Finding the right words

Liz Thomson • 06 September 2012



BookBrunch meets John Hudson, an award-winning poet and performer whose latest collection deals concisely with the biggest of subjects.
As career choices go, "poet" is up there with the most impractical. Beattie Zimmerman always worried about her first-born son's leanings in that direction and suggested he consider architecture. As it turns out, the poet who grew up to be Bob Dylan hasn't starved, and neither has John Hudson, who left school in Walthamstow, North-East London, at 17, determined to follow his calling.

"I loved the way poetry looked on the page," he recalls, amid the cacophony of Café Andaluz, a couple of hundred yards from Charlotte Square Gardens. He has just taken part in an hour of words and music at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, where Scots indie Luath showcased highlights from its autumn catalogue, which includes Hudson's poetry collection *Earth*. "I loved it when the teacher told the class we had to write a poem." He laughs, taking a restorative sip of Rioja. "It was probably laziness - you could fill up the page quicker!"

It would be fascinating to see Hudson's schoolboy efforts, though there's certainly nothing quick or lazy about his adult work. Its economy is striking, vivid images conjured up in just a few words; the commonplace in counterpoint to the uncommon; well-worn figures of speech shining with new meaning; the profound rubbing up against the everyday and, in the process, teasing out unconsidered layers of meaning. "I've no desire to write fiction - I can say everything I want to say in verse," he says. He has, however, written criticism, and when he's teaching, which he does often, notably in France and China, he sets his students critical assignments. "I might take them to a concert, Schubert chamber music perhaps, and then give them two hours to write a review. They'll say they don't know anything about it and I tell them that's the point - if they want to be critics they're going to have to find the right words."

In the poem which gives the collection its title, Earth is given a personality, "a huge personality… It's impossible to pin down and define."

I, Earth, third rock from Sun
hot stuff, fatal attraction,
Mister Magnetic…

I, Earth, the real 24/7/365…

I'm old,
some say venerable,
some crusty,
others vulnerable, in need of care…

We see Earth in terms of pigment (sienna, ochre, umber) and word association (terracotta, terra firma, terra nova); as a town in Texas ("eleven hundred souls, three hundred homes"); as the beginning and the end, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Lifecycle, recycle, "the death process", as Hudson puts it, the pain of losing a loved one (a number of poems are *in memoriam*), the ultimate acceptance of death, the realisation that life is "a staging-post on a journey"; life and death colliding in the flood waters of the Big Easy.

The collection ends with "Earth 2.0": Hudson dressing a crab (he is a great foodie) as he hears on the news the discovery of a new planet, Kepler 22-b:

Suddenly I feel lonely this night
and am struck that we will die,
all of us and every living thing,
everywhere; the Earth's days
numbered. This long journey,
on which the crab and I crawl -
though it walked sideways
and I uphill, while others sit still -
must end.

The ideas may come quickly to Hudson, but image, metaphor, pulse, metre, "the narrative movement" - all of it takes time, sometimes years, to marinate before he is satisfied. Even now, with the collection all but on press, there's a sense of itchy pencil and a writer with a desire for inevitably unattainable perfection. He talks of his "obsessive passion", what flamenco artists (the collection includes a wonderful evocation of Cordoba at night) call *duende*, roughly defined by Garcia Lorca as a dark creative force that surges up from the feet.



However, a few days after our Edinburgh encounter, and Hudson is off to France, to a chapel in the middle of nowhere for the St Clementin Bilingual Literary Festival. His sound and light installation, "Thirteen Souls in Search of a Light Switch", would seem to be in stark contrast to the intense and solitary creation of *Earth* and other collections, though it is another examination of time and eternity. One of the pieces is entitled "Marie Curie's Bad Hair Day".

There is, Hudson concludes, "a new angle on everything".

Earth ***by John Hudson is published by Luath***