

Systems Failure

Zoë Hitzig, *Not Us Now* (Change) \$18.99

Reviewed by Rowland Bagnall

In *Mezzanine* (2020), the poet's debut, Zoë Hitzig navigates a world of glitches and malfunctions, where the shapes and structures of late capitalism are beginning to show signs of strain. From consumer buying habits and manufacturing mishaps to environmental exploitation and wrongful convictions, Hitzig exposes the oddly illogical and frequently damaging patterns of (so-called) civilisation, noting the paradoxes and oxymorons of our 'self-inducing / covenant', where 'self-inducing' might as easily read *self-inflicted*. 'But now it's late', suggests the speaker of the grimly titled 'How We Programmed the Apocalypse', 'Too late to unstate our / importance. And besides, the crickets died for this', a bleakly, blackly comic vantage point from which we mourn 'the soon unseen', unable – or unwilling – to do anything about it. '[S]o convinced are we of / our own demise', concludes the opening poem, 'we devise it.'

Four years on, in *Not Us Now*, Hitzig's poems address us from beyond the moment of collapse, transmitting from a future in which only scraps of nature, language and humanity remain, cobbling together utterance and meaning from a place of scarcity and near-exhaustion. It's as though the poems have been tasked to recreate our present moment from a kit containing damaged parts, crucial pieces lost or missing: 'there were cougars here, and glaciers', recalls one of several 'Fieldnotes', stalking the terrain for clues, piecing life together like a whodunit detective. 'Technodysmorphia' borrows the language of internet status codes, twice deploying an all-too-familiar '404 Error', which indicates that a web-

page is unavailable or 'dead'. When encountered online, these errors often come with added explanation: *file not found*.

Revealing the forensic fingerprints, perhaps, of Jorie Graham (thanked in the acknowledgements), Hitzig's poems are threaded with evidence of environmental breakdown and corruption, from 'toxic molecules' and 'chemical burn[s]' to self-deleting mists, a 'sterile lake' and 'motion-stopped trees', even a 'wood- / pecker trapped in the lead / chimney again'. 'I want it to feel like someone just found it', says Hitzig in a recent interview, as though the poems were 'reporting the results of an imagined excavation'. Hitzig's poems flicker in several time zones, expressing something of David Farrier's 'thick time' poetics, a term (writes Farrier) that 'refers to the lyric's capacity to put multiple temporalities and scales within a single frame, to "thicken" the present with an awareness of [...] other times and places'. In the words of Srikanth Reddy, who introduces this collection, '*Not Us Now* resembles an inquest into the crime scene of being', sifting through layers of Anthropocene detritus to establish what has happened here. '[B]ut how did it end?' asks the final line of 'Questions', drawing a bewildered blank.

Leaning into contemporary anxieties about the future of Artificial Intelligence and the as-yet-undetermined impact of machine learning on... *everything*, Hitzig's poems speak in disjointed, algorithmic voices, erratic punctuation serving to disrupt the flow of conventional syntax, interrupting and confounding sense. Several

poems are named after specific algorithms, their speakers on the cusp of consciousness, only semi-constrained by the rules they adhere to. At times, these voices twist and play with language, as though manipulating their training data, discovering its visual and sonic patterns: 'genetic combinations / combine recombine', reads 'Aftermarket', folding over itself, 'combinatorial ancestral / trees where histories // become subhistories / become historical'. The title poem proceeds like an encrypted computer code, names substituted for symbolic cyphers, like variables in an equation. At times, Hitzig's speakers seem to reject or shake off their pre-programming – '[Y]ou gave me this task', states the 'Greedy Algorithm', 'I want to give it back' – as though attempting to mould language into meaning on their own, to do away with algorithms and begin to speak authentically, to become *self-inducing*, the same aim that has occupied the minds of poets for centuries.

'If you're living in a dystopia, you don't necessarily want to look at another one', suggested Charlie Brooker of his television show *Black Mirror*. Hitzig's poems don't shy away from the precariousness of our present moment; the overall sense, throughout this collection, is of systems gradually falling apart, things going from bad to worse. And yet, the poems express a kind of optimism in their handling of data, the heaps of language and phenomena from which each line is constructed. After all, the poems themselves are crafted objects, salvaged from 'an earthly wreckage' (a phrase from the collection's blurb). I'm reminded of Maureen

McLane's description of Marianne Moore. 'Her poems are *informed*,' she writes, 'formed by that which is in them': 'In Moore a fact [...] retrains some of the aura of its discursive origin: as a scientific fact, a historical fact, a physiological fact, a geological fact, a journalistic fact – data for stitching, or (to shift metaphors) for inlaying into the irregular yet measured mosaic of the poem.'

The raw materials of *Not Us Now* – 'o-lives – quail – eggs – bi-son – vod-ka / wine – en-trails' – retain the aura of their origins, too, like personal belongings salvaged from a housefire, somehow enhanced by near-incineration. 'Exit Music', the final poem in the collection (from which the line above is lifted) even seems to literalize McLane's suggestion that Moore's facts become 'data for stitching', each line studded with hyphens, like the stitches of a sewing machine, creating a patchwork quilt from the scraps of the present.

What Hitzig's poems achieve is an examination of the tension between structures and their consequences, between language and poetic form, nature and the manufactured. Like Moore, she reveals a world 'stained with pattern', simultaneously chaotic and contained – 'irregular yet measured' – part data entry spreadsheet, part optical illusion. 'Poetry is language for talking about things that cannot really be "talked" about', writes Jorie Graham in her introduction to *The Earth Took of Earth* (1996), an anthology for Ecco Press. With *Not Us Now*, Hitzig puts this puzzling philosophy to work, reminding us, in the words of her 'Bounded Regret Algorithm', that we 'know for certainty / almost nothing'.