

Earth Day for Elmer Fudd

By Denise Low

Book Review:

Of Some Sky, by Joseph Harrington,
Blazevox Books, 2018.



In *Of Some Sky*, poet Joseph Harrington's main purpose is ecological commentary, by way of pop culture. His previous book of poetry, *Things Come On (an amneoir)* (Wesleyan, 2014), shares the hybridity of this work but not the use of Hollywood's simulated realm of Bugs Bunny and companions. Harrington, a professor at the University of Kansas, enters the imaginary spaces of cartoons and makes his own soundtrack.

The poems vary widely. A riffle of the pages shows how agilely he shifts among formats: short lyrics, a long suite, prose, section poems—all forms united by a focus on the natural world.

Tex Avery is a model for the book, as Harrington writes in the opening pages, "The style and tone of the poem ["TEX AVERY, Environmentalist"]—and of this book—owes much to the work of that great animation pioneer." Avery helped develop Looney Tunes characters, such as Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, and Porky Pig. Joe Adamson, Avery's biographer, explains: "An often-quoted line about Avery's cartoons was, 'In a cartoon you can do anything.'" So, it seems, can Harrington.

Harrington can be playful. "Parrots of Nebraska" is an homage to the flyway—the geographic swath of the midcontinent—where birds migrate and also a route of the imagination. The poem begins,

The starlings could be rose-colored parakeets.
The crows could be white cockatoos if they really wanted to.

The mourning doves fly like the green parrots of Amsterdam.
The grackles screek like the parrot who lived on my
street in Berkeley.

The term “screak” is either the cry of a rat or the sound of metal scraping on metal, depending on the dictionary. This sound imagery is a break from plumage imagery, which continues to accrete in the poem:

The robins ought suddenly to appear as blue parrots
 form the canopy.
 The house sparrows might not be themselves today.

Hell, the starlings could be rose-colored *starlings!*

The flock of pigeons might just as easily be macaws.
 The gulls kettle like parrots far from the sea.

The conditional “could be” mood of verbs suspends the poem in imaginary space, creating room for acrobatics of the narrator’s vision. The ghazal-like pattern of end-stopped couplets gives each species a description, in imitation of bird field guides. In the penultimate stanza occurs the volta, when starlings defy comparisons and instead are literal starlings, but in fake colors. By the end, questions arise, such as, do parrots really kettle (spiral on updrafts of wind)? Why are gulls in Nebraska, “far from the sea”? (Franklin’s river gulls are indeed common.) Is this poem Harrington’s way of breaking down my logical assumptions? (Probably yes.)

The prose piece “TEX AVERY, Environmentalist” more directly addresses terms of Harrington’s underlying argument. The narrator, Avery, asserts, “The only thing I regret in life is maintainin’ that dadgum nature/culture binary.” More than repeat the Western philosophical nature/culture dichotomy, Avery enlarged it. He was a mastermind of the Warner Brothers studio, and he helped to create the alternate Loonie Tunes landscape that undermines factual ecological laws. Harrington goes on to satirize extravagance of the cartoon world in prose-poem form:

Speaking of live action footage of talking animals’ kooky, wetdream, rapidshare, cute little box social cupcake babies were the phrases “Wheeeee-doggies!” and “Let us all lip-synchronize

in advocacy for animated animals, brothers and sisters, before the comet comes to pick us up."

The poet assembles his own chatty cast of narrators but with a difference. They do not avoid the dystopian direction of nature's degradation. The "comet" will arrive and destroy.

In the tour-de-force of the book, the long poem "Earth Day Suite," the poet asks, "If Earth Day's today / what's tomorrow?" Arbor Day is the answer given in the poem, an intentionally shallow reply that shows the dearth of choices to improve global survival. Annihilation is a more realistic answer. The section that begins "Is Earth Day the New Christmas" satirizes misdirected do-gooder energy, as Harrington refers to "The global confectionary landscape," a belittlement of the iconic image of Earth Day, the pastel-blue globe. One day of parades does little to reverse the damage of, for example, decades of strip mining.

Wordplay does not leaven but rather deepens the book's impact. As promised in the beginning, Harrington uses early animation as a guide to his own style and tone. In the deadly serious "Earth Day Suite," one section uses Curly of The Three Stooges and Goofy to convey facts of extinction: "(there's not a lotta ocelots/ n-yuk n-yuk n-yuk)." Iteration of losses continues, as diction becomes more scientific: "brood parasites," "communal defecators," "fecunds," and "extirpateds."

Sections of the long suite range from deep cynicism to humor to beautiful moments, like a section about gulls:

Thousands of gulls stream
over the fly-overs so
they know it's fall.

The gulls do not fall.
The fly-overs do not fly.

If I could make words into gulls
I would do so. It would not make
me God, but it would solve
many problems.

All my words would go
one way only, up.

The fly-overs are gulled.
The gulls fly over, and out—

This recursive motion of words mimics motion of flocks. The noun “gull” transforms into the verb form “gulled.” “Fall” is a season and also the motion of a plunge. The word “over” shifts into the function of preposition, noun, and bound verb. Language follows the order of the natural world. Continuous repositioning of individual birds creates kaleidoscope patterns, like Harrington’s language. Despite the beauty of words and migrations, these lovely moments in the poem, the disastrous end is the same, “over, and out—.”

Of Some Sky reads like screeds of Old Testament prophets. Flocks of Amazon drones might replace Harrington’s gulls, but we have been warned. Harrington has thought through the ecological disasters of our time. This is not an easy book to read, but it is essential. It will sit on my desk through next Earth Day and beyond.

GET YOUR M.F.A. IN CREATIVE WRITING
& MEDIA ARTS WITH OUR FACULTY OF ARTISTS



Christie Hodgen, Hadara Bar-Nadav, Michael Pritchett, Robert Stewart, Whitney Terrell



Department of English, 5121 Rockhill Road
Kansas City, Mo. 64110
(816) 235-1305

<http://cas.umkc.edu/english/degree-programs/graduate/mfa/>