

**Atsuro Riley, *Heard-Hoard*** (University of Chicago Press, 2021)

Reviewed by **Carol Moldaw**

Linguistically and sonically intense, emotionally buffeting, the poems in Atsuro Riley's second book, *Heard-Hoard*, share a "particular articulate pulse" ("Goldhound"). The diction throughout shifts from the earthy and idiomatic to the erudite and back; the syntax is dense, at once vernacular in construction and stately; and the phrasing is often fragmentary, as if snipped out mid-conversation. These highly orchestrated poems, offering complex pleasures to the ear, are nonetheless composed in a speaking voice—an utterly distinctive speaking voice:

*Stake your scrag of ground with what you've got.*

*Drag the hose (from front around to back) to soak the earth.*

*Plug in all the prongs to call the juice : to light the dirt to wreath the oak.*

*O Willa : watch your (writhing) living rise to shine.*

("Goldhound")

The signature beat is iambic, made more pronounced by the frequent use of monosyllabic words. In the three-line poem, "Rhythm," this rhythm—not specified but written in regular iambs—is the rhythm of receiving a thrashing, with the implication that for this poet the unfailing beat of a cane-pole, not the heartbeat or foot-tapping or the dipping of oars, is the origin of his metrics:

The time she bent to eat our dirt  
The cane-pole threshed her spine.

*Times I was made to bend to eat red mud (our dirt) her cane-pole  
threshed my spine.*

The dominant linguistic influence on *Heard-Hoard* is Old English; the poems are packed with compound nouns, kennings, sensory description chosen over the conceptual Latinate. The title itself is a play on "word-hoard," which comes from *Beowulf* and was used by Seamus Heaney in "North" (. . . lie down / in the word-hoard, burrow / the coil and gleam/ of your furrowed brain"). The change from "word" to "heard" is significant. It enlarges the treasure chest to encompass and voice *everything* that is or could be heard, whether it be the gurglings of a

river “[my *chokesome weeds, my crook, my lack, my epiphytes, my cypress knees . . .*]” (“Creekthroat”) or a song that would be sung by two brothers, “Had we voice! / . . . *our not-thought knowns —*” (“Duet”). A word-hoard, in Heaney’s usage, is the entire accumulated vat of language, brain-stored and available to the poet. A “heard-hoard” includes community: not only everything that has been heard, but also who said it and who heard it or overheard it or heard it secondhand.

Like *Romey’s Order*, Riley’s first book, the poems in *Hearð-Hoard* are situated in an unspecified but very particular geographic and cultural landscape: Southern, rural, wooded, rivered, impoverished, under-educated, prospectless, homogeneous. Homogeneous, that is, except for the poet-storyteller, whose mother is as not from there as possible:

Word said and word’d spread *She’s some flotsam*  
*from that load of ‘those’ what flooded here by boat.*

(“Stranger”)

In both books, it is a world bereft of fathers, a world in which boys can be locked in cellar-holes or carted off, and where girls learn that to be seen as “something” is not what it at first seems:

Some *thing*—  
(snared) (spat on) Thing  
being morelike moresoever what he meant.

(“Moth”)

While the otherness of the poet and his mother are central to *Romey’s Order*, which presents the child Romey’s view of his world, *Hearð-Hoard* fleshes that world out, giving its inhabitants their own sometimes interlocking stories and voices.

The first two poems of *Hearð-Hoard* establish Riley’s purpose and set the scene for all that follows. The first, “Crackler,” reads like an *ars poetica*:

## Crackler

*What came to him to seem the core*

*(the pulsing core)*

*is wefted, warped: a lit*

*meat-mesh of heards*

*what tales he'd gnawed like seeds like sparks*

*live ember-words*

*(lucernal core)*

*—red (gold) filaments sting and thrum*

"*Heards*" — "*what came to him to seem the core*" — are not a "mish-mash," they are a "*meat-mesh*." And just as the "*tales*" heard are not passively consumed, they are "*gnawed*," with its suggestion of the listener being starved for them, so the "*live ember-words*" don't sing and hum, they "*sting and thrum*." This calling up of regular usage only to intensify it with a tweak creates an urgency that distinguishes the language and sensation throughout *Heard-Hoard*.

The initiating light in "Crackler"—the "*sparks*," the "*ember-words*," the "*filaments*"—in "Call" becomes a beacon, "the lamp that lamped our night our dirt," a "blackening (kerosened) cattail held high." There is now an "us," the listeners, and a "story-man," but instead of the "lured and drawn" listeners forming a circle around the storyteller, as one might expect, it is the storyteller "encircling us binding us by lard-torch and ditty." And, crucially, it is the stories of those gathered that the storyteller tells: "our night our dirt"; "our pulse"; "our (crescendo-timorous) amphi-glade of bug-chirk, burgeon." Written from the inside for those who are also inside them, these poems draw the reader in without narrative scaffolding.

In “Call” we get only bits of stories: first, the beginning of phrases that feel overheard, much like the bus passengers’ conversations in Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Moose”; then, lines that sound as if they are pulled from subsequent poems:

*So.*

*In the beginning.*

*And it came to pass.*

*Wait’ll I tell you.*

*—Some say what she’d gripped right then wadn’t vine but bullsnake.*

*—Hadn’t they clung tooth and claw to branch and bark.*

*—When the creekbend child got beat got bided fresh his mama broke her switch*

*—Damned if dog-daisies beanstalks didn’t fank up in the spokes.*

That only one of these lines reappears later is, I think, a signal that the poems in *Hearð-Hoarð* are only part of a larger unending story, a story too large to be completely told in any one collection.

The essence of the spirit of *Hearð-Hoarð* (the “radicle,” as Riley likens it) can be gleaned from “Ladder,” one of the last poems in the book. Written in the voice of a recurring character, Johnny Pep (“shrapped home from war,” “Element”), each of the poem’s eight lines recounts a harrowing Pep experienced as a P.O.W. along with his response to it, and each ends on a dash—the steps of the ladder:

*When they flang me down that hole I clawed for home—*

*When they sealed the seam with clay: sucked roots and ore—*

*When my gut would grind would groan of lack I voked some meat—*

With the last and parenthetical line, the ascent is complete:

*(When rows of welts (still) grave the mind the mind will climb.)*

The redemption inherent in these poems is inextricable from the textured guttural language in which all is expressed. I can’t think of a poet writing right now more original, more true to his internal tuning fork and singular vision.