Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lobsterography

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 1st, 2015

Everyone needs a totem, a mascot, a spirit animal. This includes poets. Jerome Rothenberg became a beaver, which he chronicles in *A Seneca Journal*. John Kinsella has spoken of the importance of parrots in his work, and as a recurring trope of Australian poetry in general. There are plenty of others too who have a deep relationship to particular animals, which I have considered elsewhere.

My animal is the western rock lobster (*Panulirus Cygnus*), or crayfish as it is locally called, which is found in waters off Western Australia. My relationship to crayfish is firmly located in one place – a particular (and secret) stretch of reef in the southwest corner of the Cape Leeuwin region. I have encountered crayfish elsewhere – eating them on a snowy Thanksgiving weekend in Maine and diving in the warm waters of Hawaii, Thailand and Cuba. But, I have though only caught them at home.

Dawn in summer from boyhood to early adulthood was spent walking over limestone reef, pulling up pots in search of lunch. My dad and I would drive down on the first night of the season, dropping pots as it struck midnight. Some years the tide would be high and we would float our pots out on old surfboards and drop them in the hole. Other years the tide would be low and the reef exposed. We'd use a wheelbarrow or carry the pots on planks. That was the night I was allowed to stay up late. The next day we would return to see if there was success. Sometimes there'd be none, sometimes ten crays, often three or four. The pots would be left in there for five months and we would check them each morning to see if there were crayfish. It would go in cycles – more likely to catch them when there was no moon, less likely the brighter the night was. It brought one closer to the sea and some essential, natural poetry. Crays are nocturnal and cagey creatures, shy and intelligent, beautiful and changeable too. They are also a symbol of summer, of home, of family for me. It is this part of home that I literally dream of when I am away for too long.

Crayfish are not birds, or whales, or even kangaroos in the poetic archive. They are marginal afterthoughts and do not carry with them a particular history of association. But they are not quite a tabula rasa. Consider the following poems:

> creole cocoa loca
> crayon gumbo boca
> crayfish crayola
> jumbo mocha-cola
>
> from '[marry at a hotel, annul'em]' by Harryette Mullen

> He was holding a dented bucket;
> three crayfish, lifting themselves
> from the muddy water, stirred
> and scraped against the greasy metal.
>
> from ‘Fourth of July at Santa Ynez’ by John Haines

> I thought I was Tom Sayer
> catching crayfish in the Bronx River
> and imagining the Mississippi.
>
> from ‘Autobiography’ by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

> mouth watering speculations:
> lobster or crayfish?
> completely out of season
> we eat the tinned sardines
>
> from ‘Humber Vogue’ by Richard Tipping

> Not housing, but characterful houses
> lace-trimmed like picnic dry blouse
> reigned when beer went with cray
> Now the crayfish are Formula One
> cars, flat out in raging procession –
> but we’re off to where the river
> learns and teaches the Bay.
>
> from ‘Melbourne Pavement Coffee’ by Les Murray

> Hours later wrapped in flame
> and salt-licked crayfish skin
> in the flase comfort of a deliriously
> cool motel room where air hissed,
>
> from ‘Sunstroke’ by John Jenkins

The crayfish then is open: it is a sound, it is prey, it is a madeline, it is food, it is metaphor, it is skin. Crayfish are able to be linguistically deployed in a variety of ways.

Like the angel of history though the crayfish moves backward. After Walter Benjamin we could say that:

> Where we perceive a sea of creatures, the crayfish sees one single environment which keeps being burdened by wreckage upon wreckage, pollutant upon pollutant in front of his claws. The crayfish would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a current is eddying from deep off the continental shelf; it has got caught in his carapace with such violence that the crayfish can no longer walk. This current irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call climate change.

Swimming backwards the crayfish sees the detritus of our lives – plastics, chemicals, rope, pollutants in the ocean – and knows that we need to regain control. In my lifetime that little stretch of reef has changed. The coral itself has been flattened; when you look back on the headland what was once part of national park is new, luxury housing.

We might though turn to poets for an understanding of crayfish, of a new social contract that includes them as an indicator species for the health of the ecosystem. Suburban people often see crayfish as the dish of choice for international high rollers. They are a luxury item and the restaurant chain Red Lobster trades on that perception. Wither gout the rich man's disease. But the health of crayfish too reflects some essential way we interact with nature. Poets are to play a crucial way in imagining a world that can be different from the climate changed one we will inherit. Following the crayfish backwards, following the angel of history, is something we all may yet benefit from.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, July 1st, 2015 at 2:30 pm and is filed under Essay
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.