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METAPHOR AND MEANING IN DAVID BROOKS' THE COLD FRONT AND ANDREW LANSDOWN'S WINDFALLS

David Brooks' *The Cold Front* (Hale and Iremonger, 1983) and Andrew Lansdown's *Windfalls* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), are attractive collections of essentially lyrical and personal poems in which metaphor and image are used to cross the boundaries between subject and object, human and external nature and the inner and the outer world. The titles themselves place the collections in the natural world, but also introduce connotations of human experience. Brooks' strong, tempered lines invoke an intellectual and emotional confrontation with the cold, sharp episodes of experience, and Lansdown's short poems do have the fresh maturity and ease of ripe fruit loosened naturally from the tree. As the poem "Darkness" suggests, Brooks is concerned with fragments of experience "that will not/alchemize to song,/that yield not/to the metaphrast." Lansdown finds in various forms of resemblance within and between the inner and outer worlds, a mode of metaphrasis that interprets one experience in terms of another. When, in "Nightfall" he hears in the thud of windfall fruit the "mute thud" of the young kangaroo that feeds on them, or sees the resemblance of a loved face in the grace of moonflowers, he performs the same act of interpretation and redefinition that Brooks performs in the complexity of "The Swineflower."

A simple reading of the two collections suggests that they illustrate two phases of imagism. But the same reading also points up how inexorably images of the external world become metaphors in the inner world of human consciousness. Lansdown frequently adapts haiku and choka forms and draws on direct observations of external nature in order, as his epigraph from Thomas Traherne suggests, to render "to things their due esteem." The result is poetry whose strength is the control and lucidity of image found in the work of Hilda Doolittle and William Carlos Williams. Brooks, in another phase of imagism, slides his images into another plane, so that *The Cold Front*

uses the deep, evocative images of T.S. Eliot, James Merrill or Gary Snyder. The difference, which requires a different reading, is seen by setting Lansdown's "Ibis" beside Brooks' "The Gap."

Stilts tread gracefully in the small-fish shallows.
Black shags stand on the sand-bar, shine
In the sun. Sandpipers poke on the shoreline.
Ducks dive in the backwater and shadows.

As we approach, peace departs; the birds freeze,
Then fly, crying, to where their fears end.
In the grasshopper-paddock by the river's bend
Hundreds of ibis roost in the ring-barked trees.
Again our presence sounds the common alarm.
Embracing the day-heat, the land-hot thermals,
They lift into the air, rise in gentle spirals.
As if even here in our canoe we could do them harm!

They circle in two loose formations: Ibis,
Gliding gradually, soundlessly away from us.

This sonnet illustrates well one aspect of Lansdown's work in which observation of external nature is dramatized in the first person address, and the distance between human and external nature is preserved during the process of showing their interaction. Apart from this, the interest of the poem lies in its formal shape and the crafted rhythm and sound of the poetry.

Brooks' "The Gap" absorbs landscape and human inscape in a complex, panoramic image:

On the pond path by Campbell's
amidst the wheel-ruts and the fallen leaves
a gap nothing fills

it gets late

birds
cross in the half-light
lugging their haul toward Tumut
Bimberi
Kosciusko
the great lake of silence beneath them

flight after flight after flight

To read this as a highly personal elegy it is not necessary to surmise that it was written in memory of the poet David Campbell (1915-1979) whose home country and poetic region are the Monaro uplands named in the poem. The plane of imagery shifts from exterior to interior with the third line, although "a gap nothing fills" does not seem

out of place with the natural images of wheel-ruts and fallen leaves. Without knowledge of anything outside the poem, the reader finds in the third line a signal that the poem is not purely an observed landscape, and begins to interpret natural images of fallen leaves, half-light and bird flight as images of death and the continuity of life.

Typically, the images in Lansdown's *Windfalls* do not require this kind of interpretation, but their objectivity is more apparent than real. These poems emphasize the fact that all language is a metaphor for human experience, and that the language used by the poet in talking about nature differs from the taxonomies of science only in that the metaphorical character of the latter is less obvious. *Windfalls* begins with the poem "Should I Fall and Fail to Rise" whose opening lines are:

> Early in the morning,
> before the wind takes up its broom,

and the poem proceeds to a series of objective observations and subjective interpretations:

> You can see where claws
> have carved cuneiform runes
> into the curve and crust
> of the dunes.

Later, the crabs' movements are described as "mechanical rituals" and the crab itself is "boxbodied like a hansomcab." The poem does not attempt a studied objectivity, and the kinship of even simple metaphors with the intellectually or imaginatively broader metaphors of surrealism can be seen in comparing the opening lines of this poem with lines by the surrealist poet Benjamin Péret:

> Le vent se lève comme une femme après une nuit d'amour.
> Il ajuste son binocle et regarde le monde, avec ses yeux d'enfant.
>
> [The wind rises like a woman after a night of love. It adjusts its glasses and looks at the world with its childlike eyes.]
>
> From *La Brebis Galante*

Lansdown's poem curbs the imaginative spread of its metaphors, and instructions for precise observation are explicit: "Look carefully, and you will see/the shells walk." Yet it must immediately explain the metaphor of "the shells walk" with the more precise

> Hermit crabs
> inhabit the reef — housed
> in periwinkles and whelks
> tritons and topshells.

The interpretive intellect cannot long remain outside the poem, which

intends to pay homage to the animal life on the beach. Some lines later the same cone-hatted crabs are described in simile and metaphor:

> Like initiates at a secret ritual,
> they dance in their white hats —
> the ku klux klansmen
> of the crustacean world.

The poem, with nine brief lyrics, reproduces in its forms some of the variety of the crustacean life on the shore, but the idea that minute observation is involved requires qualification: language metamorphoses the experience of observation into one of interpretation by the poet.

The final meaning of "Should I Fall and Fail to Rise" is intensely interesting. After the eight pieces in which, in all but one, human values interpret the phenomena observed, the last stanza demonstrates how frail and tenuous is the human dominance of nature:

> As I walk this beach alone
> I begin to realise
> should I fall and fail to rise
> they will whittle me to the bone.

The poem's final statement helps to explain why language so compulsively seeks to annex the external world in its metaphors, as it has been seen to do even in this poem that attempts a certain objectivity. In the end, it is only through the languages of science and the imagination that humankind has any control over external nature. There is emblematic force in Lansdown's poem, and in the second part of the epigraph he borrows from Traherne: "All things were made to be yours and you were made to prize them according to their value." This humanist idea sanctions the annexations of language by which things are made part of human experience, but only so long as the things are rightly valued. If the human mind controls external nature through the language in which it speaks about it, a failure in language indicates a loss of that control. The metaphors poetry uses in dealing with the natural world have their own efficiency in allowing the human imagination to retain its grasp on the external world. Science, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in *The Human Condition* (1958), now moves in a world in which mathematical symbols contain statements that cannot be translated back into speech. When the knowledge of science lies outside the language of the human imagination, humankind has lost effective control of the external world. The fate of the voice of Lansdown's poem, should it fall and fail to rise, images the fate of humankind if its languages lose the capacity to handle the forces of nature it attempts to manipulate.

The title of Brooks' "The Horseman" suggests an apocalyptic statement which bears on the meaning drawn out of "Should I Fall and Fail to Rise," but the poem requires a different method of reading from that used in reading Lansdown's poem. Where the I on the sea-shore spoke from a realistic and natural environment, Brooks' I inhabits a semi-biblical, semi-dystopian environment of the imagination, in which the holocaust of civilization is represented by a landscape emptied of all but isolated symbolic objects. The poem is in four parts. In the first part, the speaker, "sitting/high in the leaves" watches four horsemen ride "from the far end of the bible" through an overgrown allotment "off Phoebe Street." In the second part the riders eat "white bread/white cheese/the white flesh of pigeons," whose ascetic delicacy and simplicity evoke both a spiritual and subsistence food. The watcher sees "through the eyes of the last of them" fields of ripening grain. In the third part a dropped egg, and the ants drowning in it, image a destruction of nature. In the fourth part of the poem, the speaker comments on what has been seen:

> It was our fault
>
> we should have said
> the sun is a delicate globe
> no one should drop it
> we should have said
> without action
> there can be no true adoration
>
> we should have explored
> the full possibilities of language
> which include responsibility
>
> risking harshness
> risking poetry
> risking ultimate simplicity

This landscape is evocative as a painting is evocative. The reader does not need to find a hidden meaning for the speaker's sitting "high in the leaves," or in the speaker's comment "who would have thought it" on the diet of the horsemen. A number of obvious meanings which are all trivial suggest themselves; but it is the broad effect of the lines that is important. The voice of the poem is a survivor, but it is not known what form the survival takes: in the world of the poem it is only certain that the voice understands responsibility. The three failures of obligation, which apparently account for the visioned holocaust, concern responsibility for the natural world, "the sun is a delicate globe/no one should drop it;" responsibility for observing the mutual dependence of action and meditation; and responsibility towards the possibili-

ties of language. To single out harshness, poetry and simplicity as three possibilities of language does not confine language to its literary use, but implies many kinds of language communication including the scientific, the imaginative and the language of everyday use.

The last lines of the poem achieve a strange quiescence:

but we had been sitting
too long by ourselves in the sunset
and a great distance was leaning from everything

This indifference empties the world of humankind and its language. There remains only

the wind
or the time
or the silence

truly rinsing the stones.

One of the insidious powers of language is that it can suggest its own demise in metaphors that distract the mind from the horror implied in its demise. Against this, the conviction must be hastily summoned that the poetic statement of the possibility asserts the durability of art which can play with such possibilities.

Lansdown's "Should I Fall and Fail to Rise" is a literal statement that may be read as a metaphor of the human condition and human language within the external world. Brooks' "The Horsemen" is a metaphorical statement that may be interpreted as a literal statement about an envisaged world in which the human condition has no reality.

The majority of poems in both collections are concerned with less portentous aspects of the human and natural worlds, but in almost every poem the ultimate meaning points to an inescapable relationship between the two worlds, and the poems themselves often serve as a metaphor for that relationship. In a series of poems about a child's awed and reverent encounter with nature, Lansdown tenderly explores the human impulse to embrace the external world. In the "Good Catcher" poems, "mysweetson" and "In from the Garden" the natural world evades this capture with pain, or death, or in the discomfiture of the small and loving predator. Only rarely is the animal world described in a word appropriate to human artefacts, as when the grasshopper's bead of black vomit "lubricates its mechanical mouth." Human and external nature interact in "At One Purpose", in which old Mrs Shaw and the gum tree share a supple and sapling youth, and the boy "hops/like a little bird/about her." Almost all Lansdown's poems take place out of doors, reinforcing the metaphorical meaning of the title, and strengthening the cultural validity of the borrowed choka and haiku forms which originally were almost wholly restricted to natural images.

The spiritual dimension of Lansdown's collection is explicitly Christian, animated by love for the human and natural worlds and untrammelled by dogma which might, for example, offer an easy consolation for the death that is present in the background of the poems. Although the overt spiritual dimension of the collection also strengthens the validity of borrowing the Japanese verse forms, in which a religious element was traditionally central, the spiritual dimension does not extend to any suggestion of a mystical union between human and external nature. It is one of the interesting qualities of Lansdown's poetry that it stops short of the mysticism that is implicit in much of Brooks' imagery. Lansdown's images typically point up the discreteness of the units within both the natural and the human world, as when, in "While Watering Vegetables," one moth remains

> Scintillating
> above the broad beans
>
> Like the evening star
> above the quiet earth

By comparison, in Brooks' "Late Swim," the narrator retains a human psychological uniqueness, although, as in many of these poems, he does not maintain an identity discrete from the natural world:

> The storm-clouds
> are now small islands
> haloed by the moon.
>
> The only star
> not visible amongst them
> or floating in the bay
> is sleeping in my arms
> weighing no more than a bird.

There is an explicit political dimension in several of Lansdown's poems, which gives rise to one of the most interesting annexations of the natural world in the image of the dragonfly, or the "*caballito del diablo*," in the poem "One Day." The annexation is made possible by the conflation of apparently Chinese Marxist connotations in the English name of the insect with the infernal connotations in the Spanish name. The dragonfly's movements around the polling station, where the narrator acts as election clerk, are described in military terms: reconnoitres, blitzing, hovering, pilots. There is menace in the "occult precision" with which the insect "pilots between obstacles," "disappears," and "reappears." The narrator sees it as a portent:

Why has it strayed
to this dry bed of democracy?
It portends unremembered
but unbroken
alliances. *Caballito del diablo.*

When will the dragon
fly from our midst? . . .

Caballito del diablo: the devil's little horse.
One day it will return, bigger
and mounted with machine guns.

The compassion and the concern for the natural world that give the collection its dominant tone are challenged by an awareness of death which invades the human and the natural worlds and threatens the transaction between them. "Bush-Walking" comprises a three-lined stanza:

What manner of death
fills my body, that birds fall breath
less at my approach?

In "Doe and Fawn" an Indian antelope whose dead fawn dangles from her vagina is watched by zoo visitors, the women sharing a moment of sympathy with the animal that stops short of any mystical empathy in parturition:

From the crowd, women look on quietly,
ignoring the questions of their children.

Death is identified as a powerful opponent in "Except Trees" and "Salt in the Earth":

Trees defy death's gravity.
Past living they stand
silver and majestic, like monuments
to life.

In another metaphor, nature is arbitrarily annexed by language, for there is no reason why the blackbird rather than another bird should image death:

Death is a blackbird
(Not nearly
so rainbow-bright
nor raucous-sweet
as a crow)
and trees stick in his craw
like fishbones.

In its handling of the natural world, "Death is a blackbird" is as violent a metaphor as the surrealist image, "The wind rises like a woman after

a night of love," and they belong to the same order of imagination. The violence of the blackbird metaphor reveals the energy of the poet's opposition to death, just as the violence done to the dragonfly in that image reveals the strength of the poet's political feeling. A chain of visual and verbal stimuli has given rise to both images, but the ultimate use of an image depends on factors too complex to analyse. The reader can be certain only of the urgency that incited its use.

The natural world, of course, may exercise its power over human language. Lansdown's concern with sound and units of phrasing is frequently a response to the rhythm and chiaroscura of the external world as much as a response to inner psychological and emotional pressure — as was the concern of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, whose phrasing is evoked in this aspect of Lansdown's work. In "Wallabies Grazing," the first and last lines of the poem illustrate how the blended shades and movement of the landscape effect a blending of language:

> Bush and pasture
> brush and posture in sepiagrey
> and I —
> oh the freshandchill, hushandstill dusk! . . .
> Startled
> they standupandstare
> bound to the boundaryfence:
> looseshadows in a lostshape landscape

In "For the Force of Flame," a sonnet that also recalls Hopkins' characteristic work, the language of the camp fire not only invades the language of the speaker but is held to be of a higher order than human voices:

> For the force of flame, a thousand voices shout:
> In the moment of change, each leaf cries out,
> Leaps up redly, brightly eclipsing the white
> Stars, before flickering and fading into night.
>
> The moon is water-smoothed stone on a river bed,
> Shimmering beneath the streaming smoke. The crack and cough
> Of coals counterpoint the flames' stutter. Strangely enough
> I remember the voice of the fire, but not the things we said.
>
> We re-affirmed what we already knew: we do not agree on this,
> On that. How foolishly we darkened simple pleasures —
> Friendship, fire, roast potatoes and fish —
> With our convoluted talk. Life has its proportions and measures:
> I would learn them before my soul cries out to its Creator,
> Leaps, stuttering with joy and shame, up to my Saviour.

Although "cough" and "stutter" are human terms imposed on the fire, it is the image of the fire that controls the human image in this poem. And although several images come together in the last two lines, they do not coalesce but remain separate.

Lansdown, in this collection, is an imagist, and his imagism is typical of the clear, discrete mode of imagery that invokes connections rather than evokes unity. It is therefore observant of Traherne's injunction to render to things their due esteem. Nevertheless the poems constantly yield to the inexorable demand of human language that things be interpreted in human terms, and the tension that arises between the objectifying and subjectivist functions of language may be read as another level of meaning in his poetry.

The images in Brooks' *The Cold Front* are seldom discrete. They are typically metaphors originating in subjectivity and requiring subjective interpretation. This does not imply that meaning may be diffused beyond meaning because images are unstable. On the contrary, there is never any doubt what a passage means, but almost any passage defies paraphrase. "On Durras Beach," for example, opens with a statement of human perplexity and loneliness in confronting the universe:

> Another night,
> again the moon, self-hugged, self-eaten,
> rolling imperceptibly deathward.
>
> I stoke a small fire on the beach
> with driftwood and the gnarled
> roots of my sleeplessness
>
> and watch the wind
> weave through the flames
> the dark tongues of the cosmos.

Although there is no attempt to describe external nature objectively, imagery from the natural world invades the human world, as in "the gnarled roots of my sleeplessness," and later the self-hugged, self-eaten moon becomes an image of humanity, and the driftwood of the fire becomes the dry speculation in which the mind attempts to find enlightenment. Here external images annex the internal world and dictate the language in which it is spoken about, and there is an insistence on overcoming discreteness with unity.

The title poem could be a metaphor for a relationship that is passing through a critical testing period, but the paraphrase is unnecessary to establish the poem's meaning. The images, however, are not simply imaginatively evocative but require intellectual attention:

It was coming
the cold front
and the complex weather
we returned
and the difficult loves were waiting
the long conversations
with pain in the final sentences
winter
gathering her parcel for the victory

The effect of Lansdown's poetry is to emphasize human responsibility towards the natural world and especially responsibility to the language in which we talk and think about the natural world. The effect of Brooks' poetry is to indicate the resources of languge that lie in the external world. Paradoxically, by penetrating deeply into one natural image the poet outgrows a narrow subjectivity and reaches an intense but personal self whose comments have arresting meaning for others. Sometimes this language is in the sign that lives in action after it has become legend. This seems to be the meaning of Brooks' translation of Czeslaw Milosz's "Campo di Fiori" in which the public death of Giordano Bruno, the Italian philosopher burned in Rome in 1600 for heresy, is a wordless sign for the deaths in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw in 1943:

when Giordano
climbed to his burning
he could not find
in any human tongue
words for mankind,
mankind who live on.

Both martyrdoms are surrounded by gay indifferent crowds whose laughter and voices as they go about their daily life carry no meaning at all. Poetry finds its language not in the human crowd but in the events themselves:

Those dying here, the lonely
forgotten by the world,
their tongue becomes for us
The language of an ancient planet.

The intellectual force of much of Brooks' poetry depends on its sensuousness, on the knowledge of the self that is achieved by contact with the outer world through all the senses. The last two poems in *The Cold Front* are about the importance of this sensuous apprehension of one's being. "Although" ends with the assertion that sunset "still casts

its crimson on my heart/and rakes it with desire for the world," although the speaker has suffered through all the senses, and in emotion and mind:

and the greatest love I know
will never lift my worried flesh
very far from the bed that it lies upon

It is through the outer world, whose imagery penetrates the language of the poem, that survival is possible:

I shall keep from drowning.
While these things last
slow-worm, blind-worm, I shall still surround
myself and my family with light.

The final poem, "The Swineflower," is exhilarating in its sensuous interpretation and re-definition of mind and emotion. It is, for the moment, the goal of the rather austere and ascetic pilgrimage that images the earlier part of the collection — a pilgrimage that at times overtly recalls Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." The voice in "The Swineflower" revels in its voracious appetite for life:

I continue.
I tear at it and snort.
I slurp ostentatiously
letting it dribble from my chin.
I gulp great draughts of darkness
and they do not pain me.

This gluttony is not the selfish indulgence of an egotist, but the appetite and extravagant spewing of dehiscent nature. The poem ends:

Someday
on a patch of the heart-stained ground
you will find
in the lightening gloom
the swineflower, the carnivore orchid,
and know
that nothing is wasted,
that nothing in the long, hot tumult of the swine
is sordid,
not even the hunger I died for,
not even,
for all it has left bare or broken,
that strange seed,
of sunflower, starflower
flaring in your spine.

The transition from the self to the other in the final stanza is smoothly made and the I appears only in the phrase of absence, "the hunger I died for." "The Swineflower" is an interesting example of the way in which the intensely experiencing self can be totally absorbed by the external world, and in the process of this annihilation assert itself in its richest form of being.

Read together, Lansdown's *Windfalls* and Brooks' *The Cold Front* become the thesis and antithesis for an almost inexhaustible meditation on the significance of poetry in the human and the natural world.