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Anna Banks
University of Idaho

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Giving Voice to the Wild Woman Archetype

Fire Watcher by VIVIAN DEMUTH
Guernica Editions, 2013, \$15.00

Reviewed by ANNA BANKS

I read *Fire Watcher* from my home on the southwest slope of an Idaho mountain in a summer when over a quarter-million acres of the state had burned and hundreds of people had to be evacuated from their homes. The views of smoke clouds in the distance and the acrid smell of smoke were constant reminders of the world of which Vivian Demuth writes, and her poems affected me in a similar manner—experiential, personal, visceral. Demuth is a poet who has spent many years as a park ranger and fire lookout, watching and experiencing intimately the physical and emotional environment of the Rocky Mountains and the reader is constantly aware of that relationship. She seems to be what Jungian analyst and *cantadora* Clarissa Pinkola-Estes calls a “wild woman,” one in touch with her instinctive feminine nature, who lives a natural life, the essence of our natural psyche.

Like the wild woman archetype of whom Pinkola-Estes writes, Demuth offers us “tastes of the wild” through her poetry. Sometimes her poems create *llamar o tocar a la puerta*, “the fairy tale knock at the door of the deep female psyche” as in “Nose Mountain Song”:

I am the bear pausing on the
road, /
From my dreams, wakened . . . /

I pray under ancient dark fur. /
I am the bear, they are waking
me . . .

Or in “Animal Conscience,” when she directly addresses her readers, admonishing us, “O tender humans, restring your faunal instruments.”

In other poems, such as “The Age of Extinction,” Demuth appears to distance herself from the natural world, reminding herself and her readers, “I’m a human animal walking a trail of illusions,” or in “Bears,” when she warns the bruins, “But watch out for beasts like me—we turn up the planetary heat, disrupt your age-old winter sleep.” At yet other times she inserts a dualism into her poems, opposing the human and non-human animal worlds. This is displayed most explicitly in “Home with Wolves,” where she tells us “I was a wolf once . . . I howled badly inviting them to lookout cabin like a wistful sister should.” Then she breaks the connection by running inside to find her camera and “capture” the moment; the wolves “knew first that my wolf-self was gone.” Reading Demuth’s poems from the Jungian perspective offered by Pinkola-Estes, these lines convey the challenges of truly living in the natural world, expressed here in what can be viewed as a shift in point-of-view between participant and observer. Her long months spent alone in the wilderness and the isolated environment of the fire tower give Demuth moments of insight into her role as part of the wider fabric of the natural world, but she is also insightful enough to recognize how fleeting these moments are—before fire season ends and she must leave her post, or when

other humans join her and her intuitions are “buried in over-domestication, outlawed by the surrounding culture” (Pinkola-Estes 7).

Phenomenologist David Abram defines a traditional shaman as one who “acts as an intermediary between the human world and the larger ecological field . . . the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and the more-than-human worlds” (7). This role of intermediary is what Demuth offers to us in *Fire Watcher*, even as she questions her ability to do so. “Can a human ever gain the insight of a drugged bear?” she asks explicitly in “The Age of Extinction.” But then, in “Woman in Green 5,” “the earth spirits send her to infiltrate,” asking her to surreptitiously pass through the human world before being called back to the wild. Demuth’s choice of words, especially the transitive verb “infiltrate,” is interesting and suggest her struggle to take on the role of intermediary, “to slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate [her] particular culture . . . in order to make contact with and learn from, the other powers in the land” (Abram 9). However, in “Indian Graves Near Grande Cache, Moonlight,” Demuth writes, “Humans and non-humans intermingle like cached ancestral lovers,” a line which offers the reader hope that a deeper holism is possible, one that provides a healthy balance between the human world and the environment of which we are an integral part.

The collected poems in *Fire Watcher* range widely in form. They include prose poems such as “The Fire Mountain Tower” and “Bears,” blank verse as in “Summer,” the ghazal-

inspired “Nose Mountain Poem,” and “Hare Poetics,” which reads like a series of connected haiku. The poems are both traditional and experimental, like “Rufous” or “Animal Conscience,” the latter changing form about two-thirds of the way in. These varied forms are effective in giving the reader a mosaic-like impression of the world in which Demuth lives, and the other sentient beings and the environment she observes and interacts with; piece-by-piece, poem-by-poem, we are invited deeper into the complexity of that world.

Demuth’s poems are described as mixing elements of realism and magic realism but a better term, one that captures the essence of her poems, is what ecologist and literary theorist Timothy Morton calls “realist magic.” The term is an obvious play on magic realism, but also one that questions the concept of realism at a philosophical level and one that reminds us of the mysterious nature of causality. This dimension of her work is most profound in Demuth’s more overtly political poems, which comprise the central portion of *Fire Watcher*, including, the “Woman in Green” series; “Dear Wilderness Women Officers;” and “Wilderness Climbs, A Woman’s Guide.”

Recently, Greta Gaard has called for scholars and writers to revisit ecofeminism and to remember that it has always been rooted in activism, “bringing animal, feminist, and environmental justice perspectives” (41) to the forefront of our consciousness. Vivian Demuth answers that call with a passionate shout from her mountain fire tower.

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ANNA BANKS is Associate Professor of English at the University of Idaho. Her research and creative work focus on critical animal studies and ecocinema.