Auguries by Clea Roberts

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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.