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C. J. Sage, ed. *And We the Creatures.* San Jose: Dream Horse Press, 2003. 103 pp. $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9659307-5-8.

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Poems about Animals

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As an animal rights advocate, I'm always pondering why some people empathize so deeply with nonhuman animals while others seem not to at all. I'm always looking for ways to get through to those who don't recognize that the other animal species are sentient beings, too, who suffer horrendously and often needlessly because of us. I was very glad to learn that a collection of poems specifically addressing animal rights had been published, and I was honored to be asked to review it.

In the preface of *And We The Creatures*, editor C. J. Sage explains: "This book will serve well as a classroom text or as a member of one's private poetry collection, as an animal rights study or simply a nature lover's companion.... Within this collection animal lovers may find new levels of appreciation, and animal rights supporters will find they have extended family in the world of contemporary American poetry." The back cover states: "This collection is unlike anything that has ever before been published. A body of excellent poems by renowned and emerging American authors for animal rights and appreciation, it is not only the first of its kind but comprises the very best poetry on the topic."

And We the Creatures contains a few outstanding poems, including Dan Gerber's "The Bear on Main Street," Ellen Bass's "Bears in China," J. P. Dancing Bear's "Raccoon Mother," and Jason Gray's very short, very potent "The Snow Leopard": "He pads on grassy banks behind a fence, with measured paces slow and tense./ Beyond his cage his thoughts are sharp and white, he lives a compelled anchorite./ A solid ghost gone blind with all the green, he waits and waits to be unseen." Two poems, "Slow Butterflies in the Luminous Field" by Sarah Lindsay and "Who'll Say Dugong When the Dugong's Gone?" by Bob Hicok, manage to convey tragic warnings very successfully through humor. Some of the poems are disturbingly insightful, such as Charles Harper Webb's "Tormenting the Cat," in which a man relates how in his youth he and other boys took sadistic pleasure in torturing animals, explaining "None of us could leave in peace creatures so graceful and self-contained, so indulged and loved by women, so indifferent as we writhed in our own flames." In a few cases, brief explanations separate from the poem help clarify the subject matter. For example, a note preceding Deborah Cummins's "The Bisbee Donkeys" explains that donkeys used in the Bisbee Mine were kept underground for up to seventeen years, and the majority of them went blind. (In the poem, the author rationalizes this to be an act of kindness on the part of the miners, although a more plausible explanation is that it was done as a matter of convenience.)

I very much disagree, however, that *And We the Creatures* would serve well as an animal rights study. While some of the selections are strong protest poems, others are so subtle as to be neutral or so abstract their meaning is indecipherable. Still others are arguably anti-animal rights. In "Passing a Truck Full of Chickens at Night on Highway Eighty," Jane Mead goes so far as to suggest a trip to the slaughterplant could be an intriguing adventure for a chicken. In "Harbor Seals," Scott Cairns seemingly accepts the fishing industry's excuse for killing seals, referring to one dead or dying seal as "an idiot thing." If this was an attempt at irony, it failed in its delivery. Repeatedly referring to a pit bull terrier as "it," Chase Twichell conveys fascinated disgust for one in "Aisle of Dogs." Her/His descriptions of the other dogs in the shelter similarly convey more disgust than empathy: "All the other cages held adoptable pets, the manic yappers, sad matted mongrels, the dumb slobbering abandoned ones, the sick, the shaved, the scratching, the wounded and terrified, the lost, one to a cage, their water dishes overturned, their shit tracked around...." J. P. Dancing Bear's "The Horse's Life" perpetuates the perception of horses existing to serve humans (and cowboys, at that).

I also very much disagree that the book contains the very best poetry on the topic. In his interesting and in-

formative foreword, Steve Kowit writes: "I want the most musically rapturous, conceptually engaging, and powerfully moving poetry I can find." I do, too, but, unfortunately, I didn't find it in this book. Instead I found the majority of poems in this slim volume to be mediocre. Because there are so few other books of animal rights poetry, I don't understand why Sage limited the book's contributors to contemporary poets, a few of whom had more than one poem included. Kowit mentions Burns, Smart, Whitman, Blake, and John Clare as being among poets who "have taken the lives of other creatures seriously." The book would have greatly benefitted from their affecting works. Such inclusions would, in fact, have shown that the concept of animal rights is not new, but has been around for centuries, if not millennia. While animal rights poetry can tend to be sappy or strident, it, of course, need not be, and there are many superb animal rights poems, including ones by contemporary poets.[1]

Unfortunately, I cannot recommend this book. Poetry can be a very effective way of helping to convey the plight of the world's most abused (our "bottomless cruelty," as Kowit puts it) to the potentially empathic, and publishing a collection of animal rights poetry is a very laudable idea. I hope Sage or others will make another such attempt soon. (Incidentally, as with all art, value is in the mind of the beholder. I read the first half of the book with an animal rights poet/advocate and the second half with my mate, who is very much a hands-on activist. The poet was more favorably inclined toward the poems than I, my mate less so.)

Note

[1]. Examples of superb animal rights poems can be found online at: http://www.tao.ca7vegans/poetry http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Vines/2326/poet.html http://www.animalsvoice.com/PAGES/poetry.html

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
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