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"Bones Made of Light": Nature in the Poetry of Lorna Crozier

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The Saskatchewan poet, prairie poet Lorna Crozier tends to be thought of in two not-unrelated ways. On the one hand she is seen as the impertinent purveyor of "The Sex Lives of Vegetables" (*The Garden Going on Without Us*), "The Penis Poems" (*Angels of Flesh, Angels of Silence*), and that very famous image, which runs through her poetry, of "sex on a kitchen chair." This is the saucy Lorna Crozier, whose appearances on Peter Gzowski's popular CBC radio show "Morningside" led to her status as what has been called "Canada's virtual poet in residence" during that program's heyday in the 1990s.[1] It is a version of Crozier that has been reinforced in the popular mind by her publication of a great deal of personal poetry in recent years, along with a growing public awareness of Crozier's long-time relationship with Patrick Lane, which is frequently depicted in intimate detail in the poetry of both.[2] Crozier's latest poems are often fiercely confessional. In "Watching My Lover" she writes of his having bathed his dying mother and of the "old woman's" smell that lingers on his skin "so everyone who lies with him / will know he's still / his mother's son" (*What the Living Won't Let Go* 1999). In *Bones in their Wings*, she unsparingly records her own descent into old age:

> The work goes slowly. My latest poems,
> the grey ones, written on my hair.
>
> Split–ends. Enjambment.
> The *rimas dissolutus* of getting old.
> (17)

A second, not entirely unrelated version of Lorna Crozier emerges from much of the scholarship that addresses her work: critical readings which have tended to dwell on her revisionist, often impudent approach to patriarchal narrative, and particularly Judaeo-Christian myths of origin. As Susan Gingell writes in her foundational article on Crozier's work, "Let Us Revise Mythologies: the Poetry of Lorna Crozier" (1991), Crozier is a mythological poet, one who participates in the kind of feminist re-visioning that Adrienne Rich calls for, in which "female mythic understandings" are to be substituted for "the myths of patriarchal capitalism" (68). In this vein, as Gingell observes, Crozier skews Old Testament creation stories, an observation borne out by much of Crozier's later work. In "On the Seventh Day," for example, God's wife is portrayed as having to finish the work of creation, since He himself becomes desultory and distracted, and takes the seventh day off before the job is done—not in order to rest, but in order to write huge mythic untruths in his journal in the handwriting of an egotist—all "huge curlicues and loops / and large crosses on the *t*'s." "Woman / from a man's rib, imagine that!" his wife says, while comforting herself that at least no one will believe him (*Inventing the Hawk* 10-11).[3] In poem after poem, Crozier makes playful nonsense of biblical stories that configure God as a rational, benevolent creator (Gingell 75) and ourselves as descendants who ought to be judged by our conformity to any and all notions of father's (from God on down) knowing best.

Related to Crozier's rejection of Old Testament myths of origin that privilege the order of the phallus, says Gingell, is her rejection of myths of the Canadian west, those patriarchal meta-narratives that configure the Canadian west as battleground between "man" and nature. Gingell sees Crozier as contending with Henry Kreisel's seminal essay "The Prairie: a State of Mind" (1983) which assumes a relationship between man and land that is "cripplingly limited to binary structures of dominance and submission, power and powerlessness" (70), and with Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (70-1), which similarly portrays the relationship between "men" and the Canadian west as fundamentally adversarial. Crozier's response to such masculinist myths, Gingell argues, is to valorize instead "a saving identification with" the land. She quotes the female narrative voice in "Inside," for example, as choosing not to contend with nature, but rather to submit to the "flat-palmed" wind, preferring to "breathe" with it, to "tremble with the earth" (71), and to hide therein from the "heavy boots" of those vertical others whose attitude to nature is combative, oppressive, and exploitive.

Gingell gets a great deal right in her essay, which is all more remarkable in that the article was published in 1991—which is to say, before the publication of *Inventing the Hawk* (1992), *Everything Arrives at the Light* (1995), *A Saving Grace: The Collected Poems of Mrs. Bentley* (1996), *Apocrypha of Light* (2002), and *Bones in their Wings* (2003), texts in which Crozier continues her counter-textual engagement with Old Testament narratives and continues to resist "patrivincial" (Gingell 70) notions of prairie writing. I agree that Crozier's view of nature, particularly when dealing with the prairies, is very much connected to her revisionary and anti-hierarchical creation myths. However, I am troubled by terms such as "submission to" and "a saving identification with" the land, in Gingell's description of Crozier's response to nature. *Does* Crozier see nature as something significantly "other" than human to be drawn upon or "identified" with, or is the relationship more dynamic, more synergistic, more *lyric* than such words would suggest? In thinking such questions through, it is useful to consider Crozier's nature poetry within a framework of ideas about the nature of the lyric impulse and its relation to ecology or "ecophilosophy" (Wylynko 124) that have emerged in Canada since 1992, primarily through the work of Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn and their colleagues, whose thinking addresses the proper relations, in their view, between nature, the lyric, and ecological protocols.

"The lyric" is a category under considerable revisionist pressure in the academy in Canada at the moment. The traditional view of lyric as "melodic poetry" expressing "the subjective feelings and personal emotions of the poet," or as the "ardent expression of an emotional element,"[4] is under challenge from those who see the lyric not as a subjective or self-expressive mode, but as one with potential, at least, for alterity, for relating to the world on its own terms and in ecological ways. To attempt to use the world beyond the self, and especially the natural world, as a mechanism for self-realization or self-actualization, as in conventional notions of the lyric, is a kind of exploitation, such critics say.[5] Instead, poet-philosophers such as Jan Zwicky (*Lyric Philosophy* 1992) would characterize the lyric as a kind of response to the universe that is experiential, but neither solipsistic nor sentimental. In their view, the lyric response at its best is characterized by attentiveness to that which is outside ourselves, but particularly—in Zwicky's words—to "the dependencies, cultural and physical, animate and inanimate, that are inseparable from human existence in the world" (266). The fully functioning lyric poet treats the human realm (that of "mind") not as separate from the rest of nature (as in "body")—David Wylynko refers to this as "Cartesian reductionism" (124)—but as coterminous with the "natural" world. The lyricist must "listen" to that which is outside of himself or herself, says Tim Lilburn, by means of "a kind of negative attention, an alert emptiness" ("Preface" 2), with the goal, in the words of Don McKay, of "becom[ing] what we attend to" (*Apokatastasis* 96).

The lyric response, then, does not attempt to "own" or "absorb" that to which it responds, but rather is driven by "care, empathy" (Zwicky 94) for that to which it is attending; it pays "the other" the courtesy of dwelling upon the "most minute details of difference" that mark it as both other and kin (Zwicky 126). In this modality, says Robert Bringhurst, the lyric impulse may be thought of as inherently ecological: its object is to "form a community with that to which we are attending," a community which is, in effect, an "ecosystem" in which all parts are of equal value in the functioning of the whole ("Poetry and Thinking" 159). Such thinking is rooted in a deep faith in "the world's ability to manage and to understand itself" (162).

The revisionist[6] lyric poet is not ecstatic; he or she neither seeks nor achieves transcendence, a uniting with in order to rise above the natural. Rather, the lyric is always provisional, rooted in longing, which is to say a desire for an alignment of ourselves with the natural world which can never be more than partial, given that the very "capacity for language-use possessed by our species cuts us off from the world in a way, or to a degree, that is painful" (Zwicky 246). The best we can hope for is an intuition of the entity that is our other, and the possibility that its "traces" will illuminate our linguistic responses to this experience. Zwicky speaks of "open[ing] ourselves to the world" in the hopes of achieving "resonance." Resonance is not a matter of "point[ing],…grasp[ing], or…refer[ring]," she says (400), but a matter of moving "in sympathetic vibrations of varying intensities" in response to another (62), like a tuning fork vibrating with the rhythms of the larger universe. In all of this, humility is essential: "Lyric celebrates the cosmos, not the perceiver thereof," says Zwicky (Bartlett 6). "In lyric's idea of the world, language would be light" (Zwicky 422).

My point of entry into Crozier's work is her own notion of "light" and the place it occupies within her mythos, the "cosmology" within which her nature poetry operates. For Crozier, light is the first principle, representing not only the primal energy of the universe, but the spark that inheres in all forms of natural life as a kind of consciousness, as "knowing," as mindfulness and intention, as a "state of being" that is parallel to our own. Light precedes God in Crozier's symbolic universe, for "On the first day, light said / *Let there be God.* / And there was God" (*Apocrypha* 3). In fact, God *is* light, but in a perverse way, for God himself is composed of light, far-reaching and ungovernable light that will outlast Him. In "God's Bones," we read:

> His bones are light,
> they are light walking,
> light sitting,
> and standing still.

If he dies
you can't bury them.
Light slips out of
any darkness. In pine
it becomes the pine;
in oak it gathers in the grain.

If he dies
you cannot cremate them.
They are fleshed with fire,
fire-fattened.

Even the smallest bone
in his inner ear —
there's enough light
for the whole world
to read by.
(*Apocrypha* 61)

In other words, light is God's precursor and residue—an attribute that predates and outlasts him, a principle that informs the world and all that is in it, thereby offering us a mechanism by which we can read, write and sing the sentient universe.

And the universe *is* sentient in Crozier's work; it is the poet's task to make that clear. In the prose poem, "The Origin of Pen's Black Arts," the Preface to *Apocrypha of Light*, God characterizes the poet or "Pen" as worryingly intransigent: He bids Pen to "shake itself from darkness" and to "dream [Him] into words" (xi). Instead, the poet, the purveyor of "Pen's Black Arts," chooses to dash about recording the presence of light in the form of MIND throughout the universe—to register the MIND of the river, the MIND of the crow, the MIND of water snake, brome, stone, and tortoise, and the MIND of the lilies of the field (*Apocrypha* xi). In horror, God attempts to bury Pen, hiding it "among the blazing quills of Lucifer, his most beautiful, most brilliant angel," the "safest place, God thought, for Pen to be" (xii)—but that's another story.

Light is everywhere in Crozier's poetry: it is immanent and it is contagious, light constantly bringing forth life, and you can catch it at its work. In "Childhood Landscapes I," the moon "lowers its ladders of light" so that the "new shoots of the rosebushes" can "dream their fleshy blossoms, / push the thought of them / …slowly through the night" (*Angels* 14). That which we might imagine to be inanimate is not. Potatoes, for example, quartered and dropped into holes by "Potato Planters," each piece with its separate eye, keep watch as the planters recede into "the fading light" (*Angels* 22). Animals are enlightened co-creators of the universe. "Drenched with dawn," the eohippus walks "out of chaos" and strikes the sand with her foot, bringing forth water. Later, evolved into horse, she creates a companionate wind, "lean and boneless," construed for drifting "in the absolute" without rope or bridle ("The Origin of the Species," *Apocrypha* 5-6). The cat creates "with a paw's touch" the parts of the world that respond to its muted visual palette—the "greys and sepias of shade, / the sun's glossolalia on blades of grass," the warbler and nuthatch, thrush, chickadee and finch, mice, bees and spiders, and even "the dragonfly that beats / on the rilled roof of his mouth, / a word with wings" ("Lesson in Perspective," *Apocrypha* 7).

Crozier ascribes sentience to the natural world and records the enlightened nature of its various creatures, beginning with the animals. In "A Prophet in His Own Country," the gopher, a "little dusty Lazarus," is apostrophized as one who, "taut with holiness and fright," "goes down headfirst / into darkness, into the ceaseless pull of gravity beneath him" (and "What faith that takes!" the narrator says). His ears are attuned to the language of nature—the "inner and the outer / worlds: what rain says / underground" and "[t]he stone's praise / for the sparrow's ankle bone" (*Apocrypha* 13).[7] Such creatures are poets in their own right. "Lines for the Earth," for example, are formed by black ants, a "long line" of them, that "moves across the sand," so many that "if you stand on one, the line / will not break":

> It is time
> tracking itself. It is one
> vast mind moving forward.
>
> Ant after ant, each bears
> an egg, a round white syllable.
> Somewhere they are stringing them
> together. Somewhere under the earth
> they are spelling it out.
> (*Angels* 136)

Even that which we might consider to be inanimate is seen as mindful. Consider the prairie itself: "The plains are a mind thinking slowly," writes Crozier in a poem of that title, and you are but a "small figure on a road / going West" surrounded by "the great plains" that "see you" and surround you with their own "slow thinking" (*Apocrypha* 65).

In fact, it is quite impossible to separate the natural world and human consciousness in Crozier's nature poetry. In "The Souls of Animals," we are told that "If animals have no souls / it's because they do not need them. / There is something forever about their time / on earth…." "Wherever they dwell, their gaze / when they look at you / comes from a great height" and in fact in gazing, *they* occupy *us*: "they've slipped under the leaves / of your eyelids and stare from the inside out" (*Everything Arrives* 71). It is a lesson incorporated into Eve's kind of naming: Eve knows that to name properly is to intuit the self-naming of the natural world, "all the secret names / of tree and star and every bird in flight," and to understand thereby a complicated thing—that "things" are both "different and the same," that "each creature's pain" (including her own) "makes an opening for light," light by which each can see the other as affiliate ("Who Is She, Then?" *Apocrypha* 53). Some of the reciprocity that marks the proper relation between poet and the natural world—of which the person is no more than a functioning part—is caught in "Anglin Lake," wherein "the heron's flight / from shore to shore" is construed as internal as well as external, "a palindrome" that inhabits the poet during an otherwise dark night of the unanchored human soul (*Inventing the Hawk* 115).

What then is the proper attitude for the poet, receiver and scatterer of light, to assume in approaching the natural world? An openness to the kind of resonance that Zwicky talks about (the notion of sympathetic vibration with the world at large) is one possibility, I think, that is evident in Crozier's work. In "A Summer's Singing," Crozier connects listening and light: "Where does that singing start… / that thin sound—almost pure light?"; "Listen, it is somewhere near you. / In the heart, emptied of fear…":

> Where does the singing start?
> Here, where you are, there's room
> between your heartbeats,
> as if everything you have ever been
> begins, inside, to sing.
> (*Everything Arrives* 3)

What generates the "singing" in Crozier's work would appear to be a particular kind of seeing, of receiving and processing light as it enters the body. In "Midsummer Morning Run," the poet notices that

> The blue spruce all lean
> in one direction. Without philosophy.

> Nothing to push them this way or that
> except the wind
> (*Everything Arrives* 5)

Here Crozier embeds what Zwicky asserts in *Lyric Poetry*—that the lyricist must exchange logocentric "analytical philosophy" for a mode of philosophy in which "analysis" still occurs, but takes the form of "extra-logical connections of images" (86).[8] Here the visibly leaning blue spruce are read against the kinesis and tactility of the wind, suggesting on the trees' part a "philosophy" of instinctual knowing. The trees participate intuitively in the rhythms of the universe, without words and specifically without the hindrance of the words of the "dead," who can no longer know anything directly, which is to say experientially.

> O to lean in one direction,
> to know the sky the way a tree knows it,
> halfway to heaven, inarticulate,
> the dead among the green wheat
> holding their tongues.

There is something of the tuning fork in such passages. The poet longs to resonate with, to tremble in sympathetic vibration in response to, the universe. And in doing so, the poet wishes to "read" the lives of those sentient others with whom the planet is shared through the traces, the patterns, they etch.

In a sense natural entities, whether sentient or not, also inscribe: they write with their bodies (spruce etched against the sky form an alphabet for those capable of reading it). To long to read such languages is appropriate if one's desire is to participate in rather than to consume that which is read. In "How the mind works, works, works," Crozier portrays such acts of reading as a form of secular mysticism:

> Intricate scrolls along the fencelines
> illuminant, elegiac. The curious
>
> scripts of mice and rabbits:
> their coming and their going.
>
> Teresa of Avila said, *Learn to pray*
> *not with noise but with longing.*

> Prayers, then, in the pawprints.
> I learn to read them
>
> with my fingers,
> in poor light and in good.
> (*Apocrypha* 75)

Here one is asked to read with one's body, from or through *desire*—which is, in mystical terms, a state entered into with full knowledge of the impossibility of satiation, of any complete realization of the longed-for union. Under such circumstances, the reading of the differently-languaged, whose "scripts" one's fingers now trace, is clearly an act of homage rather than a satiation or consumption of that which has been "read."

Indeed there is great humility in Crozier's attitude towards her own attempts to put natural life and natural experience into human language, her own words. Her work acknowledges the difficulty of this task, given the limits of language and the labour that accrues to writing about nature in ways that express and honour intersubjectivity. To "invent the hawk," the poet must wait for the "blue / bodiless sound" to enter her ear, must incorporate "its scream" into her "belly" and await its resonance in "the dark inverted / canyon of her skull." The process demands exile to "this hard place of wind and sky," where stunted trees "recite their litany of loss / outside her window." Will she have to "lie here forever," supine before her task? ("Inventing the Hawk," *Inventing* 44).

In Crozier's view, one does not "submit" to nature so much as work with it, within the great system that is this interdependent world. What one wishes to discover is "The Garden at Night," a parallel and companionate world to our own that generates and lives by its own light, a world that human consciousness is sometimes privileged to enter partially. If properly open and receptive, the poet may glimpse the radishes that "Under the earth / …are the first / to light their lanterns" and spread "a watery glow / throughout the garden," the way the "star-nosed mole / who tunnels through the dark" finds "all his paths suddenly / diffused with light," and the way that potatoes in response build "constellations" above ground while tomatoes "wax round / and glossy on their stems" (*Everything Arrives* 105). But the poet has to be there, fully open to seeing and fully mindful of the fact that the light that animates nature—thanks to rogue Pen's black art, his having written MIND equivalent to our own into all corners of the universe beyond our sight—is accessible to us not by right, but by grace. And perhaps, in a paradox that is not necessarily oxymoronic within Crozier's cosmology, this is even a kind of "earned grace" that comes from assuming that one enters into nature as a humble part of it, and not as superior to it in any sense whatsoever.

The notes I have struck in reading Lorna Crozier as a nature poet—her mindfulness, her courtesy, her egalitarian acknowledgment of the equal status of other parts of the natural world to which we belong, her capacity for listening and for resonance in reaction to other forms of life, her yearning to receive and to process, however inadequately, the truths that lie beyond human consciousness—suggest that she is fittingly read as a lyric poet of the new order. Indeed Crozier's work must be seen as standing alongside that of other ecologically sensitive poets in demonstrating that the lyric is a formidable tool for the advancement of what Arne Naess has called "deep ecology" (Wylynko 123), the full awareness of the integration and interdependence of what used to be thought of as, separately, "man" and "nature."

Notes

1 According to Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate website, "Lorna Crozier became well known to a national audience beyond the usual poetry-reading crowd when Peter Gzowski made her his virtual poet in residence for his great morning show on CBC radio. Her lyrical works attend intimately to the relationship between humans and the earth, both in her native Saskatchewan and in Vancouver Island, where she lives today." http://www.parl.gc.ca/Information/about/people/poet/poem-of-the-week/poets

2 One website, profiling Patrick Lane, states, "In the late 1980s and through the 1990s he and his wife, Lorna Crozier, became the 'first couple' of Canadian literature largely through the agency of Peter Gzowski's Morningside program on the CBC." *One Zero Zero: A Virtual Library of Canadian Small Press*. http://www.ccca.ca/history/ozz/english/authors/lane_patrick.html

3 Elsewhere the figure of Lilith is inserted into the Edenic myth as Eve's painfully separated predecessor and twin ("The First Woman," *Apocrypha* 20-21), and other marginalized presences, from Noah's son Shem, to Lot's daughters and Dinah, daughter of Jacob, are given voices and written retrospectively into Crozier's *Genesis (Apocrypha* 24, 30, 36). In "Mother Tongue," as Gingell points out (78), Eve and the snake are construed as lovers rather than antagonists, for Eve's wisdom is that the body and language—the thing that got away from God ("The Origin of Pen's Black Arts" *Apocrypha* xi-xii)—are generative and stand in joyful and necessary opposition to Adam's submission to the codes of logos and cold dominion.

4 See, for example, websites such as the following:
www.galegroup.com/free_resources/glossary/glossary_im.htm,
www.humanities.eku.edu/Glossary.htm,
www.humanities.eku.edu/Glossary.htm,and
www.migrant.org/assets/literature/literary_glossary.cfm.

5 D.M.R. Bentley has argued that scientific rationalism, Protestantism and capitalism converged (in what becomes "modernism") and spawned the idea of nature as commodity, as something rightfully exploitable ("Further Steps Towards an Ecological Poetics"), notions that underscore or play into Romantic notions of nature as instrumental in the cultivation of heightened sensibility or spirituality.

6 I would like to be able to use the term "postcolonial" rather than "revisionist" in discussing revisionary thinking about the lyric mode. However, although postcolonial thought would appear to be potentially theoretically useful in speaking of Canadian literature—given its interest in power inequities (including, presumably, the power discrepancies between exploitative man and exploited nature)—it has been found wanting in this regard by critics such as Susie O'Brien. O'Brien observes that "postcolonial criticism has yet to address adequately the relationship between human and non-human worlds—a relationship which is of vital importance to many of the indigenous groups whose voices postcolonial critics claim to heed" (35).

7 In "Why Shoot the Gopher?" Alison Calder cites the many ways in which the gopher is negatively valued in prairie culture as a whole, and at one point refers to its being cast as "demonic other"—culture's clownish yet malevolent obverse. Crozier's gopher is one of the few valorizations of gopher that Calder can locate.

8 In *Lyric Philosphy*, Zwicky firmly connects traditional analytical philosophy with exploitative attitudes towards nature. One of her juxtapositions sets a statement of her own, that "[a] context in which the draw of the other—care, empathy—is assumed to be irrelevant is one in which all objects are potentially objects of exploitation" (94), against a damning statement by Francis Bacon: "Only let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest, and let power be given it, the exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and true religion" (95).

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