

Lines Composed Indoors While Contemplating the Weather

Sina Queyras

The Weather

Lisa Robertson

New Star Books, 2001

As she did in both *XEclogue* and *Debbie: An Epic*, Lisa Robertson is once more engaged with the lyric and romantic, investigating the impact of language, as well as poetic structure, on women's lives. And perhaps since she has given us so many clues as to how to read her text, we should take advantage. In an essay titled "The Weather: A Report on Sincerity"¹ published in *DC Poetry* in 2001, for instance, Robertson offers the following:

I'm interested in the weather. Who isn't? We groom for the atmosphere. Daily we apply our mothers' prognostics to the sky. We select our garments accordingly; like flags or vanes we signify. But I'm interested in weather also because cultural displacement has shown me that weather is a rhetoric. Furthermore, it is the rhetoric of sincerity, falling in a soothing, familial vernacular. It's expressed between friendly strangers. I speak it to you. A beautiful morning. You speak it back. The fog has lifted.

The weather, like sincerity, is rhetoric, and after spending as much time as I have with Robertson's trilogy of long poems there is one thing I know: this is a poet who has infiltrated sincerity; this is a poet who knows how to soothe, but like Virginia Woolf, her soft spots are lined with hooks. Not perhaps to injure the reader, but to puncture the clouds of oppressive, static thinking.

The Persistence of the Weather: the Weight of Sincerity

We like our poetry confident, Robertson seems to know, and so, as she did with her previous books, she assumes a canonical voice, boldly sculpting new shapes with ornate, resplendent language. Again, from the "Report on Sincerity":

¹ <http://www.dcpoetry.com/anth2001/robertson2.htm>

Sincerity is a market, a decisive method, a nationalist politics, and an ethnic signifier. Lyrical Ballads are ethnic weather. They wear a blue bonnet. They read the weather signs for bombers.

Not only has Robertson infiltrated the game; she has redrawn the discussion around it and inserted a desire to create, as Eileen Myles² points out, a feminist utopia. Robertson concludes “Weather Report” this way: “Sincerity says that identity is moral. I need it to be a tent, not a cave, a rhetoric, not a value. There’s also the fact that my sex is a problem with sincerity. I want to move on. I want a viable climate. I’ll make it in description.³”

And so she does. Deconstructing the romantic, the pastoral, the centrality of the lyric “I” by constantly “describing”, creating or recreating in mostly declarative sentences, a more relevant landscape. Tackling head on the problem of wanting women’s lives (and vistas) represented and the same problem of lapsing into confessional—the problem of mistaking “earnest” for “sincere”. And what are the lady’s tools? A shapely line both arch and passionate; prose blocks weighty and justified, flashing through the week not unlike the fine calves of Orlando in Virginia Woolf’s historical romp:

The sky is complicated and flawed and we’re up there in it, floating near the apricot frill, the bias swoop, near the sullen bloated part that dissolves to silver the next instant bronze but nothing that meaningful, a breach of greeny-blue, a syllable, we’re all across the swathe of fleece laid out, the fraying rope, the copper beech behind the aluminum catalpa that has saved the entire spring for this flight, the tops of these parts of the sky, the light wind flipping up the white undersides of leaves, heaven afresh, the brushed part behind, the tumbling. (10-11)

This excerpt, from the poem titled “Monday”, is one of the more straightforward, but look at the language: “the swathe of fleece”, “the fraying rope”, “the white undersides of leaves, heave afresh”. This is sheer delight in *looking* at the *fragment of things* passing us daily, of the human mind engaged in the act of witnessing afresh.

2 *THE WEATHER/CUNT-UPS/DARLING (BOOK)*. By: Myles, Eileen, Nation, 00278378, 3/11/2002, Vol. 274, Issue 9

3 Robertson, “Weather Report” *ibid.*

As the days of the week progress, so does the deconstruction (or reconstruction) of the lines, the language of seeing: each day with its concerns is offered in shifting sentence structures. Tuesday, for instance, is full of longing, and meditative, historical rage:

Days heap upon us. Where is our anger. And the shades darker than the plain part and darker at the top than the bottom. But darker at bottom than top. Days heap upon us. Where is Ti-Grace. But darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us. Where is Christine. Broken on the word culture. But darker at the bottom than the top. (18)

The repetitive, lyrical quality here is heart-wrenching: *How can we hold together?* it seems to say, *How can we touch ground?* One imagines a long line of women, linked by the tips of their fingers, passing on urgent messages with anxious glances. This is more acrobatic than sentimental, but not *only* acrobatic.

By Wednesday, middle of the week, the lines swell. Random inquiries of time and body appear in semi-coloned sentences: “The rain has loosened; we engage our imagination” (38), “The wind has lulled; we’re this long voice under fluid” (39), or in bridging sentences: “Cause for Quote. Oblique for Oblique. Verb for Flex” (41). Thursday is a meditation on becoming: “When nerves huddle... When sex in all its aspects...When sleep begins...” (47), and Friday explores space and construction:

Where can a lady reside. Next the earth and almost out of reach. Almost always electrified. To surfaces of discontinuity. In light clothes and coloured shoes. By the little flower called the pansy. O little bird extravagant. Among its decayed houses. (59)

Stark catalogues, instructions for seedlings, willowy girls shooting up in the light of a faux spring. The lines peak and shrink until Saturday with its two word phrases: “A name. A rubbing. A fear. A thing. A fear. A tuft. A face. A runnel. An escape. A number. A wisp. A screen. A knot. A mother. A boat.” (68) Robertson’s space is at once about movement, about becoming, and about a making and unmaking of the world around us. But it is also a call to remember the missing, to remember our roots in language, as poets and as women.

The Project of the Weather

The Weather, Robertson informs us, came about by “wanting to do a site-specific work during a six month stay in Cambridge”. She began by listening to BBC shipping forecasts and reading Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. But Robertson’s project also fits in with a larger project that, as Laura Hinton pointed out in her *How2* review of Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine’s *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*,⁴ is a timely and vital one for women. In stepping outside of the “I” in the prose blocks, in replicating the relentlessness of weather/lyric, and punctuating it with pleas to recall, to heads up, to gather together, Robertson, not unlike some of the poets (Jorie Graham, Harryette Mullen, etc.) in “Where Lyric Meets Language”, fragments the self, refracting both form and content in a scattershot of possibilities.

These “justified” prose blocks are punctuated by the more recognizably “lyric” or “lyrical” free verse pieces titled “from Residence At C_____”. Tuesday begins: “Give me hackneyed words because / they are good” and moves into a forceful lyricism with phrasal repetitions: “Say Spongy ground / with its soft weeds. Say self because it can. / Say arts of happiness. Say you have died. / Say sequin because the word just / appeared” (14). But on page 24 Robertson announces: “My purpose here is to advance into / the sense of the weather, the lesson of / the weather.” What are we to learn? This poem, these sentences she describes as the “unborrowed kind”, are in fact reminiscent of the various weathers: this line a runnel, this line mist, this line heavy cloud cover, this line a small, thin, slow moving, this line fat, still, cumulous, relentless. We cannot, must not take our eyes off the structure of our poetry; we are making ourselves as we speak. Here she gets more to the point:

Sometimes I want a corset like
to harden me or garnish. I think
of this stricture—rain language,
building—as a corset: an outer
ideal mould, I feel the ideal
moulding me the ideal is now
my surface... (52)

4 <http://www.students.bucknell.edu/projects/webdev/roberta/how9-working/current/alerts/hinton.shtm>

Ironically these “lyrical” interludes, gorgeous as they are, are not the most “lyrical” aspect of this book. I note that even poet Elaine Myles in her review of *The Weather*, refers to the days of the week as “poem like prose passages and intermittent poems”⁵. Look at the glorious language of these prose poems, reminiscent of Harryette Mullen’s *Sleeping With The Dictionary* in its shameless lusting of words and word groupings for the sheer delight (and sound) of it: “So pliable a medium. A time / not very long. A transparency caused. A conveyance of / rupture. A subtle transport. Scant and rare.... Scarce and scant. Quotidian and temperate.” (10) Is it the lack of an “I” that pushes it to prose? Is it the lack of line breaks? The phrasal structures? Perhaps this is Robertson at her cheekiest seeing how far she can push the line between what we expect a poem to look like and how it might sound.

Conclusions of the Weather

As Rankine and Spahr point out, much of the interesting work of the day is concerned with the question of lyric—whether it is in connection with the relationship to prose, or an investigation of what I term our “lyraphobic” tendency toward positioning one’s self as the center of a fashionably ordered, and limited world complete with unscorched language and mail order “otherness”. (In other words, life experienced through internet trolling, or observed, chardonnay in hand, from the delicate frontier of a front porch.) What’s so great about *The Weather*, aside from textual pleasure, is watching Robertson walk the tightrope between lyric and prose, is just that. Here Robertson continues a century long lyric experiment, an “intoxication” in her own words, with language. “I want... to write through spaces that are utterly delusional. I need to be able to delude myself, for as long as it takes, as long as it takes to translate an emotion, a grievance, a politics, an intoxication, to a site, an outside.”⁶ The shape must arrive and be appropriate to the intoxication, and each word must be created anew.

⁵ Myles, *ibid.*

⁶ Robertson, *Weather Report*, *ibid.*

As exciting as it is to discover Stein reinvent the sentence, or Marilyn Hacker reclaim the sonnet (and indeed meter!) as a vessel for female desire, it is also exciting to watch Robertson push our expectations of prose poetry:

To language, rain. To rain, building. Think of this stricture so that the vernaculars of causation quicken. To Claude, his contemplation. To objects, passing. To golden change our own blazing device. (66)

“This is a poetry,” as Tim Allen says in his review of *The Weather*, “that takes nothing for granted but its own excellence.”⁷ Indeed. It’s also a poetry that requires time. It is poetry to carry around, and to ponder. Had I been asked to review this book a few weeks into my relationship with it, I might have said, glorious, even exhilarating, but too abstract: I don’t feel invited in, I can’t find meaning. However, not unlike the poetry of Anne Carson and Erin Mouré⁸ (two other favorite Canadian poets), this is a poetry that demands you find a way to read it. And that is ultimately a good thing. All poetry asks us to do this: it’s just that much of it is so familiar we have forgotten what assumptions and lessons we bring to the page. This may not be poetry that you can expect to behave at the dinner table, but it is poetry that will provide good company for the long haul, and it’s the kind of poetry that gives back as much as you put in. No passive reflection here either: this poetry will make you reassess what you think poetry is. And for that I am extremely grateful.

Sina Queyras recently edited *Open Field: 30 Contemporary Canadian Poets*, Persea 2005. She recently published *Teeth Marks*, her second collection of poetry. *Lemon Hound* is due out with Coach House Books in spring 2006. Queyras lives in Brooklyn and teaches creative writing at Rutgers.

7 Tim Allen, <http://terriblework.co.uk/weather.htm>

8 In fact I recommend reading *The Weather* in conjunction with Erin Mouré’s *Search Procedures* and/or Sheep’s *Vigil for a Fervent Person*, her radical translation of Fernando Pessoa.