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 wreathe 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 iambics—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 choke some 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 Heard-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, Heard-Hoard fleshes that world out, giving its inhabitants their own sometimes interlocking stories and voices.

The first two poems of Heard-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-timbrous) 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:

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So.
In the beginning.
And it came to pass.
Wait’ll I tell you.

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—Some say what she’d gripped right then wasn’t vine but bullsnake.
—Hadn’t they clung tooth and claw to branch and bark.
—When the creekbend child got beat got hided 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 Heard-Hoard 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 Heard-Hoard (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:

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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.