densely-written pieces in it:

*Moments grow bare in an ossuary fishing for people,
dusting history's jaundiced millions, exposing riven
flames, churning sparse regrets.*

Hard to interpret, but there's a real sense of distilled poetic force in these lines. One of the best poems in the collection comes from this section and draws its inspiration directly from the online environment – "Your Name, This Net", dedicated to the new media writer, artist and experimentalist Alan Sondheim:

*I cry over the threshold, "It's all empty!"
Dark angels fly past wrapped in bodies of glass.*

*Look for your name in the depth,
In the darkness, in the rapture
of nothingness.*

The real point of similarity between these poems and the online projects is the way that they grow on you. Their effect is cumulative, and the more of them you read the more you feel that you are being brought into contact with a particular personality, a particular way of observing and thinking about the world - attentive and absorbed, committed and scrupulous, scholarly and humane.