

What the River Knows: Conversations with the Natural World

Andrea Freeman

Halcyon Wind Press (Mar 1, 2016)

Softcover \$14.95 (110pp)

978-0-9890897-1-5

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What the River Knows: Conversations with the Natural World by Andrea Freeman is a meditative poetic exploration of the flora, fauna, and natural phenomena that surround us.

Poems in the collection range from joyous celebrations of the natural world to moral messages about human interactions with it. Throughout, the poet maintains evocative intensity. Freeman writes in the vein of the Romantic poets, looking to the natural world for inspiration, understanding, and consolation.

Poems are musical and rich in their language. The poems' speaker reaches out toward the world, giving detailed attention to naming specific species and, at times, deriving a mystical euphoria from what she witnesses in her environment. However, the speaker also stands slightly apart from this world. It is one she enters and returns from, richer, but still other.

Anticipating the emergence of the stars after sunset, the speaker notes that "formed out of stardust myself / I considered how foolish it is to think we ever stand alone." The speaker's own struggles to unite with her environment echo many of the poem's overarching messages about humanity's impact on the world and the power and price of our place within it.

A naturalist, educator, and environmental activist, Andrea Freeman brings all of her hats to her poems. The collection's goals seem to be education, expansion, and celebration, in that order.

Instead of allowing the audience to fall into their precisely evoked landscapes, poems assert their points—whether it be delivering an interesting biological fact or the occasion for a poem's creation. As the poet notes, "There are portals everywhere.... // Bring only what you need – / the willingness to bend / and feel the tenderness of the light."

The poems themselves are well executed; their messages are part of their warp and weft and need no further emphasis. Punctuation, especially punctuation on enjambed lines within a poem, is deployed inconsistently. A few footnotes are included alongside poems, and risk interrupting the world that the poems create.

Situated somewhere between the Romantics and Wendell Berry, Freeman's poems will appeal to anyone who has been moved by nature, whether those feelings are ones of kinship or questioning. The lyricism and precise description in Freeman's work transport, even as she pushes for language to capture the greater mysteries underlying it all.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (October 31, 2016)

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