

How to find a word: *Birds of the British Isles* by Philip Terry (Red Ceilings Press) and *English Trees (a brexit poem)* by Peter Jaeger (zimZalla)

Philip Terry's *Birds of the British Isles* is a little book, 10x15cm, and a set of 50 riddles to which the answer is always the name of a bird found in Britain. It's a fun little game to play. Try this one, the easiest. You must choose the next word in the sequence indicated by the dots:

F
G
H
I
...

The answer of course is Jay (J): answers to the riddles are helpfully found at the back of the book if you need to succumb to giving in (of course you'll kick yourself). Some of Terry's other riddles are more complicated to figure, but none especially so. When they do take a little time to work out our focus is given space to drift away from the answer to the riddle and to the poem itself. Take the first poem in the book for instance:

Dawn in mist
Morning in sunshine
Afternoon in cloud
Evening in rain
.....

If you're still trying to work it out then here's a clue: it's the most famous of the poet's birds. If you're still struggling that's good: that's time to revel in the poem's simple but evocative lines. If this poem weren't a riddle look how it seems to stand on its own, almost like a haiku by Buson or maybe the first lines from a quennet. Of the 50 birds in the collection I know the names of 30. That number is less if you ask me what they look like. My ignorance is common I think even though I get out and about. What I picture when reading is a general image of a small bird, something like Larry Eigner and Robert Lax are getting at when they use the word 'bird' in their poems. Terry's poems focus our attention on the names of birds. Some words peek my curiosity more than others. For instance, 'Yellowhammer' conjures the image of a golden hammer, a superheroes weapon. Then there's 'Owl' which is a word whose interest is in its being so short and beginning with 'o'. But maybe it's not even the particular image or word but the fact that single words and short phrases are presented with space around them to breathe that is so powerful.

And just as I am unable to name many birds I am unable to name many trees (even though I spend a fair part of my time walking amongst them). In Peter Jaeger's 2018 book *English Trees (a brexit poem)* poems are a single line long, centred on the page of a 12x12cm book. There are 25 poems in total. The whole poem always take the same construction – 'among X, lacking X' so for example the first poem reads:

among alder, lacking banyan

This symmetry, a kind of mantra, is something that Jaeger has also explored recently in his last collection *Midamble* where all sentences are constructed with similar syntax. The subtitle of *English Trees* is prominent. The 'among' trees are all native to England whereas the 'lacking' trees are not. Published after the EU referendum but before the final 'exiting' of Europe these poems describe the stripping of our European identity as well as our enforced isolationism; the poor, hardy 'oak' of the 'among' trees sadly emblematic of government sycophancy.

But my initial reaction to Jaeger's poems is in how single words are highlighted or can be selected out. These words for example take my fancy from the 'among' trees: 'pear' for its taste, colour and texture as a fruit, 'holly' with its allusions to winter romance, and 'elm' similar to Terry's 'owl' in its structure and concision.

The order that the trees take page by page is also important. There is a contrast between the 'among' trees which are in alphabetical order ('alder', 'apple', 'ash'...military and prim) and the 'lacking' trees that appear to have no order ('banyan', 'jacaranda', 'acacia'...free and easy and full of exoticism). Aside from any connection to Brexit the words are just beautiful to look at or to say or to imagine (either as a particular tree or a picture book tree). Here are three nice ones: 'cottonwood', 'jubea' and 'neem'. Reading these two collections I find myself drawn to these wise words by George Oppen: 'the little words are the ones I like most: the deer, the sun and so on'. 'Bee-eater' and 'Rook' Terry writes, 'whitebeam' and 'fig' writes Jaeger.