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Looking Through What Is Not

Kelly R. Samuels. All the Time in the World. Kelsay Books, 2021.

To show the way to the best flower patch, a honeybee performs a waggle dance for her hive. The distance and direction of the dance mimics the distance and direction to the best flowers to pollinate. Other bees who intend to accompany her to the flower patch will start to match her dance, performing with her to embody the way. Together, they will set off.

All the Time in the World—Kelly R. Samuels's first full-length collection of poems—reminded me of a waggle dance many times. Like a waggle dance, the poems perform extreme proximity: they place me, in her speaker's path, as close as (humanly) possible to the natural phenomena that populate the book. And like a bee matching Samuels's dance, I follow her into intimate views of nature under the insidious influences of climate change.

All the Time in the World takes a kaleidoscopic look at the ecopoem, taking many approaches to putting nature into words. In the opening poem of the collection, "Geographical Changes," Samuels writes, "Fragments make more sense, both visible and not." In so many ways, we fathom our climate crisis in fragments—through headlines and sound-bytes, witnessing events, seemingly disparate, that are actually deeply related. With the close attentions of line, phrase, and prepositions, relationships between fragments weave to make a coherent whole, and there we are:

all that matters coming off on our hands.

Because what does a poem have to do when it is about something dying, "Something like memory," fleeting, gone already? Among other things, the poems here record, suspend, speculate, collect.

Samuels's entanglement of *here* and *there* places us right where the changing shoreline gets personal. Samuels includes the exact geographic coordinates of where many of the poems take place. Nature is no abstraction, not when we're brought right to a site of its collapse. "Rewilding of Tidmarsh and Beyond" ends,

The stream begins with clarity, stones piled on either side,

and then frays at its edges, grasses bending and disappears from sight there and then returns here.

Later, in "From Here, There," Samuels writes,

That which can be viewed, can be walked upon so much more now that this vanishing

is taking place.

By upsetting our comfortable estrangement of *there* from *here*, these poems recognize that elongating our time on this planet is an act of imagination. It is through this same mechanism that I can come to understand that a water bottle I litter could be the very water bottle building out the edge of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Here becomes there becomes here again. Like the speaker in "Antarctic Moss," we think the moss beautiful whether or not it's a harbinger of warmer climes. So Samuels frustrates this beauty, *there*-ing what's here and *here*-ing what's there.

Samuels's prepositions let the sentence wind as an idea winds, and it's in those prepositions that we land. Rarely in a sentence do we regularly land there, but Samuels forces our comfort in the preposition by using them atypically or where we least expect them to be. A preposition means *dependency*, means *change*. But so does a salmon striving upstream, a branch that is growing or just snapped.

In "Incongruous," Samuels follows the bringing on of spring: everything *of* everything, "the light, greenish then green, issue of all/ the lush lawns north of," and finally,

This is not of winter—this thickening film—but spring and what we tell ourselves is necessary for a certain kind of beauty.

Samuels's preposition reminds me that it's in dependency that ecosystems operate. In the preposition, its non-space, we are right where the grass is: waiting on the dirt and the water and the sun until we tip—green—into spring.

Samuels elaborates on her vantage point, too, throughout her poems by reminding us to look through the negative view—looking through what is *not*. In "Isle of the Dead," the speaker imagines, transported underground, the rising tide under a seaside graveyard

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bearing the bodies away, "No gate or wall." In "Redrawing Various Maps," Samuels writes,

Signs read the road is closed. Though rather, the road is now no longer is a new slope into the sea.

What doesn't exist anymore exists again. Samuels vivifies the absurdity of the scale of climate change when she writes about the not-here. After imagining into the empty spaces of what's already extinguished, might we now turn back to what is still left and imagine it back into its flourishing?

Nature has no language, so how might the poet define, with accuracy, its speechlessness in speech? As Samuels writes, "[w]e watch it from the vantage . . ." So the vantage, itself, must be accounted for in the viewfinder. In *All the Time in the World*, Samuels accounts for it time and time again. The slowness of a caesura, the line loudly enjambed, the insistence toward what is *not* there, *not* here—these are among the poems' tools, that we might come to them, waggle dance with their subjects, look for what they look for. We meet them right where they are.

