Review of *Welcoming, Poems*, by Andrea Nicki. Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2009.

Anne Burke

The title prose poem employs tropes, incremental repetition, and reflexive self-soothing, in an effort to survive terrible experiences. The multi-personaed spirit of the poet reveals emotional identification with cats and dogs, lions and tigers, and the Alaskan landscape. In another context, the poet stated, “In writing ecopoetry, at minimum I try to imagine the animal’s life and perspective.”¹

This first collection, a compact collection of seventy-four poems, is dedicated to incest survivors, but the heightened tone is never self-pitying. As such, the accomplished, “well-wrought urn” constitutes a catharsis, of sorts, divided, as it is, into four parts: “Alaskan Skies”, “Forbidden Fruit”, “Work”, and “Homeless.”

The passionate meditation or contemplation is extended, in an effort to (re)solve her personal emotional dilemmas, rendered with the encomiastic; to praise and glorify those creatures, both big and small, which need empowering.

In “Moose, I Have Lost You,” the persona of the poet grieves for her loss, while seeking to “co-exist peacefully.” Both endure “this hard land.” She expresses trepidation, experiencing fear, and insecurity. The object of her loyalty is never constant, but ever and unpredictably changeable, appearing too aggressive and territorial, or missing altogether from the scene. While she would conditionally “tie” the animal to her, she acknowledges that she lacks her “own internal compass.”

In “Ode to a Moose”, she identifies with this iconic animal, to the extent that she barely resists herself being lost, and forgetting her “own two-legged self”. The diction is passionate, as of phallic antlers, “They are hard and solid and beautiful.” However, the visceral or venal is discounted, by a mental traveler, who while subsisting in the mind, presents with dignity, and seems beautiful. Further, she seeks lessons in accepting her own (human) nature and pledges, “See! I am so lost in you....” In “Alaska in the Snow”, she combines art with nature, to the extent that the speaker desires snow-sculpted dog, cat, mouse, and pig.

Her empathetic or empathetic responses are more than mere personifications or convenient comparisons; but originate from her academic philosophical underpinnings, her field studies in healing childhood trauma; and her research in Bioethics at the University of Minnesota. The term Empathy (ěm' pāthē) is derived from the Greek and from later applications by German theorists in the nineteenth century, we have the concept of "Einfühlung" or "feeling into" another. There is the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it. It also deals with the capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas. In feminism, the female is reading oneself into an object, or mimicry within of another. This approach deserves comparison with the patriarchal male projection of oneself into or onto another, and the analogy merits further study

In "Ravens" she attributes her own power to see colour with their imagined ability to perceive blackness. In her own dark clothing, she only lacks their wings, and opts to fly by means of poetics. When she changes her coloration, she believes that they take no notice. As I am writing this I am thinking about a poem I wrote about crows seeing black and now I am wondering if this is in fact true, and if I am guilty of speciesist lethargy.

The underlying assumption is that whatever affects one similarly affects the other. The inclination is to think and feel alike. In her cosmology, there exists an accord, and the correlation, capable of communication.

When I first read the term "ecopoetry" I was delighted to experience a moment of self-discovery; I had thought of myself primarily as a feminist poet, when much of my poetry has been concerned with environmental issues and with humanizing our technologically-driven world. I am, more accurately, an ecofeminist poet.

In the second section, the title poem "Forbidden Fruit" depicts a consciousness of being observed by a menagerie of giraffe, elephant, chimpanzee, birds, carnivores, and fish-eating bears. Domestic dogs are barking ("Thunder in Suburbia"). Female configurations abound, of The Medea ("The Man With Five Penises"); the Goddess and Giants, or Lady in Red. There are object-based narratives and self-referential, confessional stories, for example, of menstruation. Under her mother's direction, she was wrapping a sanitary napkin as if it were a dead baby bird ("Mothering 2"). Males may be dangerous animals ("Mothering 3"). Indeed, every species has a predatory power, whether, Rape, Abuse, or Darwinian Natural Selection.

A dancer, like
 The black bird squats
 Flaps his wings
 legs kicking
 (“Gay Dance”)

In the third section “Work”, there are concrete and visually interesting, textual Found Poems, for example, documentary evidence arises directly from Human Resources, in “Employers’ Reports of Injuries”. In contrast, the poet admires Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Some of the students are like a baby bird, a butterfly, the frog, and flies (“Chinese Students”). Even ladybugs are in danger (“Boys”).

In the fourth section “Homeless”, the reader will find an alphabetized bestiary (“Anne’s Alphabet”), as well as a naming dictionary (“Adult Survivors of Incest”). The latter includes an “Ugly Duckling” and a “woman who rode horses.” There is the competing territory of somebody else’s backyard. (“homeless”).

“Are you saying
 I am fat?” I ask
 fat like he thinks
 a cow is fat
 (“Furniture Owner”)

She demonstrates dexterity in economical forms, with “Haikus” of habitat, grass, and treehouse. Her memory empties:

My mind is so depressed
 it thinks only of
 the outline of birds
 (“Depression”)

It is clear that Nicki has reclaimed a harmony from nature which is lacking in human experience. Rejecting antipathy and even violence, disavowing human subjects,

[F]ollowing the direction of ecofeminist theorists, I try to empower the smallest of creatures which are devalued simply because they are tiny, and write about insects like inchworms, ladybugs, and butterflies.

In this manner, lips are “like two earth worms”. (“Untitled”). Lovers are “Two[-]inch worms” (“Young Lovers”). Categories of “Mental Illness” are each characterized by the metamorphosis of the caterpillar/butterfly. In “Butterfly”, etymologists capture a “tiny warrior of life”. The poet observes intrusions. In “Globe”, she desires

...a swirl of green clean
with the dolphins
and the whales

Ultimately, she concludes with the mysterious absence of bees (“Prayer for the Bees”).

Notes

¹ Unless other wise indicated, all prose quotations are from Andrea Nicki, “Ecofeminist poetry: Empowering All Creatures Big and Small”, in *Eco Poetry: Women Poets On The Environment 2009*, edited by Magie Dominic (Toronto: League of Canadian Poets, 2010) p. 45-50, Living Archives Series of The Feminist Caucus.