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A web of entanglements



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No Longer Alone, Allen Fisher (74pp Spanner)

The idea of 'planetary boundaries' was first proposed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre ten years ago. It's an analytical framework for highlighting the risks we run as a species, and its assessment of our planet's health is alarming. Fisher is well versed in this research. In his latest work, *No Longer Alone*, he refers to a number of the areas where we've entered the high-risk zone, for example that of biogeochemical flows. Fisher writes:

this is a particular situation
some parameters are fixed
phosphates run-off into oceans
towards our depletion limit

It's a crisis which involves all of us, the result of our personal daily activity, the 'scalable quantum rhythms of our lives', as Fisher says. It's a predicament in which 'the erasure cycle is a function of our tipping point/we are no longer alone'.

No Longer Alone is full of Fisher's characteristic dark humour. There are some bitingly acerbic phrases: 'the manipulated battlefield shopping dessert', 'retch yield', 'to the next bar the next glut box', 'layered paradise in the squelch lounge', 'coins of happiness in their mouths'. He parodies the idea of colonising other planets as an escape route from the mess we're making of this one.

The poetry is, like all of Fisher's 'facture', multi-layered, a collage of themes rich in associations and connections, words and phrases recurring throughout in a web of entanglements. As elsewhere Fisher appropriates the concepts and language of science:

at a dinner the questions about the Cartesian subject
substance, and the signifier,

how the bacterial community determines composition
the soil content of antibiotic resistance genes

we drive proton-spin quantum jumps by a magnetic radio-frequency field
in a storage device with a homogeneous magnet
enable the measurement of the spin-flip probability
as a function of the drive frequency

sampled a plate of coleslaw
to call into question what we were starting to learn
to break away from the 'ethic of presence'
and the 'nostalgia for origins'

The text makes 'quantum jumps', 'spin flips' in ways which open up various possible readings while constantly deferring closure. The plate of coleslaw is a typical Fisher use of bathos, a counter to the abstractions in the lines which follow. Ground for optimism seems limited. As Fisher says in a later poem: 'we shiver in ontological quiet/on an edge of knowing nothing'.

Along with the text, *No Longer Alone* contains nine colour photographs, abstract images of moving lights photographed at night. The pictures are by Fisher's partner Paige Mitchell, from her work *Power Displays: New York Lights* (2010). They have a particular relevance to the text.

Poem twenty-three of *No Longer Alone* speaks of 'rows of red lights blue rectangles/moving yellow flashes white lights,' and includes the lines:

the ends of human kind
contingent on given nonentities
turned the lights out you could see many of the
stars but not read the signs

in smell and touch as you imagined them
lost in the effects of lit cities

The poem suggests a gathering of 'galvanised representatives' at the UN, there to 'demand the rich world provide against damage'. But these delegates are 'beyond dominant hearing loss', their demands 'a nonlinearity of thermal expansion', the whole event 'a flush of lift and overwhelm'. The phrase 'many of the stars' in the passage quoted above could be read as referring to the big names attending a UN event, a prognosis for the future eclipsed by urban light pollution.

No Longer Alone is one of the best books of poetry I have read this year. You can be ordered a copy from <https://allenfisher.co.uk/recent-publications/> [<https://allenfisher.co.uk/recent-publications/>].

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