

:introduction:

In *A Short History of Myth* Karen Armstrong notes that one of the qualities of a myth is that it looks into the heart of a great silence. Daniela Elza's book of poetry, with its silences and fissures and gaps, its trickster crow, its broken/open semiotics and its hauntings reminds me of a myth, of that attempt to construct the self through utterances and story. That said, the wonder of these poems is the celebratory feel of them, the poet's willingness to throw herself into the search, as if there might be a magic word out there that will call all the properties of the self into cohesion. Myths, of course, are also attached to place, are formed, in many ways, out of the landscape and resources and metaphysics of a particular location. In *milk tooth bane bone* "place" is as unseated as the crows that swoop through many of these poems and flit in and out of the poet's consciousness. When you have lived on three continents, when you speak more than one language, when places as diverse as Bulgaria, Nigeria, England, the United States and Canada have been called, however briefly, *home*, how is one to tell the myth of one's place in the world? Through the fragment perhaps, through the constancy of a bird, through whatever coattails of story your family has bequeathed you. This is not to tie the poems in this collection too tightly to the biography of the poet, only to suggest that what is at work here, in these wonderful poems, seems to me to come from a very deep place, but also from a sense of no place or displacement—a rich interstice that is perhaps more strongly represented in the poetic tradition of other nations, although the lyric philosophy of some of our finest Canadian poets is changing that.

The construction and deconstruction of a personal mythology is a powerful theme, but what I admire about this book is that as it works through "the rattle of logic" and "the edge between substance / and / nothingness" it also grapples with language itself—the very tool of meaning-making employed here. In this way words themselves are queried, broken open or exposed in the same way our crows break open mussels with their beaks. In a similar

vein the crows themselves shape-shift. Yes, they are crows but sometimes they are other things: a crowsmos, a story, language itself, the *insubstantial*, the paradoxical. What Elza creates in much of this work is a purposeful slippage—of language, of things, of history, of self. Jane Hirshfield once suggested that “[p]oetry’s work is the clarification and magnification of being.” Elza’s work seems to support this principle, but at no point in this book does she pretend that such a task can ever be straight-ahead or simple.

What struck me on rereading this collection was how wholly it is also about community. In a book of poetry that so openly engages with semiotics and language (Elza has a degree in philology), this might be easy to miss. First there are the host of writers, philosophers and poets whose ideas Elza cites, or whose words Elza folds into her own thinking, but there is also a “we” here—familial, generational, but also, more expansively, human, and sometimes, pan-ecological—a we that includes crow and land. It’s been said that in a post-modern world one ought not to use “we” because subjectivity and difference make “we” impossible. This may be one of the reasons I have been such a fan of Daniela’s work from the beginning, because I think this idea is wrong, that sometimes “we” is a good place to start, because it conveys a kind of optimism, because in tandem with the “I it can function as a kind of call, as the extension of a hand. This is what I love about this book: that the work takes me somewhere, that it asks me questions, and offers me ideas.

In “the crow hour” Elza puts it this way:

this :all of a sudden: I know.
 this :I am not alone: here.

and poetry? what can it do
 before we awake? but take us part way

Aislinn Hunter
 Vancouver, 2013