

IN DIALOGUE WITH POETRY

Edited by Robyn Rowland

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I find it exciting to read prose written by poets exploring their own processes in poetry, the value and purpose of poetry, its meaning – what poetry is to them, and sometimes what it should be to others! Often they creatively engage with issues of craft; sometimes with the mystery of the moments of creation. Understanding their own work and the work of others is part of their exploration of the poetic life. I am often struck by their sense of surety in this, a kind of fearlessness of opinion. In the established poets, there seems no anxiety about ‘fitting in’ or being in ‘fashion’. They don’t see this positioning of their opinion as something they need to be careful with. Debate is seen as important, useful and engaging.

Zest is keen to bring its members some of that lively engagement with poetry from our own Australian poets. Each month we’ll be selecting a prose quotation from a poet and asking one of our own poets to respond. The selection will be eclectic and will cover a range of approaches to poetry.

The brief is as follows:

‘Please respond to the quotation in your own way. You are invited to agree or disagree with it, interpret it and explore. It can be an agreement/extension or a disagreement/argument or both. It can relate to your own work and processes or to the work of others you admire in what they have said on poetry. But I don’t want an essay on others, rather on what YOU think and believe about poetry in relation to the issues raised in the quotation given.’

The Poet: Diane Fahey

Diane lives in the Victorian coastal town of Barwon Heads - the setting of her recent poetry collection, *Sea Wall and River Light*. Her seven other collections variously engage with Greek myths, fairytales, visual art, nature writing, and autobiographical themes. Her mixed-genre novel, *The Mystery of Rosa Morland*, was launched at Adelaide Writers’ Week in March, 2008. Diane has published and read her poems internationally, and her poetry has appeared in over 60 anthologies. She has received a number of poetry awards such as the Mattara Poetry Prize, the Wesley Michel Wright Poetry Prize, the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Prize, and was co-winner of the 2007 Judith Wright Prize, awarded by the ACT government, for *Sea Wall and River Light*. She has been awarded writer’s fellowships and grants from Arts SA and Arts Victoria (most recently, a grant for 2008, to write on birds), and from

the Australia Council - from which she also received support for writer's residencies in Venice, at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland, and at the University of Adelaide. Other residencies have been at Hawthornden International Writers' Centre, Scotland, and at Varuna: The Writers' House, in the Blue Mountains. She holds the degrees of B.A. and M.A. in Literature, and a PhD in Creative Writing for her study 'Places and Spaces of the Writing Life'. An interview with Diane Fahey can be found in *Thylazine* No. 9 <www.thylazine.org> and a selection of poems from *The Mystery of Rosa Morland* will be featured in www.mascarapoetry.com

Poet in Prose: Lorna Crozier

Now, I know it's not the task of poetry to find the answer. Instead, as Rilke suggested, I've learned to live the questions. To circle what can't be said until something of its smell, sound, taste, and gesture appears on the page. It's as if the body of what I don't know is already out there. Warm-blooded and muscled, it's watching from the trees. I feel its gaze, the unnamed spot on the back of my neck prickles, but I don't see it. I stand patiently on the trail, sometimes seeing a tuft of hair, the small leftover bones of prey, a smudged paw print filling with rain. What's there in the trees has already begun to write itself. My task can be compared to finding the exact chemical substance—the right combination of the senses, the heart and the intellect—to brush across the page so that the invisible ink of its words can be seen. Can this be true? Is a writer of such minor importance? Part of me resists this secondary role I've assigned myself because I love the tasks of revising, of refining and extending the metaphor, of fine-tuning the lines, of deleting obscurities and trickery, of finding the most precise word to say what I can't say any other way, of making the language sing, of speaking what I am so a horse will greet me as a friend. The poem is in the details and I work hard to get them right. Yet however successful or unsuccessful I am, the tasks I've just described come after the first words are there. When I'm not writing poetry, what I miss is not what you might expect. I don't mourn the loss of putting the lines on paper, the absence of pages of poems piling up on my desk. I miss the attentiveness that poems demand, the bargain I must make with the world to persuade the words to walk out of the shadows where their lairs are.

Selected segment from Lorna's talk: 'See how many ends this stick has: a reflection on poetry'

Diane Fahey in response:

From the first, Lorna Crozier lays stress on poetry as a process, a quest, an encounter with the unknown. There is a seeking, a tracking, both subtle and instinctual, which is also an experience of being sought out, shadowed, beckoned... the stalker is also the stalked. Even after the endgame, when

some trace element of the sacred, some half-understood longing or sorrow, has been captured, made palpable in language, the poem remains somehow open-ended. It is a ritualised moment in the poet's ongoing mining of self-truth, and her tussle with the elusively shifting boundaries of language: a dance in the space between what can be said, and not said.

The slippage of words that is an everyday fact of life, is magnified by the poet's ambition to shape a symbolic language, and to speak with the lilting grace of music, or a heightened vatic eloquence, or an elemental plain-speaking that none can gainsay... or, somehow, all of these at once.

At most, one brings a flawed authenticity to poetry - being in good faith is of the essence, but there is so much, so infinitely much, we do not know about ourselves, and the world, the worlds, we inhabit. What can we truly lay claim to? We live between knowing and unknowing... But that dilemma in turn becomes one of the primary creative tensions of poetry. Poems achieve depth, resonance, when they tap into the unconscious. A fish is pulled up through a hole in the ice - a wriggling, flashing surprise. But what kind of fish is this? Only the struggle with form can reveal that - or perhaps some other creature will be invented out of that grappling? Originality is, one might say, born of the very condition of incompleteness, our fractured and partial grasp of the whole, the tensile pull of motives and aspirations.

We do not have mastery. But in serving a process, some kind of purchase can be attained. Lorna Crozier captures eloquently the mix of teasing frustration and intricate fulfilment to be found in carrying the seed of a poem through to its flowering. There are many thresholds to be crossed: 'The poem is in the details', she writes - and, as of old, the devil is, too: and sometimes small angels of revelation, dancing on the pinheads of letters, words. Ground is being won on a new map - not by defoliating conquest but by careful and devoted toil. The yin and the yang work together here - an outward-bound and forward-moving energy is in a dynamic balance with patience, receptiveness, openness. But there must be a rogue, iconoclastic impulse, too - and a willingness, at any point, to score out false leads and false consciousness, or tear up the ticket, start over. Anger, one of the great fuels of creativity, needs to be focused, channelled, transformed from primal noise. And while traditional piety, truly expressed, is a rare thing in poetry, reverence for life is its mainstay.

The metaphor of hunting and stalking invoked so powerfully by Lorna Crozier has led me to seek out and re-connect with a few poems that deploy images of hunting, in one way or another. Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt...' and 'They flee from me, that sometime did me seek...' are both thought to centre on his love for Anne Boleyn. Written, as it were, in the shadow of Bluebeard's castle - a site of obsession and murder - there is a sense of encoding in both poems, which give new life to the trope of the beloved as a deer. The theme of the first is a renunciation of the hunt, and the lover, after

a lacerating and failed quest: 'I leave off therefore, / Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.' This elusiveness is evoked in the second poem, where it is infused with a sense of haunting and exquisite eroticism:

They flee from me, that sometime did me seek,
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber:
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild, and do not remember,
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range
Busily seeking in continual change...

This dream-like opening of the poem reverses the idea of the hunt, shows tameness turning back into wildness, and unforgettably captures a sense of stalking while being stalked.

There is, as it happens, a connecting corridor to be walked from Sir Thomas Wyatt to Eavan Boland. In 'The Achill Woman' she writes of being a young student of 'the Court poets of the Silver Age' - some of whom, though not Thomas Wyatt, spent time in the service of the British Crown in Ireland - and encountering an old woman who carries, in living memory, the suffering of the Irish famine, of 'old Ireland'. As Boland writes in her book, *Object Lessons*: 'I turned my back on her in that cold twilight and went to commit to memory the songs and artifices of the very power systems which made her own memory such an archive of loss.'

In Boland's poem, 'Object Lessons', a small domestic incident, the breaking of a coffee mug while setting up a new home with her husband, signals much else. On the side of the mug is a hunting scene ('cruel theatre as the kettle poured'), an image of various kinds of ascendancy, at ease in the knowledge of mastery: 'Dogs. Hawking. Silk. // ... A lady smiling as the huntsman kissed her'. Love, power, and violence... But the illusory idyll - a veil over the oppression-sown violence of Irish history - is shattered. As in many of Boland's poems, the burden of history enters even into the heart of domesticity, and must be reckoned with.

The final poem also turns on a relationship, and involves hunting. But it is the gun which speaks, and the relationship is an eerily symbiotic one between gun and 'Master' (the latter often taken to be a composite Muse figure in Emily Dickinson's poetry). 'My life had stood - A loaded gun' can be read on one level as about the poet being, from a state of both extreme passivity and explosive potential, given agency by the 'Master', with his 'emphatic thumb'. It is a complementary relationship of extreme opposites. The poem shockingly unfolds the logic of the metaphor, at the same resonating with many levels of experience and association, keeping it - as so often with Dickinson - out of the reader's full grasp.

Lorna Crozier's vision of poetry encompasses the elusive and haunted nature of some poems, as well as the visceral, elemental force that poetry can attain - poetry, whatever else it may be, is of the body. Poets call to the unknown, the unborn, the unimagined; and they work to reverse the silences of repression and oppression, of denial. Poetry can be a healing force in that it can wreathe in a renewing silence that which has been damaged by physical and emotional and spiritual violence of whatever kind, and by the pathologically invasive imagery of capitalist materialism.

While Basho, in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, steps back from language at moments, honouring the mystery - he writes, at one point, 'To say more about the shrine would be to violate its holiness' - we live in times where we need to actively restore the sacred silences around many areas of human experience: to create and re-create sanctuaries of heart, mind and spirit. Poetry has its part to play in this.

Lorna Crozier's emphasis, through her own words, on what W.B. Yeats called 'the passionate patience of art', may be complemented by another image to do with hunting that has arisen for me while engaging with her words. I remember an account of a North American Indian man who said that, should he lose his way while hunting, what he did was to stand perfectly still until he had found his bearings again. The hunter, the stalker, stands still until, from within himself, and from outside - the language of leaves in a forest, the wind moving over dried and living grasses - he knows where he is, and therefore in what direction he must next go.

In her wonderful poem, 'Blizzard', Lorna Crozier gives us an image of herself as a child struggling through a snow storm with her mother. They seem to form one being as defacing whiteness threatens to erase life, everything... It is an example of poetry going into the heartland of the unknown, where the quotidian markers are lost, and even language is on the brink of failing:

...My mother tugs at me and won't let go.
Then stops to find her bearings. In our hoods of stars

we don't know if anyone will understand
the tongue we speak, so far we are from home.

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