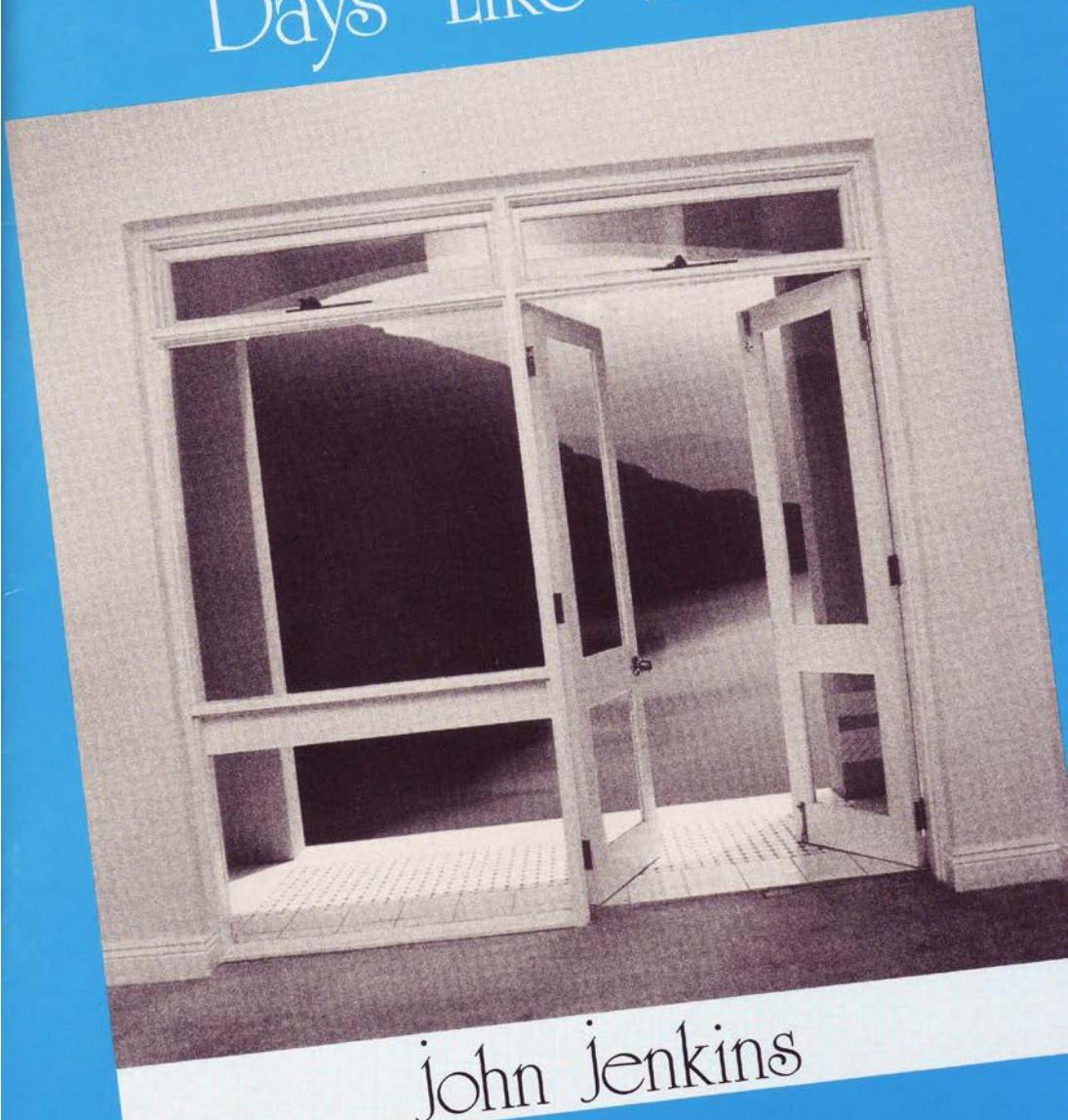


Days Like Air



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JOHN JENKINS

MODERN WRITING

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DAYS LIKE AIR

*“The crudeness of finding everything
self-evident through force of habit
and the mania for mystery to the point
of the superstitious must disappear
where genuine astonishment
begins.” —Karl Jaspers*

The silence around a glass of water

I woke and walked to a nearby beach. I wanted to make something you could take into, like a rock pool. A world born of chance, which sets us free. Something clear and cool. A text about how we know things, sudden depths beneath bright surfaces, where memory mirrors poetry. Something brief, yet refreshing.

Endless summer

That summer, as I walked along the beach, I dreamt of a text built around silence and stillness. I pictured it as a crystalline wafer, full of reflections, of separate frames placed in a row that *could* be infinitely extended, yet *would* end in an arbitrary way. Almost a matter of chance, too, would be the place given each paragraph, linked by light playing over rock pools, reminding you of reflections and liquid depths in others along the same beach.

A picture

Step back from the world a little and it begins to become a picture. It fills with things. They do not seem inevitable. The frame begins to crowd with details and small events. Two drops of seaspray collide to form a third. Glancing light stirs up a hive of atoms: the wave, leaf and caterpillar, the mobile grammar of each face.

The uncertainty of memory

As one pool became every pool, one wave broke into every wave at my feet. It does not matter that this beach – already a metaphor, a frame to place around the things I see – has no fixed place, either within my memory or the text I imagined might contain it. ‘Upon’ becomes ‘within’ as the frames begin to tilt. Whether Shoreham, South Melbourne, St Kilda, Bondi, Cape Tribulation, Koh Samui, Mana Island, Grossard Point, Waikiki, Skiathos... each wave merely breaks and etches a mirroring outline within the word, the expanding frame, this ‘beach’ has become.

A walk

Today, as I walk a winter beach, words cling to what I see and touch, smell and hear. But things are not words. Fixed ones almost move as I walk. There is no time, as they seem to bend and bobble away from me, to gather them into a sentence. The way they fall into rows, diminishing in size, is part of my effort to place them. They seem made out of light and color, with light in the gaps between, long tracers of daylight. Then more sandy beach, scattered with seaweed, rocks, trees, light.

A single pine

Light, scattered with objects. Yet each is a thing in itself. And this is true even of things without clear outline. A tree seems part of the hill it grows upon, part of rocks around it. Tree, rock, hill. Where do you place the frame? In sunshine, the tree can not be taken away from its shadow, or from the sound of leaves in wind. Its roots are not visible, and part of the earth in which they are buried is becoming the tree. Absorbing sunlight and air around its branches, the word 'tree' is uprooted from the hillside.

Question marks

Before the tourist huts was a patch of greenery, shaded by palms. Are things in place, unplaced, in this or any garden: whether the most casual, the most carefully planned? What does ‘in place’ mean, as grass grows like something that can’t quite be said? You take some soil into your hands. Bright clusters of soil, grains, shards, bright clusters, all running and sparkling within a luxuriant chocolaty mulch. When I thought of these little sparkles as ‘atoms’ they had a wider, symbolic use for me. They were more than simple details I could place in the frame around my thoughts. By addition, they became a view of the world we call real. When they entered metaphorical use they left the world, pointing behind to a sort of ‘absence’. They shed most of their particular ‘thingness’, to leap into mobility and abstraction. When you place one thing in the frame, you must leave another out. No two ‘objects’ can occupy the same place in space as well as time. Except for ideas, or rays of light?

Clarity

I wanted to make something clear, like light in a tidal pool. Something random and refreshing. A play of light on the surface: lemon glances to cool depths below. Like an argument about perception, the sudden resonance poetry lends memory.

Coherence

These reflections, made possible by language, are also made of language. A cloudy gas of values clings to each word, giving all a different emphasis, and us our particular trajectories, our view. Your eyes are partial, like mine. Your world is one of the possible many. Your view is a part of the seen. The rest is simply not there, for you or for me, until it enters the frame. You and I, codes of one breath, frame a human world within the words we inhabit. Framing that world is a larger one: a continuously extending present, always *there*, always incomplete.

Simple statements

I like the color blue. I like the feel of cool water on hot skin. I am thinking of a white tennis racket. I prefer the music of Eric Satie to that of Xenakis, Bach to Mahler. Do you know where, on this beach, I can buy an icecream? This is how, on this hot day, we manage an effortless communication.

Beach rendezvous

I wake and walk to the beach. I can see it from my window. Here, at this point in the text, the image of a sandcastle-shimmering in mid-day heat and disintegrating in the wind-is not a symbol of ageing. In any case, it is beautiful. In the wind, there is something crystalline, glowing, softly pulsing. The wind is transparent with your name.

‘Incidental’ memories

The images cohere, then silence closes around and they are still. You look back, and they re-appear. Later, they may surface in your memory, borne on a current of associations, suddenly chance waves here thrown then at your feet. A constant semaphoring along the beach: patchwork of towels, small lances of light from buckles and sunglasses. Beach toys, and yellow plastic buckets: a pop art mobile glazed with honey, where people weave between sunbathers, calmly erase themselves in the wakes of themselves. I see them. I look away. Just as I look, again, f see them and remember. Memory is looking back.

Pearlshell

We leave no trace, except in memory; within another's body. What we leave on objects becomes a code only if it is read. To be read, there must be a reader. A social memory accretes in this way. And memory becomes culture by elaborating the metaphor of something precious saved from loss. A changing view, a changing of places, among particulars.

Windows

Faces focus, slip through each frame. The sentences collide, swap verbs in a play of light. Night falls. The frame floods with stars. The silence around a glass of water. Days constellate. Sentences cohere. Time is like water moving under glass. There are slices of blue sea through a white window. The frame floods with stars.

Identity

This is where memory, language and fiction become overlapping frames arranged as a wafer, such that you may view them from above, as they in-prism the clear, simple and coherent hologram of what you are. The atoms of this prism are words and images, which cluster like a hive to resist entropy and the erosion of time, a crystalline headland against wave after wave. Though you understand this not to be ‘true’, but as a play of language, a tidal shift traversing faint edges and limits, a seepage towards perception.

Blossom trees

The gardeners, in comical Fijian sunhats, raked the leaves outside our beachside huts. In the long tropical afternoons, the raking had a soothing sound. Among the leaves were curiously shaped seeds in large brown pods. Within each one was a new tree. At this point, at the point of a rake, it was subject to climate, soil and the weather's whim. And to the gardener's good humor.

You

Never fully known, I approach you, never fully known. Sometimes I imagine you are male, sometimes female. There is nothing ambiguous here. You are many rolled into one, but also particular, singular and indivisible. There is something curious about your face. It can never be seen head-on, as one would another's across a table. I can feel the pressure of your glance upon these words, but cannot see you. Because you are my reader, I continue to wait for you, to write these things.

‘Uneventful’

‘You’ are included out of deference and expect something important, but it has already happened. Our lives are made up of in-between times, that constitute the grain of experience. Such moments are no less interesting than the dramatic and emotionally charged ones we provoke, invent, foreground and privilege. The sense of telescoping, of ‘looking through’ or ‘back to’ events. As though through an empty medium, a clear gas or liquid, made up of these plentiful, ordinary, unexamined and forgotten atoms of our lives.

Winter beach

Another event, a thing which happens. And beyond that, silence. Like trying to speak underwater, to gather silence around verbs and nouns.

Haiku weather

The sudden frost of an icy thought. Random conversations in the waves. Light shafts piercing clouds. Rain penetrates the shapes of days.

Sleep's micro-events: an analogy

Sentences collide inside your dreams, verbs emitting minute quanta of light, as sentences weld or break apart, the particles of language crystallise into new clusters, trace in the cloudy chamber of your thoughts. Also, as you read.

Never remember

The stress of time is clear and contentless. An aeroplane pencils a thin white line across cloudless blue, across the face of a day you will never remember. Office window overlooks harbor. The next day, stormy prelude of heavy cloud and whipping branches. The everyday begins everywhere, has always begun, ends nowhere, is always ending.

Bone white

A sudden focus, a detail settles into the frame, as the general propositions of the weather are stated beneath an arched sky. Lispéd air-tropes, voluble tiny tongues of gossiping waters. On the beach, the skeleton of a gull is bleached white, like a theological argument from the Middle Ages.

Far gone

Clean lines of sand announce the purity of the day's indifference. The empty window of the mouth emits tiny sounds. One by one, silent swimmers reach a sandbar. The lines run out to horizons, to days like water, mute parallels, clarity of abstractions, depthless stars.

Mobile light

Stepping over nouns, rocks, nouns, light lances, silver spill about pools, minute succulence through sea pods, scumble of bubble chains, wave by wave. Above the cliff, cacti bristle with verbs. Selfish succulents hoard water. Vines elaborate a light-seeking rectitude. In damp eroded channels, ferns launch communal spoor mats. Digression the chrysalis of purpose.

Ant

An index to the ant. A word walking.

Random notes

Light swapped between your cells. Clarity of being. Window, stars, sea, sand, sun, skin. Rhythms and rhythms. Intricate intervals suffused with light. Echo and pulse of identity, particles alive in light, threads from atom to sun. Word to word, pulse to pulse. A sum that cannot be abstracted from movement, as identity resides at no single point, is a continuous motion. Pausing. Moving on.

Atomic

Within the world, seeking content, shedding content. I will never see an atom. I am composed mainly of empty space. I walk into a little sketch of the beach, a palette of 26 letters.

Further

I wash in colors of the sky, before chance-which is a storm-sweeps everything away.
Later, sentences shot through with light.

Recapitulation

A sudden deluge of light through the mobile frame. Your memory of it takes place now. Sudden particles cohere and this takes place now. You are also a changing event. Frame by frame, you are building up the days you inhabit. A few will be remembered, transparent within memory. A gull veers against the mast of a foam-lashed sailboat. It tips and kicks in the surf, a roped buoy slaps up spray. A shutter at speed, a camera click away. You look, and the light swims into your eyes.

Coda

The weight of a wet towel across my arm, the taste of sea brine. The endlessness of small sensations, small perceptions, that are distinct and separate, that break from their chain, from the continuous moment. They are mainly empty space and never fully known. A word rushes out to meet you, the air written with your name. Stars, pebbles, cells, the night sky. Voluble tiny tongues of the wind. The day continues, arbitrary endings and the endlessness of things.

Beach grass

To display all the possibilities of the seed requires ideal conditions, for this tree of language to grow. (The text is temperate, delicate, subtle.) It is also tough, like beach grass. The ecology of this sentence allows us to be fanciful...

Nothing

Today, clouds appear through a white window. Clouds drift into its frame. One, white and grey, is shaped a little like a rabbit. It is the only one soon. Then it disappears, leaving an after-image. Now nothing inhabits the empty frame.

Continues

The frame is not a square or rectangle. If you close your eyes, it is a black ellipse. If you open them, facing straight ahead, imaginary lines of perspective converge in focus. Objects around that clarity bend towards it, but are fuzzy at the edge of the absence that defines us.

With both eyes looking right, it is still an ellipse, the right side elongated, the left almost circular, containing all we see. Behind us is not blackness, but nothing, *which* we may imagine as black. We can't see it, unless we turn around. Doing so, we erase half a world, but gain another.

Notes on the text. Days Like Air began in 1981, and grew out of conversations with the composer Richard Vella, and our collaboration on a choral piece, Play For Voices, performed by the Melbourne Astra Choir in that year.

In the late 1980s another collaboration, this time with the photographer Peter Lyssiotis on a photo/text book, Wind Alphabets, led to more notes and reflections which have also cohered here. The American poet Bill Berkson suggested changes to the text, and Robert Harris and Antoni Jach suggested further minor alterations.

A small section of a very early draft was published in 1984, in my book The Inland Sea. The final manuscript was completed in 1991.

– John Jenkins.

Modern Writing

"I dreamt of a text built around silence and stillness. I pictured it as a crystalline wafer, full of reflections, of separate frames placed in a row that could be infinitely extended . . ."

A brief refreshment for the mind, yet written over a period of 10 years, Days Like Air is a meditation on perception and memory, and its virtues are clarity, simplicity and a style without apparent effort.

Within its deliberately restricted frame of references emerges "Something clear and cool. A text about how we know things, sudden depths beneath bright surfaces, where memory mirrors poetry."

John Jenkins is a Melbourne writer, poet and journalist. His most recent books include The Wild White Sea (Little Ester, 1991) and 22 Contemporary Australian Composers (NMA, 1988).