

Jean Pearson. *On Speaking Terms With Earth*. Rexville, N.Y.: Great Elm Press, 1988.

Jean Pearson's chapbook *On Speaking Terms with Earth* is a unified and strongly crafted collection—unified by a mind that is formed by ecological awareness, crafted with sensitivity to the rhythms of the clean, taut line. The final three poems of the nineteen gathered here can be taken as characteristic of her work, each throwing light on, or from, some of its key facets. In all three poems Pearson encounters primitive presences, presences in or close to the natural world, and they call forth allegiances in her that are more compelling than whatever shaky ties she feels to the present human culture in which she lives. Her tones are her own, but in terms of alienation from European-descended twentieth century voraciously technological and commercial American civilization, Pearson can be compared to her precursor ecological poets Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder.

"Woman Who Lived with Wolves" is a reworking of a Sioux tale. The speaker is a fugitive from human society. Beaten and taunted, she flees, goes into the hills, and is accepted by the wolves. In this visionary exile, she learns to "chew their food" and "keen in their speech." When she considers returning to human community, she's not sure she will. But:

If I go among men again
no one will touch me.
They will learn my real name.
When I open my mouth
they will listen
and believe.

The speaker of this narrative is of course not the poet in any simple way, but Pearson also often feels closer to animals than to mankind. The biographical note tells us, "An animal advocate, she has worked with wolves at Wolf Park in Indiana and edited a collection of tales, poetry, and essays on the wolf, her spirit animal." She is eloquent in several poems in her call for greater consciousness and regard toward animals: "Pray that we will see/ their faces again in the mirror of creation,/ the miracle of animals, their clear eyes/ meaning more than profit to our own."

The impulse to protect is one side of her consciousness of animals. The poet knows that animals need human allies now (I write in the summer of the mass death of the North Sea seals, potentially the quickest extinction on record), and she aims to be among them. The complementary side is that which "Woman Who Lived with Wolves" expresses: the desire to "turn and live with animals," to draw spiritual sustenance from them. (The book is dedicated to someone named Dogga, "companion in all weathers.") This desire is a shadowy and easily sentimentalized thing, but there is no doubting its reality and importance. An entirely human world is an impoverished world. You can't buy the ascent of a heron from a marsh at the mall. Pearson brings back a salutary, potent, sane blend of compassion and vision when she returns among men and opens her mouth, when she writes her poems.

In "Red-Tailed Hawk" an animal again appears as a spirit guide, one that "stares down,/ watching you from a giant pine," whose "living solid face demands/ that you recall the branching path/ that led you to this hour, this place./ Do not turn away." I wish Pearson had cut the next sentence: "Earth waits/ for your hand, the speech of roots/ and mosses your tongue makes." Cut it because even if the earth does wait in this way, which is doubtful, the line is too human-centered and doesn't sound true, and because this poem is particularly a poet's totemic encounter and "speech of roots/ and mosses" is asking, perhaps claiming, too much, and something different from what Pearson does truly achieve. Better to say, as she then does:

Not every woman is gifted with earth-song.
Do not forget. The hawk's beak can pierce
through hollowness and flesh.
And the fierce spirit lives on.
Let your blood merge with the river's water.
There's no true power without some dying.
Die in the right way. Make your song strong.

Earth-song, yes, but lyricism and articulation, gracefully curved but also sharp. The hawk's beak is the more appropriate natural image for the best qualities of her poetry.

If “Woman Who Lived with Wolves” and “Red-Tailed Hawk” highlight relationship with animals and the nature of poetry, the final poem, “Learning to Float in the Monocacy,” can represent a third element (present in the other poems as well), which is the whole turning and drift toward that which is older and more primal than the “300 years of imported history” which she admits she is prone to ignore. She digs in a streambed, looking below any European shards for remnants of “the original people,” called by us the Lenape. Then the drift of her feeling goes further, to animals; then to the earth and water themselves, until the identity of the complex human person is minimal and “All that is left of me streams/ with a deep, eddying knowledge/ of how to go home.”

Pearson is a poet of transformation, and she accomplishes that difficult magical evocation frequently— most strongly, I think, where she focuses it most sharply, as in the ending of “Seed Pod and Resinous Cone,” or “In the Season of Possibilities in the Real World,” where she says, standing again by water: “O, this capable river! Such handiwork,/ such implicit, high technology!/ And I am still a small creek of a girl/ playing beside it, for all my years.” “And I am still a small creek of a girl”— a lovely line, for its sound, for its playfulness, for its unpretentious sudden evocation of being two things at once. I like it also because it stops short, where the ending of “Learning to Float” tries for the full drift back to the pure home. I find the smaller claim more believable, and a better signpost toward where we need to go.

On Speaking Terms with Earth contains a poem in honor of Olaf Palme, but otherwise nothing from the European/Western/human sphere receives praise here. Alienation from this particular culture is not hard to understand. Some of us go further. We are, as Pearson suggests, no doubt less separate from other species than we have thought, but one thing that very likely does distinguish us from the other animals is that we are probably the only ones to feel alienated from our own kind, even to long to belong to other species. It’s a strange, interesting, complicated trait human beings are capable of.

What I am getting at is that one thing the deeply ecological poet can and perhaps should investigate is the complexity or paradox of his/her situation. One of the reasons Thoreau is so fascinating and valuable is

he did such a good job in this area. I would like to see, to hear, Pearson engage this task more.

Meanwhile, *On Speaking Terms with Earth* is a book of deeply committed and lyrical poems to be grateful for. Jean Pearson’s poems have a fine shapeliness and clarity. The language is kept spare and mostly simple, so that when a striking phrase or image appears it shines like a vein in rock. And I like her anger— poignantly expressed in a description of seeing as a child at a roadside gas station/zoo a five-foot alligator displayed in a four-foot metal tank; expressed with rhetorical, incantatory skill in “The Purchase of Playwicky Indian Town and the Land Between Neshaminy and Pennyback Creeks, June 23, 1683.” For Pearson poetry is the meeting place of the earth and language, and in these poems she honors well both sources of her power.

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