



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL GEMPERLINE

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 question." 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 *Unaccountable 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-still-to-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 like "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 "gasps": "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 make-believe 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. ■