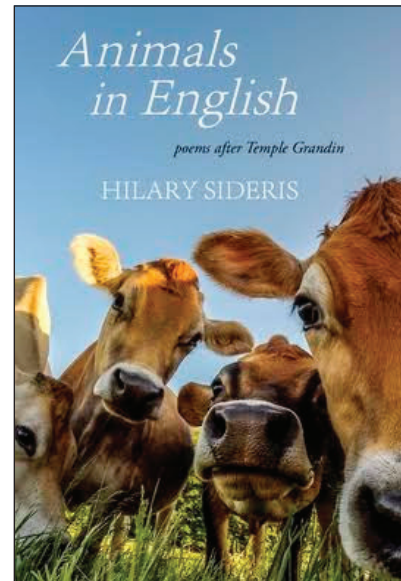


Hilary Sideris's *Animals in English* (Dos Madres Press),

reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

In the prologue to her poetry collection *Animals in English*, Hilary Sideris explains that she “was writing a series of poems in the voice of Temple Grandin,” who, because of her autism, “spent her youth and most of her adult life learning to speak the language of ‘normal’ humans so that she could tell us how animals . . . perceive, feel, and experience the world in pictures.” Sideris hopes that she can parallel Grandin’s intention “by translating Grandin’s experiences and insights into the language of free verse.” The “voice” of these poems is Sideris’s representation of Grandin’s: through the activist’s epistemological framework, the reader is brought closer to the inner worlds of animals, a rendering which expands our awareness of the greater existence we humans share with our fellow creatures.



In the collection’s opening poem, “Nantasket Lights,” Sideris begins her act of ventriloquizing Grandin. The poem details Grandin’s childhood frustration with language: “I didn’t think in words. Still don’t,” and describes how she was removed from school for slapping a classmate who mocked her repetitive attempts to tell a story by calling her “tape recorder.” What Sideris’s child-Grandin was trying to describe was a physical sensation, the pleasure of being “pushed up against a wall” while riding the tilting wheel of the Rotor at Nantasket Park. The comforting feeling of compression is continued in the next poem, “Squeeze Chute,” which describes how cattle are “clamped” in a metal cage to get there shots, a process which actually calms them down “like swaddled newborns.” Sideris’s Grandin suggests that she would find comfort in “a squeeze chute of my own.”

“Squeeze Chute,” as do more than half of Sideris’s poems, begins with an italicized quotation taken from a set of books cited at the volumes conclusion which are by or about Grandin. In the poem “Rapid Erratic Movement” the epigraph reads “It doesn’t jump out at normal people the way it does at me or a cow.” Sideris’s poem goes on to describe a child-Grandin who is “obsessed” with motion, such as “flags/ flapping in the wind,/the light reflecting off a fan’s rotating blades.” The narrator compares herself to a cat chasing a laser dot, “mindless,/ obsessed, their world/ a skittish dot,” and continues on to contrast her behavior with the purposefulness of a child, who, “cheered on by our mothers,/ makes a castle with/ a bucket & shovel.” Grandin, like the animals with which she empathizes, is observational, not planful, like the purposeful child. The epigraphs to Sideris’s poems tell us the activist “saw pictures inside her head,” and that during her thinking process had “no words in my head at all,” a revelation Sideris

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transliterates in her poem "Certain Infinities" as "Words came unnaturally,/ I learned to speak/ mimicking mom, who/ conjugated like a queen." Sideris's poems and the epigraphs upon which they are based suggest that Grandin was a difficult child to raise, her condition nearly impossible to properly diagnose.

The epigraph to the poem "1950" describes how childhood autism was once believed to be "a reflection of bad parenting, and most especially of a chillingly remote . . . refrigerator mother." The poem itself describes how, as child-Grandin "painted walls/ with my feces, Doctors told her [mother]/ she was the cause,/ there was no cure." Yet while Grandin seemed immune to "normal" parenting, the poem "Ariel" reveals her intuitively empathetic relationship with a horse she was learning to ride: "She shows you/ how to ride, knows/ when you want/ to canter, gallop,/ trot—dances with/ you when people/ can't or won't." The horse, it is suggested, observes the details of the child's discomfort and adjusts to accommodate them; to demonstrate Grandin's empathetic understanding of animals, Sideris's poem "Signs of Horse Distress" parallels the autistic child's suffering with the distressed awareness of an animal like Ariel: "Head high,/ eyes wide, ears/ pointing toward/ the person of/ concern or pinned/ back, flat. Sweat/ without exercise./ Tail swishing/ without flies."

Sideris channels Grandin as she considers the difference between language as used by "normal" humans and animals. Our own human understanding of language prejudices our conception of animal language. As the epigraph to "Prairie Dogs" explains, "instead of looking for animal language in our closest genetic relatives, the primates, we should look at animals with the greatest need for language in order to stay alive." The complementary poem suggests their calls are intended to warn that "a predator/ is on the way, how fast,/ where from, what kind." The epigraph to "Annabelle's Bite" explains that "[a]nimals probably don't have the complex emotions people do, like shame, guilt, embarrassment, greed, or wanting bad things to happen to people who are more successful than you." Sideris's poem illustrates the concept: "The pet we let out/ kills with grace, Calm jaws clamp/ prey then shake/ methodically." In "Slaughterhouse Lights" the Grandin-based epigraph emphasizes once again the similarity between animals and the autistic, asserting that "[a]utistic people and animals are seeing a whole register of the visual world normal people can't or don't." The poem describes how Grandin was hired by a company to determine why pigs were stopping on a chute that would lead them to slaughter: "I got on my hands/ & knees, saw the reflecting/ lights in puddles; pigs fear not death, but sudden movement,/ rapid changes, foreign objects/ in their visual field."

Sideris's art in *Animals in English* resides in her ability to complete a multi-level act of transduction in clear, simple language. Her poems are based on dual premises: first, animal language is not based on the same premises as "normal" human language; second, that the epistemological framework of those with autism, specifically the animal activist Temple Grandin, closely resembles that of animals. Sideris's concluding poem, "Stairway to Heaven," opens by telling the reader that "Cows think in pictures,/ not stories." While being led to slaughter, they proceed along the chute that leads them to death as if they're part of a herd that "spirals" over pasture land, and uncomplicated by emotions, they "never wonder where it ends."