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BOOK REVIEW

Ron Ellis  
University of Wisconsin

About the Author: *Ron Ellis* teaches writing and literature in the English Department, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, WI, 53190-1790. He edits the poetry journal *Windfall*. He has a special interest in relating poetry to other arts. He has read and recorded his poetry in many forums. He has recently published a collection of poetry *The Blue Train* (Woodhenge Press, 1990).

*ON SPEAKING TERMS WITH EARTH*, Jean Pearson, Great Elm Press, 1988, \$4.00 U.S. Reviewed by Ron Ellis

Those of us who hook, spear, trap, cut, poison, inject, or shoot animals seldom pause to wonder whether they mind such treatment. We assume that they have little or no feeling, or that their pain is justified by human need. We lack the scruple of earlier cultures, such as that of the Greeks, who would put food under the head of the one to be sacrificed to produce the downward motion, the nod, that could be construed as the animal's assent to the proceedings. Some of us, however, no longer accept the religious mandate that slipped from the Old Testament into an assumption of general dominion, interpreted as anything from bear-baiting and cock-fights to meticulous scientific experiment. A growing body of opinion, not only within the animal rights movement, but ranging from scientists to poets, questions the ease with which we give and take animal life.

Jean Pearson, a poet and activist with a Ph.D. from Cornell University in German Literature, shows us in her epigraph from the Book of Job that there is a biblical injunction for something quite other than dominion: "But ask now the Beasts,/And they shall teach thee;/And the Fowls of the Air,/And they shall tell thee;/Or speak to the Earth,/And it shall teach thee." Listening to whales and dolphins is a very recent legitimate study; science is only beginning to catch up with poetry. Imagine someday experimenters listening to plants, perhaps to verify Tennyson's hunch that the flower in the crannied wall has the knowledge of "what God and man is." But whereas Tennyson proposes to remove the plant from the wall, "root and all," Pearson watches and listens, as in her "In the Season of Possibilities in the Real World," where "the first yellow fuzz/begins its whisper at the top of a willow." She sees the river as unmethodical, wandering, and yet as support, "with ducks on its back." The river is also a product, the result of "handiwork," even of "implicit, high technology." Clearly, to be on speaking terms with Earth is to be aware of how thin the line is between human, animal, plant, and so-called "inanimate" objects and forces, a point this poem makes precisely by transforming the speaker into "a small creek of a girl...for all my years."

Rivers and streams connect the speaker to Earth in several of these poems, especially in the concluding longer poem entitled "Learning to Float in the Monocacy," where the poet (whom we may safely identify as the speaker) becomes a spiritual archaeologist, uncovering the real name of the river ("Monakessi.

Stream that Bends") and the tribes of the Lenape: "I dig and call:/Minsi, Unami, the well-grown, straight-looking/first people...." The poem develops into a song of kinship with "the community of beasts," "wolf-dog, deer, and badger" and others, all connected to the mystery of a deeper, transcendent unity: "We have been bathed in voices/from before the light." The Monakessi brings the speaker into an ecstasy she can identify as the "knowledge/of how to go home": "I bear the river's weight, dancing/into wilder clarity." Pearson brings us to that sense of the Earth as mother and goddess (without ever using those terms) which characterizes the most ancient of all myths. As Joseph Campbell has pointed out in *The Masks of God*, the goddess Earth pre-dates by many thousands of years the patriarchal warrior tribesmen who transformed or suppressed her to produce later traditions.

In "A Daily Prayer for the Poisoned, the Blinded, the Trapped, the Shocked, the Sacrificed..." the traditional division which allows us to exploit animals is linked with a theology of dominion: "...we said/they had no souls, no reason, no thumbs..." The prayer is to re-establish the prelapsarian link, "that we will see/their faces again in the mirror of creation...."

Many of these poems show such linking of human to Nature, present to past, to achieve or at least move closer to, the lost unity. The first poem in the book, "Seed Pod and Resinous Cone," shows the observation of Nature as the first step. The symmetry of the pod and cone lead the speaker to a state of stillness which is the "necessary step/deeper in." The dream state is another step, as a Lenape Indian in "Spring" initiates the dreamer to "secret openings" so that she can epiphanize, in this erotic and Whitmanesque encounter: "I smell of earth,/I am all damp with Life!" Whitman's famous speculation that he could turn and live with animals finds development in Pearson's "Woman Who Lived with Wolves," following a Sioux tale as it takes us to the final step of direct communion. The speaker, an abused woman, leaves the tribe to learn the customs and speech of wolves to find her own healing. She speculates:

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.

It won't do to attribute the feelings in a poem like this to a sentimental, exaggerated view of what wolves might be able to teach. Although most scientists have been very cautious about attributing "higher faculties" to animals, recent research is tending otherwise. For example, Shirley Strum, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, says "it is anthropocentric to believe that humans are the only creatures with motivations, attitudes, needs and mind."

The woman who lived with wolves may be an "eccentric" example of rapport

with another species, yet in Jean Pearson's world the poet must function to make that rapport possible. As we learn in "Red-Tailed Hawk," "This is the season/of visions." The hawk, a "spirit-guided" described in terms that fuse it with a warrior, addresses all poets and proclaims that "Earth waits/for your hand, the speech of roots/and mosses your tongue makes." Without any litany of threats to the planet, the speaker nevertheless conveys great urgency and presses for commitment in the final line:

Die in the right way. Make your son strong.

This is a fine, perhaps too slender, collection of poems that convincingly render a passion for compassion, an energy that very seldom turns brittle or rhetorical ("For Olof Palme" might be susceptible to such criticism). Jean Pearson helps us make that connection with Earth as mother which Joseph Campbell calls the ground of all being. In "The Green World Lover" she adapts the Campbell injunction to "follow your bliss," as the speaker embraces shag moss "all down the bark of a tree":

Deep in my own life  
as I follow my bliss  
I must become  
this green.

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