

Jane Mead is the author of three previous collections of poetry, most recently *The Usable Field*, also from Alice James Books. Her poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals and she is the recipient of grants and awards from the Whiting, Guggenheim and Lannan Foundations. For many years Poet-in-Residence at Wake Forest University, she now farms in northern California and teaches in the Drew University low-residency MFA program in Poetry and Poetry in Translation.

STALKING THE PLEASURES

The pleasures are the *can-be*
and the *want*, the abundance
of water before the well

went dry. The pleasures
are primitive stalks of *might-be*
and *aftermath*, shaded

and bamboo-like grasses
on the arduous walk
to the waterfall: first

brush so thick we crawl,
then down into the dense
and muggy grasses, muddy

elbows and no idea where
the path is—stalking
the pleasures: *heart-beat*

can-be, stone's-throw, want.



Katherine Van Acker Photography

MONEY MONEY MONEY WATER WATER WATER

Jane Mead

An Interview with Jane Mead

In a recent discussion with Jane Mead, AJB asked the author about the inspiration for her latest collection. Here, she discusses the friction between economics and ecology, “foursies”, and the role of punctuation in poetry.

ALICE JAMES BOOKS: *A distinct appreciation for nature is clearly visible within Money Money Money | Water Water Water; this appreciation often arises from passionate views on human destruction of nature. How did this book come to be? Did you set out to write a collection based on this theme, or did the poems lead you there?*

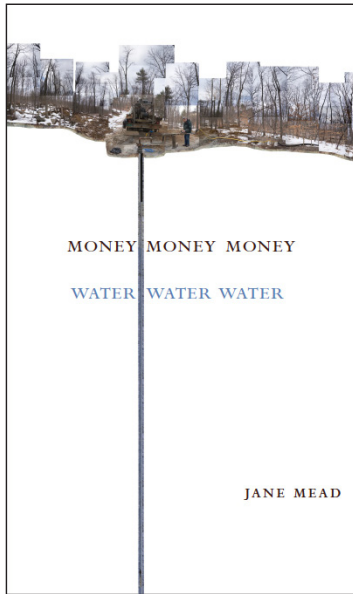
JANE MEAD: The poems lead the way; the collection materialized only in retrospect. And the writing of poems is itself an unguided exploration for me. I have

much better luck if I let the intellect with its curiosity, the body with its music, the unpredictable intuition with its complete ignorance of convention, do their thing and don't let that conductor, the ego, get in the way. The ego always wants to conduct the music before it's written.

That said, the poems do germinate within the context of one's world-view, and so it is no surprise that there are themes that weave through the book. I grew up with naturalists and come from many generations of scientists, so I take an utterly necessary nourishment from what we call the natural world; I'm also extremely interested in systems and their evolutions. My formal studies were focused on economic theory and political science---in some sense, a natural extension of the study of ecosystems. That these are for the most part competing systems is an utter catastrophe.



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AJB: The collection begins with an epigraph from Theodore Roethke's "The Lost Son," which states your title: "Money money money | water water water." What specifically drew you to these lines and how do you feel they encompass the collection?

MEAD: The juxtaposition of money and water creates a complex tone for me—on one level, water is our life's blood, and money is an abstraction created to facilitate commerce and, of itself, has no elemental place in animal survival.

On the otherhand—in a world in which pure water is increasingly scarce—it, and its transport systems, have become commodities—those countries and individuals with the most money get the best access to water. Period. So the title embodies two truths, ecological and economic, if you will,—and so emphasizes the complexity of our reality. The title's not ironic, but it can be read on two levels. The fact that the words are repeated gives additional tonal resonance of course—both with chant, which is a way of calling something into existence, and with dismissal—chant's opposite.

"The Lost Son" is Roethke's howl from Woodlawn. A brilliant, lonely man—he addresses the worms and the toads. He doesn't address a single human in that poem, but manages to keep at least two opposing truths in his mind at the same time, and to feel them with the whole of his being. It tears you apart. It tore him apart. He came back.

AJB: Many of these poems reference places: historical and current, and events, political and personal. How much research aided in your writing?

MEAD: Spellcheck.

Although, seriously, sometimes more. For example, after I wrote the poem "WE APPROACH MAGNA CARTA," I got on the internet to make sure my memory, from college, of Magna Carta was accurate. In doing that, I got interested in the language of the thing—so I patched together that later poem in the book in which I tried to bring forward the beauty of the language as well as the emphasis on commerce, which I'd forgotten about.

AJB: In the first section of your book there is the recurrence of the Magna Carta. Could you describe your inspiration for using this piece of history and how you came to relate it to the themes found throughout the poems?

MEAD: While it would be false for me to suggest intentionality here in terms of how the more overt references to Magna Carta

might give context to the other poems, the poems are all born of the same obsessions. The poems referencing Magna Carta bring certain themes into focus through the lens of that document: the way in which "universal" freedoms have been, historically, necessarily, doled out within a particular socioeconomic context; the question of what we have done with our collective freedoms and how that has affected the planet, etc.

Environmental destruction as a way of life, within the context of global capitalism—is only one of the darker and interconnected consequences of our collective choices. I mentioned earlier the emphasis in Magna Carta of easing commerce through standardization of weights and measures. This seems like a reasonable thing, but that the early codification of rights for selected individuals also concerns itself with facilitating commerce, raises a lot of questions. Most immediately, if you look at where we are today, as exemplified by, say, Citizens United, you have to wonder whether democracy and capitalism are, in the end, compatible. Abstract questions about power structures and resource distribution are not the place of poetry, but the following is:

"there was only one egg
One hard-boiled egg
And Akhmatova"
Gave it to Mandelstam

That the freedoms in Magna Carta are limited to barons (it's a start!) is a selectivity echoed in the U.S. constitution, raises the question of whether such distinctions are self-perpetuating (or worse, inevitable). That's an abstract debate but

"Serfs one minute, slaves the next—//
and where's the shore from there?"
is a question poetry can ask.

That neither fish nor streams are represented as one of the "stakeholders" of the water they carry is, in the abstract, a fight for legal activists. But the world shaped by those laws is ours, the world out of which poetry comes. I guess you could say that the poems are a spiritual reaction to the world as seen through the lens of these questions—and since those questions are knocking around in my head, it is not surprising that many of the poems reflect them.

AJB: Throughout the collection, the relationship between man and nature is carefully examined; in your poem "The Narrows," there seems to be an admission of ignorance and an acknowledgement of not being fully connected with nature. What is the importance of these views in regards to the collection, as a whole?

MEAD: Well, we think we are separate from nature, and of course we are not. Or we think we are one with it, and we are not that either—in that poem, nature is in "angry mourning," while the wildness of the rain is experienced from inside a car. There's connection and the impossibility of connection,—recognition and separateness.

AJB: A unique feature of Money Money Money | Water Water Water is the use of quatrains—or "foursies," as you say—on each



left-hand page. These “foursies” seem to read as almost an echo or afterthought. Can you explain the reasoning behind this particular formatting and how you feel this format impacts the reader’s experience? Do you feel there’s more than one way to read through the collection?

MEAD: Although they are not spoken in one single voice, many of the foursies represent a more interior voice than that of the longer poems, and often push back at those poems that proceed them, or push deeper into the material,—or nod, one way or another. Others of the foursies are found poems, notations from ag journals, for example, about the threat to vineyards of European Grapevine Moth, or the sale of water rights between agricultural and environmental interests. Those are facts which affect my everyday planning as a farmer,—pushing back, or wedging deeper into the world and thinking of the longer poems.

I always spend a lot of time on ordering poems in a book—it’s a process that happens over one or two years—but when I read a book of poems I begin in the middle more often than not. I guess you want a collection to hold up either way.

“**I** feel passionate about the subject matter and I speak it as well as I can. . . ”

AJB: Another distinctive quality of your poetry is that it utilizes a variety of deliberate punctuation that strays from normal usage (for example: “.—” and “,—”). How do you envision this punctuation functioning and sounding?

MEAD: As with all punctuation, that double punctuation is meant to serve as a precise notation of pacing—the pace at which a thought develops. Often times a dash alone can indicate a kind of break and/or rush in logic in a way that no other punctuation available to us can. Combined with other punctuation it conveys even more information about the process of thinking. The danger, of course, is that it can seem affected. But communicating that extra information feels essential and natural to me, so that I have to constantly cut it out of my prose. In my poems, I allow it. That’s partly my allegiance to the poem, partly assumption that readers of poetry are open to nuance and willing to work a little if something isn’t immediately understandable. So, to look at a couple of examples, in “THE ELEPHANTS IN THE OCHRE CLAY” I say

The ochre elephants
did not fail me,—I failed
to meet them half way

and the punctuation is meant to convey the mind pausing before rushing into the thought that occurs to it during that pause. Or, in “DUST AND RUMBLE”:

The only break, the break as forgotten.—
I saw it in my own mind with you
on the other side as a mistake.

I hope to reproduce a sense of thinking one has finished what there is to say on the matter (the period) and then suddenly taking a sharp breath and hurling into the next idea.

In a couple of poems (“EXPERIENCE AS VISITATION,” and “MAGNA CARTA,” for example) this movement is formalized.

AJB: There seems to be one predominant speaker narrating the poems, though there are other voices and characters that emerge (such as “Toby the Stray” and “Alice”). How did you hone these characters? What do they bring to the collection?

MEAD: Mostly, it’s just me talking. Speaking from different places of my being. My poems mostly start as notes, phrases in my thinking that catch me unaware, and those often set the tone of the poem, though they may not survive revisions. I’m a brutal reviser, so it would be most accurate to say the poems are an interior voice which has been relentlessly urged into becoming a thing in its own right. Direction, pacing, balance, shape—that all comes from the conversation I have with the initial material. For me, revision is a collaborative process between myself and the poem. And, in that process, whatever is most distinctive about the voice gets honed, so that, in the end, I guess you could say that the collection gives you many facets of a self.

The poems about Toby “the stray” and the burial of Alice are villanelles, so that contributes to certain elements of the voice.

AJB: How do you feel Money Money Money | Water Water Water challenges the poetry world?

MEAD: Oh, I don’t know. I hope it speaks to people. I hope it contributes to the conversations we are all having. I feel passionate about the subject matter and I speak it as well as I can—it’s central to who I am, the subject matter and the speaking. You put it out there, and hope it is heard, hope it contributes. And maybe the best contributions are, in a sense, always a kind of challenge.



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