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Auguries by CLEA ROBERTS

Brick Books, 2017 \$20.00

Review by KATE BRAID

If books could speak—which of course, they can—then reading this book is a quiet, thoughtful conversation with a woman keenly sensitive to an environment most of us don't know. In case we haven't met it before, Clea Roberts introduces us to the intensity—the cold, the dark, and the brilliant light—of the Yukon. From the first poem, the book murmurs, no—sings—of peace. "I've decided to speak," the opening poem declares,

to release certainty,

to take winter's ravens
as my rowdy clerics.

(*"Andante Grazioso"* 8-10)

And indeed, there is a sort of holiness to the awe, the close attention with which she proceeds.

Clea Roberts is a poet who deeply appreciates northern wilderness and weather. The language is that of a keen observer who notes "the mischief of / new brome grass" (*"The Forest"* 13-14) and "cacophonies / of wildflower and lichen" (*"The Forest"* 37-38) so clearly that, as I read, I put the book down to look again at my own flowers and lichens. What had I been missing? This is exactly the gift we hope good poetry will bring — keener eyes and a deeper heart:

The trees will count
all the years we've lived
and then they will keep
on counting. (*"The Forest"* 16-19)

Roberts' line breaks are as enticing as her words.

The trees will keep . . . what? Keep a memory? Keep standing? Keep track of how much further to home? Ah, "keep / on counting" (*"The Forest"* 18-19), keep track of time, of course, but meanwhile our minds have explored all those wonderful things that trees do.

Years ago, I spent a summer working in the bush in northern British Columbia and southern Yukon. I came to know a little, then, of the vastness, of the lack of human presence that leads to a different sense of proportion. There were few if any of the measures I as a city-dweller used to take for granted, such as streets, fences, signposts: all the symbols we smugly call 'civilization.' When I drove up through British Columbia and into the Yukon, miles from any other human or structure, that northern landscape—seemingly endless and wild and dangerously beautiful—was humbling and made me realize how small and vulnerable we humans are. Roberts captures this essence—both in the beauty of the land and its terrifying hostility. There are moments when she conveys setting as near-magical:

The light from outside
the room diffused
around us like milkweed[,]
(*"Brother"* 1-3)

and "Every night the wolves called / into the unreachable parts of us" (*"Riverine"* 20-21).

And oh, those northern ravens of which she speaks, those can't be ignored! I remember being downright alarmed the first time I saw them, at how large, how cocky they were. But for Roberts, they're neighbours. For example, when a couple are caught making love outdoors,

The passing corvid, aware
of its reputation for intelligence,
will fly over,
clearing its throat.
("The Forest" 45-48)

Most of the poems and the
individual line breaks in this collection are
quick and short, as if paying close attention
allows for only small, short breaths:

Tell me
how to breathe
between
the painful
and the beautiful,

my lips,
my eyelids
slow with cold. ("Cold Snap" 58-65)

As I moved through the book, I
wondered how Roberts might have come to
this place and why she remains. She tells us
why in "Why She Stayed" with a subtle
humour and some of the confidence that
often seems inherent in people who choose
to live in this country. Why did she stay?

Because her
chainsaw was bigger
than his (14-16)

and

Because she took
an axe to the frozen lake
...
and in this way
felt the reliable deepness
of winter. (23-29)

Later, she speaks of

the fierce
and elegant gestures
of the chainsaw;

its stuttering, beautiful
economy[,] ("Getting Wood" 15-19)

a cacophony that could only be admired by
someone intimate and at ease with winter
and the tools of winter. That same humour
moves all through the book: "I am sweet-
blooded," she tells us elsewhere, "an
apparition / of calamine" ("Perseids" 29-
31).

Have no doubt about it, this can be a
dangerous environment, yet the book is a
celebration of cold:

I want to be
a winter person;

I like the way
it implies
improvement.

So cold
it
...
unstitched
the long sleeves
of our schedules[.]
("Cold Snap" 43-53)

About something as simple as frost on the
bedroom window, she observes, "This is the
flora / of our slumber" ("Cold Snap" 12-13).

With such slow, sweet, careful
observation, readers begin to slow too, to
pay attention to detail—first in the book,
then around us, to our own six senses. It's
an uncommon experience in much poetry
these days. There are no shocking
revelations here, no chaos of impressions:
only the everyday, ordinary violence and

power of life in the cold, in the brilliant light
of summer, of making coffee in the
mornings with your beloved, of yoga
lessons and, eventually, of the death of a
parent, the birth of a child. What's
important is this moment of

[d]ust on my boots, a black
stream edged with ice,

and the whistle of the pika,
so unadorned and fierce

it tugs at the sky
where the cranes kettle

always on the verge
of an alphabet.

("Mountain Walking" 28-35)

Even grief takes on the metaphor of place,
becoming,

a slow
river, never freezing
to the bottom.
("Spring Planting" 31-33)

Congratulations, too, to Brick Books,
the publisher, who've done the poems a
service with a beautiful lay-out allowing
plenty of white space and appropriate
graphics conducive to a careful reading,
giving poems and reader alike a few
moments of peace and room to breathe.

KATE BRAID has published, co-written,
edited and co-edited 14 books and
chapbooks of prize-winning poetry and non-
fiction including a memoir *Journeywoman:
Swinging a Hammer in a Man's World*
(Caitlin 2012). With Sandy Shreve she co-
edited *In Fine Form: A Contemporary Look
at Canadian Form Poetry* (Caitlin 2016). Her
most recent book of poems is *Elemental*
(Caitlin 2018). In 2016 she was awarded the
Mayor's Award in the Arts for leadership in
the Vancouver writing community, though
she now lives in Victoria and on Pender
Island.