Small Mechanics
by Lorna Crozier

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Crozier is not just another one of those great Saskatchewan poets, she is one – along with Eli Mandel and Andrew Suknaski, among others – who set the pace. And so it is with great anticipation that I peel back the cover of Small Mechanics.

But before doing so, it is fitting to seek to discover what it is Crozier herself looks for in a poem. Fortunately, we can glean just that from her website (http://www.lornacrozier.ca/notes.html), where she states:

I want poetry that surprises. But not in a cheap way. Does the language—does the music—take you to a place where you haven’t gone before? . . . There is a kind of logic that sound creates—that rhythm creates and that metaphor creates—which is the essential logic that lies at the heart of a good poem. It’s a kind of thinking, of proposing, of reasoning that can teach us the most because it’s done at a level beyond thought. That’s what I’m after in what I read and in what I write. Again it’s not conscious, at least not at first, but you know when that special thing is there in the images and the words and you know when it’s not.

She then provides a beautiful summation when she says of her own poetry: “What I am trying to establish when I write is a movement back and forth between the profound and the ordinary.” This statement brings to mind the 1957 publication of Mircea Eliade’s The Sacred & the Profane, in which the author introduced the concept of the “sacred space.” Whether or not Crozier’s comment is an unconscious reflection of Eliade’s title we will never know, but we can sense in her statement that the concept of the “sacred space” does find refuge in her statement and in her poetic mindset, although perhaps on a more quotidian, secular plane.

That last statement certainly doesn’t mean to imply, however, that Crozier shuns spirituality. You sense a profound respect for Taoism in several of her poems. In addition, there is at least one that seems to flow from an exposure to Zen Buddhism.

And, of course, spirituality never suspends humour. Ever since we observed carrots having sex in Crozier’s poetry, we have come to expect more of the same and have not been disappointed.

Crozier is attuned to the subtle nuances of words and lines, and in the opening poem, “Last Breath,” we can hear a death rattle in each line. Speaking of breath, we owe a debt of gratitude to Denise Levertov, who taught us that punctuation breathes, that the pranayama of the poem is found in the comma (a half breath) and the period (a full one). Having said that, I am not one who believes that a line can only be endstopped by a punctuation mark; a strong verb will suffice, one that requires us to suck in a breath. Consider, for example, in the third line below, the word “pluck,” whose plosive expression forces us to expel air from our lungs. Crozier creates an impression of each line breathing its last:
Not a living soul about,
except for me and the magpie. I know
if I don’t keep moving, he’ll pluck
the breath from my body, taste it
on his tongue before it slides (1)

Normally, the poet wants to begin a line with a strong word. Crozier foregoes this convention in the last three lines cited, thereby shifting the emphasis to the last word of the line. And it is only in that fourth line with its weak “it” that we ever acquire the full sense of enjambment.

It doesn’t take long before we encounter another poem that takes our breath away. Listen to the play of phonics and sense as you sound out (which you should do with every poem) the lines of “Transplanted”:

This heart met the air. Grew in the hours
between the first body and the next
a taste for things outside it: the heat
of high intensity, wind grieving (5)

That first short sentence which begins the poem but does not end it allows its period to act as a caesura with two stresses on either side. There is also in that sentence the alliteration of “heart” with “hours.” All of these devices bring into play the little-used poetic device of the ancient Anglo-Saxon line (think Beowulf.) We expect, in the second line, the word “last” but, instead, encounter “next,” which grasps the line from the jaws of cliché turning it into surprise. And then we encounter an excellent play on “t” in line 3 before the “h” sound ending that line gets us “high” on the next, a line that ends with the excellently evocative “wind grieving.” Note as well that “intensity” returns us to the play of “t.” These lines demonstrate a master at work.

“Lichen” takes us in another direction. It is reminiscent of a poem in Dennis Cooley’s classic, Bloody Jack, which plays with metaphors on the idea of the moon creating a list of images. Crozier goes one better, expanding Cooley’s single-line references into poetic sections. Her fabulous images include descriptions of lichen as “rock’s small wound” in section 1, as “embossed orange seal” in section 2, etc.

Crozier explores various spiritual traditions in her poetry. In “If Bach Were a Bird,” we encounter Taoism:

I am reading Wang Wei
and listening to Bach though
why they go together I cannot say,
can count on only this for sure:
the Seven Sages in the Bamboo
are chickadees, know-it-all and chatty. (19)

The Seven Sages reference is to an ancient Taoist fictional work. Wang Wei is either a Taoist book or the name of a Taoist scholar. The opening stanza of “Prophecy of Birds” – “A snake’s tongue licks your ears. / Now you understand at last / the prophecy of birds.” – is structured like a Zen koan.

There is so much here that I could continue forever. ❖

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