

The Bees

Maurice Scully, *Humming*

(Shearsman 2009)



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Irish poet Maurice Scully has devoted a good part of his writing life to a multi-book project entitled *Things that Happen*, a series which consists of *5 Freedoms of Movement* (Etruscan Books, 2001), *Livelihood* (Wild Honey Press, 2004), *Sonata* (Reality Street Editions, 2006) and *Tig* (Shearsman Books, 2006). That series establishes Scully as an outstanding voice of the millennial turning, a musician of language and thought (a muse-ician) whose poetics embraces a lyricism both of the everyday and of the political forces of our times.

Humming is the first book to appear since that project concluded. However, the poetics established in that series are here even more deftly executed, even more delightfully buzzing with the song of colloquial speech, the angers and rigours of daily life, the music of a deeply reflective mind. Happenings and happenstance—the standing of things as accidentally thrown together—that nevertheless make a musical interplay—continue to drive this work.

Music is, as Fred Wah might say, at the heart of Scully's thinking. The divisions of the book are called Song, Ballad or Jam and the book as a whole is arranged like a musical score, such as a sonata, which develops through several movements various threads or musical

arguments and then ends with a Coda. It is also a passionate and loving book, a tribute inspired by the death of his brother.

The half-title page—which reads “Humming / [the words]”—adds a little jibe to this musical scenario, as if to say, Well here are the words to the music that you must already be humming.

At the heart of the heart of this book is the sonnet—a sounding, a mapping as in locating the submarine rocks of a coast—also the sounding of a man’s life, any human life, that fleetingly is here and fleetingly gone—by chance at no known moment—but that is composed nevertheless of fleeting sights and sounds—captured in ephemeral utterances and gestures. Transitory touch-downs like the grains of pollen collected on the bee’s legs as it zips from flower to flower. Connect these and you have the line of a coast, the line of a life, the line of a song or a ballad or a jam session. Or, indeed, a poem, as the Coda tells us:

A seam, a stitch, a line of tiny zeros in the fabric
through which twists *this* to *this*, fluid thread, un-
dancing thread, appearing/ disappearing, holding to-
gether what had not been, tight, fast, in place,
tacked in, a little way on. Drop by drop, grain by
grain . . .

POEM

“This piece of paper you have just been handed is . . .
Keep it. It advertises nothing, has no designs on you,
has come a long, long way, to here, in silence, in the
rain, free. As *you* are. You *are*. Now:
breathe . . .”

As if to say, the poem comes by chance as one’s life comes, it is a gift made of sips and glimpses.

Not that we should be fooled into thinking Scully is a casual writer, for he’s the most careful and attentive of craftsmen. These soundings are arranged with much thought and precision:

Grain by grain
 dust settles on yr
 bookstand. Listen.

Where to? Where from?
 Arrows – glints –
 shadowprints – the
 Dramas, one to five . . .

On slipping away
 you didn't collect
 your encyclopedia
 all those years

grain by grain
 (yr encyclopaedia)
 to keep you on
 yr toes you know

There is great formal variation in the work, from one-word lines, to quatrains to prose poems. Scully makes full use of the design of the page in order to score the performance of his music in the reader's mind.

Like a bee sipping and dashing from flower to flower the mind circles round in these poems leaving and returning to several motifs and eventually building in the book as a whole a crystal lattice-work of wisdom and sense. Onomatopoeic words and repeated refrains make one such thread—a rhythm section in this orchestra. The word “knock”, for example, kicks off the first poem which raises the question “who's there”, as in the old riddle (“knock knock, who's there”). We circle back to this thread later in the book:

. . . There is the sound of water. Where,
 where does it, this sound, come from? There
 is the sound of wind in trees.

Who's this knocking on your oaken door now? Dear
 Other, negotiate
 that.

As if to say who is on the other side of the sounds we hear and in particular who is on the other side of our words—what ghost rustles behind them, especially after death, and is not language filled with such ghosts?

Scully works another rhyme of ideas around the word *dot* (the materiality of ink on the page), the grains of pollen picked up from bees humming in flowers and the pollen from flowers used at a Neanderthal burial site in Iraq—the pollen being the only ink from which we get a record of the first known use of flowers in a burial ceremony 60,000 years ago.

Writing ink and the writing of life on the planet's surface is also an undercurrent, but it's writing that comes in dots and crystals:

you ever remember life's
 crystal tricks of light-in-
 shadow crystal tears crystal
 agreements memory's crystals

With a wonderfully moving prose poem on snow that reminds me of Francis Ponge, Scully brings us to another angle on notions of the crystalline:

Warmed by the earth below, the base begins to lose moisture by flowing off the tiny rays of its crushed crystals to the colder crystals of the snow above. Gradually an open space is formed different in shape: hollow pyramids that fuse together at their tips. Down here in this latticework of interlocking ice columns the air is warm, moist and still. The light that filters through is a pale bluish white. The only sounds are the scamper of little feet or the muffled movement of a predator above.

Such quieter reflective moments in the book are well balanced by spirited and playful romps such as the following medley on the words

just and *justice*:

just give us the money & go
 just give us the money & toddle off
 just do the job & do it properly & get paid & go, on the dot,
 on the button,
 just
 Just This Once
 just watch me pass the Aperture of yr True Judgement &
 and dance in that Tiny Spotlit Slit & stick out my tongue &
 give you the finger then I can sleep the Sleep of the Just –
 Can't. You. See. We're. Just getting by?
 So just skip-along off. Justice? *Hah!*

Scully is a consummate rhymester of sounds, ideas, sense, intellection;
 and his rhymes are always full of surprise.