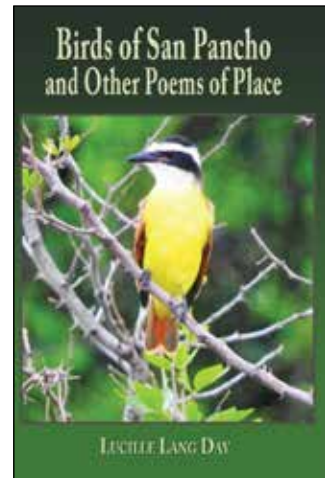


Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Birds of San Pancho and Other Poems of Place
Lucille Lang Day
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Reviewer: Eric Paul Shaffer

Poetry of place is an essential strategy for human reconnection with the planet. What Gary Snyder called "the capacity to hear the song of Gaia at that spot," the one place each of us inhabits, is one of the fundamental sources of poetry, and in her work, Lucille Lang Day demonstrates thorough commitment to this principle in all her work.



Day is co-editor, with Ruth Nolan, of *Fire & Rain: Ecopoetry of California* (Scarlet Tanager, 2018), a volume of 250 poems from 149 contributors, among whom are Ellen Bass; Ann Fisher-Wirth (co-editor of *The Ecopoetry Anthology* from Trinity UP in 2013); Dana Gioia; Robert Hass; Brenda Hillman; Ursula LeGuin; and Gary Snyder. As one whose work was also included, I admired the editorial decision to shape the contents using eco-zones, such as desert, coast and ocean, and fields and meadows, and the work included demonstrates Day's broad knowledge of ecological poetry in California.

The poems in *Birds of San Pancho and Other Poems of Place* investigate, celebrate, and communicate the expanding joys of exploring and dwelling in a place, for a moment, a month, or a millennium. The poems convey views of places near and far in the distinctive detail that knowing and inhabiting any place demands.

Day's poems make my ears ring with immediacy. She is not just talking, or just talking to me, she is speaking to us of all living creatures, us and others, making life meaningful. In "Elephant Seals," observations empirical and entertaining allow Day to examine humanity. Speaking of the seals, she says, "It looks like an easy life--lounging in a puddle/ or sleeping on the beach." But the daily activities of elephant seals set human concerns in a stark new light: vivid images like "Loser males lumber toward alphas, rear up,/ get bitten, lumber off" are interspersed with pressing questions like "Does anyone dream about dinner?" And expertly, after piquing our hunger with a quip, Day reminds us that these seals dive "two thousand feet under the sea, holding/ their breath for up to two hours to hunt for fish." The juxtapositions are jarring enough to help us each see where we are, who we are, and who seals are.

And Day embodies a rich authenticity I admire. In "Watching the Grebes," she fully sees the grebes I've seen myself at Clear Lake in California. The movements of grebes she describes are the ones I remember: "Long necks held high, black crests and white cheeks/ side by side, they glide as though on skis, advance/ toward us." She sings the song "of Gaia at that spot" in the way all of us hope to vocalize in order to draw our audiences close and convince them of the wonder of every passing moment.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Even better, Day connects the courtship of grebes to that of our species convincingly and gratifyingly as she expresses a wish “to be as easy/ as the grebes, who seem content to find/ a dancing partner as the new day starts.” Day believes that in the world, we find ourselves, and her poems convey her vision.

In “Redwoods and Rain,” kinship extends into the deep past: “My elements come from supernovae/ blown light-years across space.” Then, Day shares a moment of kinship among artists as she visits the re-creation of Van Gogh’s house: “this is now a true artist’s house too,/ where one could go mad dreaming of sunflowers.” In “Shoe Story,” the casual makes a random moment eloquent: “My sole started flapping like a huge/ tongue on my left sneaker when I was/ three thousand miles from home.” And so are poems made of mistakes and meaning. Most of all, the pleasure of these poems is not all in the reading; the pleasure is in being there, and we are.