

Vibrant Matter and Domestic Wisdom in Erin Brubacher's *In the Small Hours*

Materia vibrante y sabiduría doméstica en *In the Small Hours*, de Erin Brubacher

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Received: 30/11/2021. Accepted: 02/04/2022.

How to cite this article: Martínez Serrano, Leonor María. "Vibrant Matter and Domestic Wisdom in Erin Brubacher's *In the Small Hours*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 43, 2022, pp. 115–32.



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.43.2022.115-132>

Abstract: Canadian poet Erin Brubacher's *In the Small Hours* is a sequence of sparse poems which focus on the experiences and emotions underwent by the author in the aftermath of her divorce. Interspersed with memories from the past and encounters with the vitality of domestic objects, the collection shows the poetic persona making sense of her life and the world in meditative lyrics of great brevity. Drawing on Jane Bennett's conceptualisation of "vibrant matter," this article explores how Brubacher responds to the thing-power circulating within and around the bodies populating the Earth, whilst acknowledging a sense of communion with the more-than-human world.

Keywords: materialism; vibrant matter; vitality; body; more-than-human world.

Summary: Introduction: A Multidisciplinary Artist-Poet. Making Sense of Life Experiences. Encounters with Vibrant Matter and Domestic Wisdom. Responding to the More-than-Human World. Conclusion.

Resumen: *In the Small Hours*, obra de la poeta canadiense Erin Brubacher, es una secuencia de poemas breves centrados en las experiencias y emociones que experimentó la autora tras su divorcio. Tejido de recuerdos del pasado y encuentros con la vitalidad de objetos domésticos, el poemario desvela a una persona poética que aspira a comprender su vida y el mundo en poemas líricos de corte meditativo de extremada brevedad. A la luz del concepto de "materia vibrante" de Jane Bennett, este artículo explora cómo Brubacher responde al poder de las cosas que fluye dentro de y en torno a los cuerpos que pueblan la Tierra, a la par que acepta su comunión con el mundo más que humano.

Palabras clave: materialismo; materia vibrante; vitalidad; cuerpo; mundo más que humano.

Sumario: Introducción: una artista-poeta multidisciplinar. Comprender las experiencias vitales. Encuentros con la materia vibrante y sabiduría doméstica. Responder al mundo más que humano. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST-POET

Erin Brubacher (b. 1979) is a Toronto-based poet, director and multidisciplinary artist working in such diverse media as theatre, performance, and photography. As a theatre director, she has travelled extensively to take her work to numerous national and international venues. Working collaboratively with artists from different disciplines, she has created the award-winning productions of *Concord Floral* (2014) and *Kiinalik: These Sharp Tools* (2017), and with Christine Brubaker, she has written the travel memoir *7th Cousins: An Automythography* (2019). As a poet, Brubacher belongs to a generation of young Canadian women poets in their thirties and early forties writing in a variety of modes, ranging from language poetry through confessionalist and avant-garde meditative lyric to ecopoetry. Though they form no recognisable group or school, Johanna Skibsrud, shalan joudry, Virginia Konchan, Alison Smith, Gillian Sze, Annick MacAskill, Elena Johnson, Robin Dunford, and Basma Kavanagh are some of Brubacher's most eminent contemporaries. At any rate, her work deserves more critical attention than it has garnered so far.

In the Small Hours: Thirty-Nine Months and Seven Days (2016) is Brubacher's debut collection, beautifully produced, handbound, and printed by Gaspereau Press, a small press in Kentville, Nova Scotia. The collection gathers forty-six poems of marked brevity and formal simplicity, arranged in two sections—"The One-Room Apartment" (thirty-nine poems) and "The House by the Bay" (seven poems)—, whose very figures might well be a clue to the time (thirty-nine months and seven days) it took her to overcome the crisis she experienced after her divorce. Concision and smallness are one of the main strengths of the collection. As Kate Cayley has observed in a lucid review of Brubacher's collection, *In the Small Hours* is "a deceptively small" book, one "[y]ou could fit . . . in the palm of your hand, both literally and thematically. Each poem consists of a sentence or two, floating on the page, bare statements, some so stripped-down as to be cryptic" (129). In fact, the forty-six poems appear to be inspired by the minimalist nature of the ghazal, a form of

amatory poem or ode originating in seventh-century Arabic poetry, and whose central themes are love and the pain of loss or separation. In her collection, Brubacher makes the most of the brevity of the ghazal form in condensing deep thinking and feeling with the maximum of linguistic economy. A postmodern adaptation of the classical Arabic ghazal, most of the short lyrics are two or three lines long and capture feelings of loss, separation from the lover, and nonlove. In fact, the form reveals itself to be versatile enough to accommodate a wide range of emotions, feelings, and memories in the poetic persona's revisiting of her past.

In the Small Hours is both an elegant art object and a record of the little epiphanies Brubacher experiences "in the small hours," that period of the day when she turns introspective and is most emotionally and intellectually alert to moments in her own life with the texture of transcendence. From yet another perspective, the collection chronicles the aftermath of a marriage, the memories triggered by the bitter experience of a divorce, and the compulsion towards self-renewal and metamorphosis following such a turning point in one's life. *In the Small Hours* gathers short lyrics mostly "focused on the domestic (indoor spaces, lonely spaces, tiny necessary rituals like dishwashing or measuring out a recipe)" (Cayley 129), where the lyrical subject gets access to introspection through "thing-power" (Bennett xvi). The whole collection is interspersed with encounters with the very materiality of domestic objects, with feelings and emotions, and with memories from a time now vanished. Like tesserae from a mosaic, the poems help the lyrical subject shed light on areas of her experience that need elucidating on her journey towards emotional self-recovery. These austere poems are the result of intense contemplation and reflection upon the state of one's life in the middle of the night, amid the peace and quiet of the dark. For Brubacher, the small hours were a reflective part of the day—the hours of noticing those luminous details which often pass unnoticed to people in *doing* mode rather than in *being* mode. As the poet further explains apropos the title of the book in an enlightening radio interview,

[t]he 'small hours' refers to those hours in the middle of the night when you should be sleeping and you're not. And it's... for me it was kind of a marking of lines on the wall at the time period after my husband and I left each other. So it's kind of about what's next. . . . But it's funny too. It's not about sadness and darkness. (White)

Following Jane Bennett's insights into the "vitality intrinsic to materiality as such" (xiii) and the vibrancy of the objects populating the world, this article focuses on how Brubacher's poetic persona responds not only to an excruciating experience in the story of her life, but also to reality and matter at large, to the wide "range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies" (Bennett ix), and to images of everyday objects that open her eyes to unexpected moments of epiphany. As Karen Barad contends in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, "[matter] is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification" (151), but rather a conveyor of meaning and sense, which is not a special possession of human beings. The lesson Brubacher ultimately gains is that humans are just part of a vast world of material-semiotic interconnections where the human and the nonhuman are entangled and mutually constitutive. This is, obviously, a strong counter to human exceptionalism, that is, to "the belief that humans are special in the sense of existing, at least in part, outside of the order of material nature" (Bennett 36–37). One more vital lesson she possibly learns is one of utter humility: the calm acceptance of life as it is and a moving acknowledgment that, despite the heart-rending experience she has undergone, life must go on. There are moments of radical epistemological uncertainty, when one's self must feel overwhelmed by unexpected turns in one's life, and yet, Brubacher appears to imply, one must mend one's shattered self to make it whole again. Though *In the Small Hours* is autobiographical in nature, that is, an accomplished example of life writing where the boundaries between writing and life blur to a large extent, the poet and the lyrical subject (or poetic persona) are not to be confused. Poets write about what is close to hand and end up transmuting their idiosyncratic experiences into something impersonal that potential readers might relate to. To put it in Eliotian terms, poetry is not about self-expression, but an escape from personality. Yet a personal experience is what often triggers the creative act and gets metamorphosed into poems capable of transcending the biographical circumstances that catalysed them into existence in the first place.

1. MAKING SENSE OF LIFE EXPERIENCES

In the final acknowledgments section of *In the Small Hours*, Brubacher dedicates her book to a friend, Vivien, who told her: "*Après tout, les mots t'appartiennent*" [After all, the words are yours] ([61]). Words belong to

the woman-poet, despite the emotional shipwreck following her divorce, and words are now her gift to her readers. Confronted with this turning point in her life, she metamorphoses pain into well-wrought verbal artifacts in the tradition of the ghazal, a deceptively simple composition that appeals to the reader's sensibility based on its evocative, ornament-free minimalism. Her mission now is to put back together the shattered pieces of her *self*, to regain a sense of wholeness and well-being despite the enormity and gravity implicit in witnessing how the project of a lifetime next to another person falls apart. Thus, the poems making up *In the Small Hours* testify to the lyrical persona's attempt to piece her life back together in the wake of her divorce; they show the lyrical subject bringing herself back to a sense of normality in the best way she can—by composing poems of lasting value that might serve a cathartic purpose to herself and to other fellow human beings facing a similar experience. Given the commonality of some life experiences, poetry reveals itself to be not only a mode of understanding the world and our place in it, but also a tool for (self)healing and catharsis, which is what seems to be at stake in *In the Small Hours*.

As pointed out above, the first section of Brubacher's collection, "The One-Room Apartment," consists of thirty-nine short lyrics of marked emotional intensity and deceptive artlessness. In Cayley's view, the whole collection has "the quality of a novel broken down to fragments" (129). Instead of being read as if they were discrete, unrelated compositions, Brubacher encourages potential readers to look at them as if they were tesserae forming a gigantic mosaic, a long poem chronicling her poetic persona's states of mind and moods as she reminisces her past life in the company of the man who used to be her husband and has now become someone she used to know. Upon closer scrutiny, looking now at the person with whom she shared her everyday life, she starts noticing cracks in their relationship, as well as mutual misunderstandings in their communication. Thus, the poem entitled "Listening" dwells on the pitfalls inherent in human relationships:

In the morning I told him I'd liked listening to the streetcar bell, in the night. He thought that was nice: said he'd stopped noticing. 'On weekdays you'll hear the kids, at the school, over there, in the yard,' he said. Later I did hear them, but only once. (12)

One of the fundamental insights of new materialisms is that the nonhuman world is communicative and speaks a myriad of languages, including the noise made by the machines and artifacts populating cityscapes. Humans are literally *embodied* and *enworlded* beings (Abram, *Becoming Animal*), responding to thousands of stimuli bombarding them from all directions in a world we are a part *of*, not apart *from*. What “Listening” makes self-manifest is that whereas she had listened to the nice sound made by the streetcar bell in the middle of the night, he had remained indifferent to it, listening to the noise of kids in a nearby school instead. Being confronted with the same soundscape, their responses are utterly different, dissonant as it were, which might ultimately betray some kind of emotional incompatibility between them.

Overcoming her divorce turns out to be a bitter experience for which the poetic persona pays a heavy toll at the beginning of her journey towards complete recovery. Torn between memories and regrets, she evokes moments of her past marriage when a sense of intimacy with another person was overwhelming and yet hid a sense of impending pain. In “He Washed My Hair,” she writes “I can see how that would make a person feel vulnerable” (17), in words not devoid of irony. The poem evokes the act of having one’s hair washed by another person, which is an act of intimacy and physical proximity and yet gestures towards one’s body being finite, singular and exposed to another’s hands touching one’s head. Likewise, the poem titled “Hope” points to this sense of intimacy between two people who love each other genuinely: “We would read together every night and be happy and intelligent and touched. If the reading did not touch us enough we would touch each other” (24). All senses are now made to participate in an act whereby the lyrical subject revisits the story of her life, as if, by dint of involving listening and touch, the events of her marital life could be reconstructed and evoked more faithfully. Touching another person’s skin is tantamount to touching the geographies of another body, which is again an act of unequalled intimacy to the poet’s sensibility. Closely linked to touch is the poem titled “Before All This,” where the poetic persona invokes a time prior to her divorce: “One year I slept with the back of a man, I only saw his face in the mornings” (38). Ironically, Brubacher resorts to metonymy (*pars pro toto*) to underscore the notion that there was an insurmountable abyss between husband and wife despite their physical proximity in bed. Here are two bodies lying on a bed, not recognising themselves in spite of their being close to each other.

Alongside the senses and bodily existence, language plays a crucial role in Brubacher's poetic persona's reminiscences and imaginings of episodes of her marital life. This is evident in a cluster of four brief and yet emotionally charged poems in *In the Small Hours* that dwell on the power of language to invoke and evoke, to appease pain or instigate melancholy instead. After her divorce, the lyrical subject cannot avoid keeping on mentioning her ex in her spontaneous conversations. In the piece titled "In Conversation," a simple line, "I mention you. I mention you" (35), suffices to evoke the ex-husband's lingering presence, whereas in "Outbursts" we learn of how the poetic persona, thinking of her ex-husband, uses "exclamation marks, excessively" (36). The emotion moves upwards, in crescendo, in "Correspondence": "After all the words that have passed between us, I would have no way of knowing your handwriting" (37). A marital life entails a constant exchange of words on a daily or regular basis, but it seems it is only spoken words the poetic persona and her ex have shared with each other as partners. After all they have gone through, she would be unable to recognise something as personal as his handwriting, conceptualised here as a sort of outgrowth from another person's body. *Handwriting*, like walking or body language, is also expressive of people's personalities, and to her sadness and disappointment, the lyrical subject now realises that there would be no chance for her to recognise such an intimate trait of someone who used to be so close to her in the past. In "Thank You for That Angry Note," Brubacher writes: "Now I know I'll know when I've hurt your feelings" (26), dwelling with sarcasm on yet another critical moment of misunderstanding between the lovers, tinged with nostalgia.

In "That These Things Will Never Be Said," the poet ponders the sadness implicit in two people parting and going in opposite directions in life: "That you exist breaks my heart, from time to time" (39). Note how the adverbial "from time to time" moderates "breaks my heart," which is indicative of the poet's determination to move on. A handful of ten words conveys the deep sadness experienced by someone who is painfully aware that she will not be given another opportunity to say these words to her loved one. The things that are left unsaid linger in mid-air before vanishing for good, not without leaving first a deep imprint on her heart, possibly a wound that only time might heal with a bit of luck. When there is nothing left to say for two people who have been on such intimate terms, there is at least a sense of closure, but when there are things still to be said and no chance to say them, there is room only for constant rumination and

suffering. Brubacher succeeds in communicating as much through the medium of a simple sentence consisting of ten words and two halves separated by a comma, meant to give a short pause to herself and the potential reader that might empathetically relate to this experience.

The poetic voice speaking in Brubacher's tiny jewel-like poems is also that of a resilient human being. In the poem titled "Pessimism," the female voice acknowledges how tiring it is to try to know someone in depth: "The idea of trying to get to know anyone, as well as I knew my husband exhausts me" (41), she confesses overtly, as if discouraging herself from giving love another try. Rather than opting for permanently dwelling on the past, she pushes herself forwards, takes heed of a friend's advice on limits—"My friend doesn't believe in encore" (13)—and finds a newly-conquered sense of freedom in the well-known territory of the kitchen in "Something about Ending a Marriage": "Now I can leave the wooden spoons in water all I like. I can let them sit, day after day, soaking in a wet, dirty pot" (14), she writes humorously. Feelings of disappointment and pessimism will not be dispelled that easily, though. The piece "Short Story Logic" shows the lyrical subject still holding on to the hope that she might still be remembered and loved somehow by her ex-husband in the distance: "I'd imagined he'd kept my bracelet on his nightstand" (40). All of these poems that have been just briefly analysed show the pain, debris, and mess following a broken relationship. It takes stamina to face it all and transform it into poetic matter, which is what Brubacher accomplishes in her poems, moulding words and pain to make them fit into the inexhaustible vessels of meaning and art objects that poems are. The ultimate purpose is catharsis and spiritual self-renewal: to allow herself a chance to look back and set her inner self in order to propel herself forwards. However, some of the poems make use of understatement, irony, and sarcasm, as if to suggest that the poetic persona is not engaged in serious soul-searching.

2. ENCOUNTERS WITH VIBRANT MATTER AND DOMESTIC WISDOM

After the emotional turmoil brought about by divorce, Brubacher's poetic persona finds comfort at home, which somehow becomes an extension of her own *embodied mind* and *enworlded body*. The road towards spiritual self-renewal and emotional wholeness comprises several stages, the first one of which is the painful awareness that something precious (i.e., intimacy between two people who have mutually recognised themselves in each other) has been lost for good. After awareness comes the slow

acceptance of the new state of affairs, which is masterfully conveyed through another cluster of poems of marked emotional intensity that offer a clear glimpse of Brubacher's poetic persona coming to terms with the inevitable fact that time's arrow cannot be reversed. All that she is left with is the determination to make things in her life cohere again, to salvage precious memories from her past, and to look ahead in life to a brighter horizon. In simple household chores and objects she finds unexpected comfort that ease her mind and allow her to breathe normally again.

As Bennett has pointed out in *Vibrant Matter*, matter *matters*, as it is not "passive stuff," it is not "raw, brute or inert" (vii), but meaningful assemblages endowed with affects that impact people's lives. The power of nonhuman materialities (or thing-power) circulating around Brubacher's lyrical subject at home is indicative of a continuum of life that transcends the human-nonhuman divide and gestures towards the interpenetration of all matter. By "vitality" Bennett means "the capacity of things . . . not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii), and by "vital materialism" she means "the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts)" (xvi). Upon closer scrutiny, *In the Small Hours* shows Brubacher at work as a vital materialist, pondering on those moments when she finds herself fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that she shares with the more-than-human world and ultimately experiencing the world more horizontally, as a vast semiotic-material network where everything is connected to everything else. Thus, her poems direct sensory, linguistic, and imaginative attention towards a material vitality that is simply inescapable, as it is intrinsic to all the things making up the world.

One of the earliest statements on the vibrancy and agency of matter in *In the Small Hours* is found in "How to Be Close," a powerful piece on the close relationship between the poetic persona and her mother. This is the lyrical subject speaking about her mother: "I have not often imagined my mother carrying me around inside of her. / Tonight, at the concert, I laid my head on her shoulder and listened" (11). This poem shows Brubacher practising "a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body" (Bennett xiv). The vibrant matter invoked in these lines is none other than that of the female body as a place of existence and the umbilical cord uniting a mother with her child in her womb. The lyrical subject thinks about those moments in her life

when she has imagined herself within a space of warmth and protection inside her mother's body. Now that she is an adult, shipwrecked after her divorce, she lays her head on her mother's shoulder to listen, possibly not only to the music that is being performed at the concert, but also to her beating heart as part of a vaster soundscape that brings together both human and nonhuman sounds. Under her present circumstances, the act of listening performed by Brubacher's poetic self is tantamount to charting the emotional state of her inner self and to finding a solid connection to the very materiality intrinsic to reality as such. By revisiting her mother's bodily, physical, and material presence, she seems to recover the cherished, unbreakable link with matter and the world at large. Ultimately, the self emerges as being "itself an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage" (Bennett xvii), a collage consisting of heterogeneous elements, both organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman. Notice in this poem the singularity of the concert room, the mother's beating heart, and the poet's head on her mother's shoulder, all of which is expressive of a material vortex or assemblage where the human and the nonhuman are part of an unbroken whole.

However, some of the most interesting compositions in this cluster of poems are concerned with exploring the materiality of daily objects and household chores, or rather the interconnected existence of humans and things. They serve a cathartic purpose in the poetic persona's life as a single woman again. For instance, in "Assurance," the poet writes a powerful one-line poem of utter simplicity and yet profundity of thought: "Sometimes, knowing a person is home, preparing a salad, helps" (15). The juxtaposition of "person," "home," and "salad" is meant to raise awareness amongst readers that there are moments in people's lives when knowing a person is like experiencing homecoming, a sense of returning to the origins one has never really left. The poem sounds slightly mournful or nostalgic, as it suggests that it might be nice for the speaker to know that a partner is at home preparing a salad. At the same time, the poem appears to imply that a mundane act like that of preparing a salad might help the lyrical subject forget. That the materiality of a salad should prompt these musings testifies once again to the agency of matter, to the vibrancy implicit in thing-power, which is able to compel humans to take action in one particular direction. As Bennett claims, "humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power" (16). Things have an impact on our bodies and our minds in a world that is an intermeshed interconnectedness. Far from being discrete elements, the entities called

“person,” “home,” and “salad” form a material and lyrical assemblage that conjures up a world of interpretations where the reader is summoned up to play an active role in decoding such a short and yet semantically dense lyric.

Similarly, in “Advice” the poet pays heed to a friend’s recommendation that encourages her to immerse herself in household chores, which will turn out to be extremely beneficial in helping her to forget: “My friend tells me that doing the dishes is like learning your lessons” (47). A mundane, mechanical activity like dishwashing serves the purpose of catharsis for the poetic persona’s troubled self: physically interacting with the dishes resembles rote learning, where one ceases to pay attention and absorbs unconsciously whatever needs to be absorbed quite effortlessly. She is not going to the object, but rather letting it come to her. She is letting herself be infused with thing-power, which Bennett eloquently defines as “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made things to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our experience” (xvi).

That things speak to Brubacher’s poetic persona with a language of their own is also evident in one more brief composition. On her path towards self-enlightenment and a form of domestic wisdom, she experiences moments of revelation prompted by the obscure power of the ordinary that propel her forwards on her path towards spiritual self-renewal. Thus, in “Remains” ordinary things as varied as plants or a bag of flour that are part of the assemblage called “home” prompt her to think about the passage of time with nostalgia and gravity. She writes:

Waking up, watering the plants, watching them grow. Sometimes, things, like a bag of flour, remind of how little time has passed; you bought a large sack of it and I measure it out, recipe by recipe, in a home you’ve never seen.
(23)

“Remains” shows the lyrical subject listening to the language of things at home, to the vibrancy and agency of the matter that is closest to hand—in plants and in a simple bag of flour. The poem reveals a poet engaged with uncovering new relationships and resonances in matter, and remixing her sparkling *trouvailles* as poetry. Plants take their time to grow under the auspices of her watering, and the remains of a bag of flour suffice for the poetic persona to gain an awareness of how time passes slowly or quickly depending on her life experiences. The bag of flour is a link to a past now

vanished that betrays the absence of her ex-husband. Settled in a new home now, the lyrical voice is squarely confronted with the blunt fact that there are subtle traces from the past with a stubborn material consistency about them that cannot be simply ignored. The most powerful dichotomy at the core of “Remains” is that of presence vs. absence: the presence of the bag of flour suggests the ex-husband’s absence. The same dichotomy informs the poem “What’s Hard about Living Alone”: “When you get home at night, and open the door, you can expect everything to be exactly as you left it” (49). A highly sociable person, Brubacher admits to not spending much time on her own, as she needs human contact. This poem suggests that the hardest thing about living alone is that things stay exactly in the same location where one has left them, which betrays human absence in what used to be a home for two people. After all, things occupy a specific space in complex assemblages that are charged with meaning. As Bennett claims, “[a]ssemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23). Remove an element and the whole system is altered, even if only slightly. Yet surrounded by thing-power at home, the lyrical subject can be said to attain some form of domestic wisdom, as if simple objects transcended themselves and revealed essential aspects about her inner life.

3. RESPONDING TO THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

The second section of *In the Small Hours*, “The House by the Bay,” consists of seven minimalist poems of marked aesthetic austerity. It depicts a nature that preexists and outlives humans, and is prefaced by a quote from Andrei Tarkovsky that reads thus:

If every single day,
at precisely the same stroke of the clock,
one were to perform the same single act,
unchanging, systematic, everyday at the same time;
the world would be changed. (51)

The palpitating paradox at the core of this excerpt has a gnomic texture about it. It gestures not only to the possibility of changing the world by dint of repetition, but also to the notion that a human life might be a

sequence of identical days. On another level, this statement might be interpreted as being expressive of Brubacher's poetic persona's determination to start a new life. The seven poems included in this section hold the promise of metamorphosis and spiritual self-renewal. Here is Brubacher finding a new voice, a new self, a new life, as well as energy to keep on living despite the traumatic experience intrinsic to her divorce. Looking ahead, beyond the horizon of her present, she finds out in "Fortune" that, as T. S. Eliot put it in *Four Quartets*, in her end is her beginning, that life is protean and full of promise at every step along the way. In words that betray hope, she writes: "Love comes, goes, and then comes back again" (53).

As the poet reveals in the acknowledgements section, the ingredients needed to make her *self* whole again are found during a stay at a friends' home by a bay, where Brubacher admits to having composed the closing poems of *In the Small Hours*. Once again, life and life writing overlap almost to the point of indistinction. Silence, patience, attention to the tiny details and motions of everyday life, a sense of communion with the more-than-human world around her: all of this makes the lyrical subject's metamorphosis ultimately possible. In Bennett's words, she is determined "to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it" (14). It is no wonder that the poet should have found peace and quiet in close communion with the natural world, in a house near a bay. In this respect, Bristow defines the ecocritical term "more-than-human" as being "a general term reminding us that the non-human world (on which humans are absolutely dependent) has agencies of its own" (126). The Cartesian dualism (*res cogitans* vs. *res extensa*, mind vs. matter) is to be transcended thanks to this "focal alternative to the prevailing human/non-human perspective in bio (life) and geo (earth)" (Bristow 6). In short, acknowledging the existence of a more-than-human world is tantamount to embracing a view of life whose measuring rod is not human beings anymore, but life (both human and nonhuman) instead. In a biocentric (not anthropocentric) frame of mind, it is *bios*, not *anthropos*, that is the measure of all things. As Aldo Leopold claimed in the classic *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (262), and Brubacher appears to be intent on being part of that large community that is more capacious than humanity itself. In this respect, "thinking beyond the life-matter binary" (Bennett 20), the closing poems of *In the Small Hours* appear to counter "a dualist sense of nature as something external

to humans” (Bristow 125) and to accept that the world out there is not external to her poetic *self*, but rather coextensive with it. In those poems, she transcends “the conceit that humanity is the sole or ultimate wellspring of agency” (Bennett 30). As Barad has stated in an interview, agency is not a special possession of our species:

Eros, desire, life forces run through everything. . . . Matter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. . . . [F]eeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 59)

Silence allows awareness to flourish into full bloom, or so suggests the poem “It’s So Quiet,” where the lyrical subject, amid human silence, hears “a fly caught in a spider’s web” (54), i.e., the soundscapes of the nonhuman world, which is communicative and speaks a language of its own. Transcending her own pain and wounds, she starts noticing the tiny details of the more-than-human world surrounding her, a vast web of interconnections where the boundary between human and nonhuman has blurred. Given her renewed, acute perception of the materiality of objects and of the thing-power circulating within and around her body, her sensory attentiveness and attention skills have been sharpened to astounding levels now. In “Patience,” she responds to matter in its minutest details and perceives “a small thread” (55) in her sleeve that might have gone unnoticed under different circumstances, and, in “A Map: Wallpaper, Waves, Weather,” a beautifully alliterative title, she notices “Lines drawn on a paper bag” (56), which is expressive of a new relational mind capable of apprehending isomorphisms and metaphorical links between seemingly unconnected entities in the world. At any rate, these tiny poems appear to be an exhortation addressed not only to herself, but also to potential readers, who are reminded of the need to dwell in the present moment, to be mindful of what is going on here and now, to be aware of how one’s body and mind respond to the world they are just a part of. Metaphysics is ultimately physics, given the uncontested supremacy of what-is.

In this respect, the poems “Swimming” and “Garden” convey an ethics of care implicit in love, including self-love. In the former, Brubacher writes: “Someone follows me into the ocean, tells me to stay close” (57), which betrays the presence of someone who cares about the poetic persona’s physical integrity and well-being. In “Garden,” we hear a similar

humane voice: “I find my space and seeds in the ocean. ‘Take your tools before the tide comes in’” (58). The vast, blue ocean offers her an opportunity for spiritual renewal and purification: it is home, it is the place where the seeds of herself are. Both poems show Brubacher dwelling in *this* world—in the sea and in a garden. Heidegger, who addressed the concept of dwelling in his philosophy, observed that “[m]an is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being” (245), a powerful statement underscoring the mutual interdependency of the human and the nonhuman. From this ecologically sensitive standpoint, Brubacher’s self is thus coextensive with the garden and the ocean, earth and water, two of the four classical elements out of which the world is made. At stake is a more ecological sensibility, the notion that she is to read the world, as Bennett claims with great lucidity, “horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being” (9–10), which is tantamount to experiencing “the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” (10), to perceiving all bodies as being “kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relationships” (13), and the world as being “a knotted world of vibrant matter” (13).

The closing poem of *In the Small Hours* is a moving and necessary celebration of optimism. In “Things We Put on a Hill,” readers will hear Brubacher’s autobiographical voice accepting change in her life for good, with utter calm and peace of mind at long last: “No, not tomorrow; I’m here now. And there it is: Change. Just enough” (59). Long ago, Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic poet-philosopher, said that nothing stays the same except for change, which is to say that constant mutability is part and parcel of reality. The poet welcomes change with open arms, with optimism at last, in an attempt at reconciling herself to her new, mended self. She has learned an important lesson: suffering and pain ultimately reveal themselves as both an inevitable part of life and as a chance for growth, serenity, and renewed maturity.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the corporeality of human beings, bodies are spaces of existence that are open to the world outside by means of the five senses. Bodies are exposed to and bombarded by thousands of stimuli from the more-than-human world where they are just part of the living mesh of things, which is ubiquitously pervaded by an inescapable form of vitality. The poems in *In the Small Hours* show Brubacher’s poetic persona

responding to matter and thing-power in the aftermath of a divorce, active in creating and participating in a world of meanings on which humans have no prerogative. All beings, both human and nonhuman, organic and nonorganic, take part in the inexhaustible feast of meaning and sense-making. To acknowledge the deep interconnections between people's materialities and objects' materialities is a profoundly ecological attitude. What ultimately makes the poems in *In the Small Hours* precious and worth re-reading is their apprehension of this intimate link between people and things, "a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies" (Bennett 4). Closely related to this is the intimation that "objects are always 'entwined' with human subjectivity" (Bennett 16) and that there is "a vitality distributed along a continuum of ontological types" (37) that shatters the belief in human exceptionalism. Brubacher's poetry is a woman's meditation on reality at a moment in her life of enhanced sensory perception. She is not only responding to subtle nuances in the world without, but also trying to capture the way her very self responds to the gravity of an emotional experience like a divorce, which leaves a deep imprint on her sensibility.

An exceptional testimony of a woman's writing, this collection of poems is an example of life writing as well, one where the author comes to terms with her life and seeks to write down her emotions and feelings in a stark confrontation with the circumstances of her present and the world. Life takes place not in a void, but in a world of interconnections that brings together persons and things. What they share is vibrant matter, a vitality that is pervasive and breaks down any sense of hierarchy in a world of actants that can affect and be affected by other bodies. In the aftermath of her divorce, thwarted dreams and memories from a previous stage in the story of her life prompt Brubacher to look at the world with fresh eyes. What she ultimately experiences is a complex process that leads towards illumination, spiritual self-renewal and the calm acceptance of change as an inevitable part of human existence, as a precious opportunity for growth and maturity. Whereas the poems in the first section of *In the Small Hours* chronicle episodes of her marital life as seen through the lens of her new present—and from a somewhat bitter-sweet emotional stance—, the second section gives way to a more sustained look at the vibrant world outside of her *embodied mind*. In a world marked by astounding vitality, she comes to the sudden realisation that she is a tiny thread in the larger mesh of things, that she is a part of what Abram terms a "Commonwealth of Breath" (313)—a vast community of breathing (non)human beings

sharing the Earth—and that there is room for hope and faith, for love will come back to her someday. It is no wonder that this moment of epiphany should have taken place close to a bay, amid a green world that makes her feel whole again. Such is the therapeutic and healing power of the non-human world, that she finds peace after thirty-nine months and seven days of pain and sustained meditation about what should come next in her life. Torn by the grief of loss and yet open to the life-giving details of the natural world, she comes up with the poems making up *In the Small Hours*, written with a simplicity that belies the intensity of her newly won sensory attentiveness to the more-than-human world, a symposium of the whole that encompasses people and things sharing the same substratum of vibrant matter. At the end of this journey of self-discovery, she is wiser, calmer and more open to the world, and she is willing to let go and let herself be changed by the world.

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