HELP FROM UNEXPECTED **QUARTERS**

a review by Catherine Carter

Kathryn Kirkpatrick. The Fisher Queen: New and Selected Poems. Salmon Publishing Ltd., 2019.

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When I first began reading Kathryn Kirkpatrick's The Fisher Queen, it soon became apparent that I'd have to renew my acquaintance with its formative allusion to the legend of the Fisher King, the strange, variable, multivalent story from Arthurian legend, in which the knight Parzival, or Perceval, encounters a king who has been rendered impotent by a wound to the groin or thigh, who is often the quardian of the Holy Grail, but whose wound has made his kingdom barren. Parzival can only heal the king by asking the right question. In some versions. Parzival must visit the Grail castle more than once, with numerous adventures in between, before he is capable of asking the question.

The answer to the question varies with the source, but in Kirkpatrick's version (following that of the thirteenth-century Wolfram von Eschenbach), the question is, "What ails you, sir?" or "How were you wounded?" The question is central to our era of climate change, sea level rise, and species loss, in a land well on its way to being as barren as the Fisher King's. This volume makes it clear that to be healed, we have to face and acknowledge how we were wounded. The wound is the ecological devastation of uncontrolled population growth and unregulated late-stage capitalism and consumption.

The Fisher Queen is the wounded king's wife, whom Kirkpatrick has added to the original legend's cast of characters. In the initial poem, the Fisher Queen identifies herself as being, "beyond the usual margins, / in the hinterland of the old text / camping out on

the Grail castle grounds / with my solar oven and organic greens." Although the tone is wry and a bit self-deprecating (how many of us seek out organic vegetables, in the effort to reduce our complicity with corporate agriculture?), this positions the Fisher Queen solidly in Kirkpatrick's home realm of ecofeminism.

The Fisher Queen, then, kept "knocking at the door of the written page / with my herbs and my stories," but she's not some archetypal nature girl. She

was always open to hypertext, to shuffling the narrative, ready to turn my face to each reader like a sunflower tracking the sun.

In swift acknowledgment of the patriarchal nature of most early literature, the Fisher Queen adds that, "Given how the other women fared, / I'm probably best out of that version." Her role in the story, then? When Perceval returned to the castle to ask his fateful question, she dosed him with herbs, "skullcap and valerian, / herbs of forgetfulness, so he'd ask / his question as if for the first time." This positions forgetfulness, perhaps of old stories which no longer serve us well, as a necessary pathway to the right question. That question is asked in the white space between stanzas, leaving the Queen to explain what's most important in the present:

I wanted the land alive again as much as anyone, the wounds healed, including my own. I tell you this now because you've got your own wasteland and you'll need help from unexpected quarters, new pages for the story.



What are these "unexpected quarters"? The book offers a range of possible answers: new or rewritten stories from the historically silenced. Women's voices. The wild. The work of art, restoration, creation, and re-creation, Truthful, nuanced answers to the question, "What ails us?" And, most immediately, this author's body of prior work collected here.

Lacking space to give all selections the attention they so richly deserve and discuss how they so richly reward the reader, we might consider those selections primarily in light of their reenvisioned place in the new poems' frame tale of the Fisher Queen. One of the most remarkable aspects of this New and Selected is how seamlessly the question "What ails you?" and a woman poet's many responses to it unite selections from six prior collections, weaving them into a more beautifully coherent whole than most of us can claim for a body of work that spans decades. The volume feels as though most of its contents have all been tending toward the same place, the barren land, and the as-yet-unasked question.

The first of the new poems is "The Fisher Queen" at 30,000 Feet." The Fisher Queen who, in the reconceived version, has helped to bring the land to life, has been transmuted into someone more like Kirkpatrick herself, a human woman in flight, "the old wounds aching again." This speaker meditates on having left behind the earth, which is her grounding in every sense, to ask, "What's ordinary now?" in the era of climate change, and "how do you heal a wound / by wounding again?" She recognizes that she's "not myself this far / from the ground, but what if / there's no ground?"

What, indeed? And this new poem, this perhaps unanswerable question, leads the speaker into the past from which present and future are born and borne. It takes her first back to the reckoning

with the fraught memory of parents, to "Vietnam, Again" through the never-over effects of Agent Orange and dioxin, as her ghost-father returns, healed and whole, to make her "plexiglass ceiling" into a boat turned "east," toward the wounds of that war, with "a heart that takes to the task of righting." It takes her to the craft of cleaning and repair, as she recalls (in "Shine") her younger self polishing shoes "until each pair, restored, stood equal / to the world it was to meet." Here, work is both meditation and "stay against the sadness" in "the feeling of the task so surely done / it sounds a tuning in your bones." Her memory of a taciturn father is fused with her recognition of past mistakes on a cultural, global scale, and by the very nature of the work - repair, restoration. In context of the Fisher Queen poems, it seems clear that this steady, mindful work can be not only a "spare delight" and an escape from self, but also a possible template for the restoration of the world as well as the shoes.

These questions and answers form a kind of ecological web, which stretches through the "green ripeness" of an avocado associated with a child's hunger for a father's love; the canned peach grown with pesticides that ends up wasted, smashed into a child's face in a moment of paternal anger; the repurposing and unbraiding of the father's handmade whips into indigenous crafts and fencing for a vegan garden; the poems connecting a mother's growing dementia to climate change and species loss ("the bees gone and going" and "how shall I write /. . . / redemption as the weather shifts?" (in "Mother, Ireland"). Particularly pragmatic and poetic is the paean to watermelon rind pickles' use of

. . . what's left, after the swell, the need sated, the glare of the rim bitten clean? . . . what the slave brought in the secret seed, view to a future, however bleak. . . . ("Watermelon Rind Preserves")

Those concerns culminate in the final new poem of the section, "The Fisher Queen's Question." In these verses, the making of the very paper on which the poem is printed has exposed the reader to dangerous pollution. The Fisher King's groin wound becomes the loss of a breast to a cancer, very possibly caused by environmental contamination. Readers learn that, "Finding the



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Grail is learning / another beauty from a changing land that speaks. / Why not fathom the language of earthworms, / sing notes of jasmine, chant rhythms of light." The poem ends on the question the Fisher Queen now asks of the reader and the world: "What is it, friend, that ails you?"

This section opens into the selections from the six prior books, beginning in 1996 with *The* Body's Horizon. "Sigune to Parzival: Discourse on Grief" makes it clear that the poet has been thinking about the Fisher King mythos for many years. The poem associates Sigune, Parzival's cousin and sometimes problematic guide with Medusa, a symbol of fraught female power, of whom she tells Parzival, "winged horses rose from her blood." Parzival keeps asking for direction, but Sigune tells him, "my voice is ruined with lamentation." Likewise, in "Holding Tight," an elegy for a friend who has died of HIV, the Fisher myth reappears in the final line, where the dead man's friends "refus[e]" (a powerful choice of verb) "to ask the right guestion." It seems likely that even in this much earlier poem, that question was the question to which no one dared seek the true answer: "what ails you?"

The links between the Fisher Queen and Kirkpatrick's Beyond Reason (2004) aren't as direct as those in her The Body's Horizon, but in the selections from her Out of the Garden (2007), they glimmer through again, particularly in the connections these poems weave between patriarchy and damage done to women, animals, and landscape. For instance, in "The Deer," the speaker is able to rescue a lost fawn from her dogs but recognizes her own presence as equally deadly "as the rifle's sights might yet be." In "First Mammogram," which reveals a mass which isn't cancer (yet) but a scar left by a belt buckle, wielded by the father, the

speaker dreams of a woman with a scarred chest. a "female Parzival / in a wasteland." When she dreams this, "I know a man is dangerous."

The next book, chronologically, is *Unaccount*able Weather (2011). In this volume, though, it comes after Our Held Animal Breath (2012). This switch makes sense because Our Held Animal Breath provides such a perfect bridge between the prior volumes' developing themes of ecofeminism, the coming cancer documented in Unaccountable Weather, and even the chronologically-stillto-come Fisher King and Fisher Queen, whose wounds make the whole land barren with the cancer-like devastation of global warming.

In the first poem from Our Held Animal Breath, "A Friend Visits the Sites of Vanished Civilizations," we are told of the Hopi flood legend, "the leaders / had stopped talking to the spirits / of the land, and the people, / the people let them." Poems llike "At the Turkey Farm," "Trackless," and "Strange Meeting" mark the beginning of explicit, consistent connections between human consumption, including the literal consumption of animals, and human and nonhuman misery and death. In "Strange Meeting," for example, the speaker identifies men who judge women only in terms of their sexuality - or their level of potential threat - via

the slit throat of the cow in the leather shoe

the poisons deep in the soil where the cotton grew

the felled trees of the papers stacked

the mountains leveled in the electric hum of light and heat where we sat.

In Our Held Animal Breath, the world is steadfastly, repeatedly recognized and described as dying and emptying of animals, of parents, of friends lost to murder or stroke, of women's voices misattributed to men. Its final (and title) poem offers a moment of hope in a context of concrete, something like Black Elk's one small rain cloud, a literal vision of a rabbit on an exit ramp in a city street. The speaker and those with her "gasp": "and wait to see how on earth / it lives here, between wheels and exhaust, // as if watching whatever is left / of our warm and vulnerable selves." When

the rabbit disappears into a flower bed, the watchers cheer, "because, for the moment, escape, / survival in the common release / . . . / of our held animal breath." Unaccountable Weather refers, of course, to global warming. Here, though, climate changes fuse with the earlier books' foreshadowing of breast cancer as that cancer manifests in "Every Small Death." Global warming's too-early blooms become the "unwelcome bloom in my breast," "chaos of green / on my hill," "my body's unruly / cells."

These poems illuminate the connections between violence against animals, against ecosystems, against other humans, and against our living bodies - violence which, in the latter case, may well be the inevitable result of expanding ecological catastrophe. Cancer isn't just a personal tragedy or struggle; it's part of the larger pattern of pollution and climate change. A series of poems to other women who have also lost breasts to cancer documents - and sometimes celebrates - their handling of chemotherapy, the mastectomies, the prosthetics, and the perceptions of others. Glenda gardens bare-chested after her bilateral mastectomy and does not back down when the police are called for her "Indecent exposure." Donna, dancing, throws her lover the prosthetics from her "Dolly Parton bra" because "it's all makebelieve now, like Dolly's hair."

The women's independence and celebration in the midst of loss neither undo nor are undone by the eco-anxiety pervading the later collections. Rather, they happen specifically in context of that anxiety and

change, like the rabbit's survival in an artificially constructed flowerbed. In a world where violence against ecosystems and nonhuman life is intimately connected to violence against women, moments of celebration are also resistance. The Fisher Queen is a book of both/and, of nuance and complication. Its interconnections reflect those of ecological networks, linking multiple, interacting causes with long-term effects that too often go unnoticed.

The book ends with cave paintings, perhaps at Lascaux, in which the speaker links humankind's original relations with animals with their ability to create art, here where it is easier to

... find that other self, that knows as the animal knows . . .

... so that daughters of Adam, sons of Eve, took up what the bears laid down, dark claw on limestone, and drew.

Throughout Out of the Garden, the speaker seeks to "make something wholly new / from the dripstone of another life," in a place where human art and animal parts become one.

The final section is excerpted from 2014's Her Small Hands Were Not Beautiful, a book deeply engaged with Irish history, Irish legend, and the interactions of William Butler Yeats and his muse, the Irish nationalist Maud Gonne. While this volume also offers reflections on power dynamics in marriage and in love and landscape and on what it means to be "really an artist," the volume ends with "The Fisher Queen Listens," reminding the reader how the prior selections are strung on the

thread of the Fisher Queen; she might almost be a weaver queen rather than a fisher queen, especially in context of the author's commitment to veganism. Now, "Suddenly all the stories were wrong. / Some of the origin tales collapsed." Eve makes love with the serpent.

It was long past time for everything to change, but for many the sadness was large. After all, they had the old stories by heart.

The sadness, indeed, is very large. But with "The Fisher Queen Listens," the volume ends where it begins, with a suggestion of hope and change - if humankind is able to pay attention. What's left of the old stories? What can we find in the new stories? The Fisher Queen, listening. What does she hear? A coyote's howl, the call of crows.

Kirkpatrick's choice of animals is deliberate and well informed. Both coyotes and crows are generalists, adaptive to life in a world of constant human encroachment; crows are famously intelligent and creative, and coyotes, likewise, are returning to Appalachia where the wolves were driven out by human activity. Both are also trickster figures in many traditions, including Indigenous ones. The crow is associated with death, but also with humor, pranks, and, in some cases, creation. In some versions, crows and coyotes created the whole world. Their voices, perhaps, come from the "unexpected quarters" of the first poem.

What do they say? We don't know yet, but the Fisher Queen "just keep[s] listening." This book is well worth listening to; in it, the listening is the point.