

LUCILLE LANG DAY, *WILD ONE* (SCARLET TANAGER BOOKS)

Somebody stole my myths.
--X.J. Kennedy

“Science!” complained Edgar Allan Poe in 1829,

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Like Poe, Lucille Lang Day is fascinated by the intersection point of science and poetry. Day’s first book, *Self Portrait with Hand Microscope* (1982), began with two quotations: one from Sylvia Plath and one from Albert Einstein. In “Converting,” a poem about her conversion to Judaism, she writes,

Rabbi Cahan thought of God
as the grand unified field theory...

It was a God I could
at least begin to understand--one
who obeyed the laws of science.

For Day, it is not Science that obeys the laws of God but God who obeys the laws of Science. Poe would have been horrified.

If science has annihilated one’s “myths”--the ragbag of traditional stories--and if one is not inclined to create stories of one’s own, then one is left with (a) autobiography and (b) science--precisely Day’s subjects. Though Day is in some respects Feminist, there are no mythic goddesses haunting her *oeuvre*. Here, in a wonderful passage, is the way she presents an old friend dying of cancer:

We had six kids between us
and debated Doctor Spock, Piaget and positive discipline.

When I think of how we’ve changed, I think of the Earth,
which had its own beginning, how once it was covered
with boiling seas. The mountains were molten rock
that finally burst onto the surface. Now the mountains
are wearing down. Grain by grain, they wash to the sea;
the continents keep shifting. Still, it surprises me to meet
for lunch, two women speaking in hushed tones.
I’m the only one in the restaurant who knows
you’re wearing a wig and weak from chemotherapy.

Science will fail this lady: she will die of her cancer. Yet, Day observes, “Even the Milky Way is not forever,” “The universe itself keeps changing.” Much *soi disant* autobiography is

nothing but an excuse for veiled self-justification and self-aggrandizement, not to mention self-pity. Not so Day's. She does not question the nature of the "I" that asserts itself constantly throughout her book--am I one person or many, an individual or a multitude?--but she does observe that "I" with an intelligence, keenness and objectivity which are extraordinarily rare. *Wild One* is not a book about the nature of consciousness but a book about the self as it interacts with others, with world. In the opening poem, "1954," the poet is seven--the "age of reason":

I danced on the slanted cellar roof
to make it rattle, and when Uncle Dick
yelled, "Stop!" I climbed the fence and ran
toward the creek, cutting through backyards
and hiding between houses. "Geronimo!"
He called, following with long strides,
"Come back!"

Uncle Dick comments, "That child's a wild one"--and so the title. "Wildness"--following one's own will, having one's own way--seems to be a positive. Yet it is not entirely that. The dangers of "wildness" are also emphasized. Another "wild one" is "stabbed eighty-seven times in Santa Cruz"; and the poet admits that "I've been mugged twice / by teenage boys / with cruel faces, / *wild* eyes, and white / gleaming teeth" (my emphasis). The book is less a celebration of wildness than it is a longing for it. In another recent book, *Greatest Hits* (Pudding House Publications), Day complains that her first poem of the year 2000 commemorates an occasion when "absolutely nothing momentous was happening in my life." "May things get a little wilder as the century progresses!" she comments. There was immense energy in the child who danced delightedly on the slanted cellar roof and ran off from her uncle. Can that energy be transformed into imaginative power? Poetry does not come from the "myths" but from the "wildness" of the world. But, acted out in the world rather than in literature, wildness is dangerous, even deadly--and the adult mother in Day sees those dangers very clearly as her own daughters become "wild," too. "Your children's friends...come with guns," she writes. At the wedding of one of her daughters, she asks,

How could I weep, remembering the cocaine
addicts and dealers she might have wed,
and the boyfriend shot dead on my dining room deck?

This sense of the dangers of wildness brings Day by the conclusion of the book to a powerful sense of identification with her mother--who nevertheless "couldn't remember what I majored in / or understand why I didn't remarry, / or why I write poetry." The very same words Day uses to describe herself at fourteen-- "More than anything that Christmas Eve...I wanted a baby"--return again in her description of her mother: "For years, my mother wanted a child / more than anything else." This identification with her mother is responsible for some of the most moving poems in the book--particularly "Red Shoes" and "One Hundred Fifty Necklaces." Another poem, "Birth Mothers," deals with an unusual subject: the state of mothers who give their children out for adoption.

Day's poems about her child-self, desperate for motherhood and marriage (she is fourteen when she marries) are delicious--wonderfully comic and specific:

I was pregnant that year,
stitching lace and purple-flowered ribbon
to tiny kimonos and sacques.
I still thought sperm
came out like pollen dust in puffs of air.

I ate cream of wheat for breakfast, unsalted....

Day shoplifts, quits school, goes through various encounters with men, marries three times (twice to the same man), goes back to school, has two daughters, an abortion, experiences severe depression (one poem is called “Why I’m Not Going to Commit Suicide”), takes LSD, converts to Judaism, tries out different ways of dealing with the world. She wishes to feel “alive,...a woman to be feared.” Throughout, one senses her effort to find a context large enough to contain her mind. The “Elvis Presley records, / makeup, cheap jewelry and angora sweaters” she steals as a child are a vision of the beautiful, the world of desire--yet finally they fail her as does almost everything (and everyone) else. She goes from context to context as from birth to birth. A woman, she tells her daughter, “is born twice”: “the first / person she gives birth to / is herself.” But the self is continually changing. Day’s book documents a constantly expanding awareness of the world in which she functions. Finally, she will be satisfied by nothing less than the universe. This is the opening of her poem, “Birth of the Universe” (the Birth of Births) from *Infinites*:

Lying on a quilt I should have washed weeks ago,
I try to picture it: nowhere
a speck of nothing explodes.

Burning with the heat of billions of stars
condensed to a point,
the universe cools,

inflating exponentially
for less than a second, until
it reaches the size of a grapefruit.

Imagine it: a grapefruit!

In a similar way, her friend’s dying of cancer is understood in terms of the universe:

The universe itself keeps changing. New galaxies gather
in the void with spiral arms like the silver pinwheels
we used to blow (remember the hollow stems filled with candy?).

Old stars burn out. Matter is sucked into black holes. Perhaps
we'll meet again in some other realm, perhaps not. Time
is not necessarily linear, though the clock ticks off the hours
in one direction. Even the Milky Way is not forever.

Wild One, an “autobiography in verse,” traces the poet’s life from 1954 to the present. Though there is no narrative as such, there are various signposts which indicate time passing. Day is a biology student, then a neurochemist. She passes her Ph.D. Qualifying Exam. Her two daughters are born, one in 1963 (“named after a B movie-- / *Liana, Jungle Goddess*”), the other in 1974. One daughter’s fifth birthday is noted (1979), as is Day’s 1985 divorce. There are references to the 1989 earthquake and the 1991 firestorm. She gives us a comic, rhymed “resumé” from 1994. The book ends with a series of poems dealing with her mother’s death.

As a young woman, Day was part of a very active writers’ collective called The Berkeley Poets’ Cooperative. Her early poems, while excellent, have a slight workshop feeling to them-- especially the workshop insistence on the specific, the observed: “I wore moccasins / and a paisley dress from the Persian Caravan.” The later poems, with their thrust towards (to use the title of Day’s forthcoming collection) infinities, require a very different use of language. Scientific words (“alveoli,” “chromosome,” “mitochondria”) are constantly appearing in her work, which tends to turn the science into metaphors of feeling. Though most of her poems are in free verse, there are also experiments in form: a very funny villanelle, two pantoums. There are also some forms of Day’s own invention. Allowing for “slant” rhyme, the following stanza rhymes a-a-b-c-c:

There aren’t very many photos of my father, Uncle Dick
and me, because we were the ones who took
the pictures, but I have one snapped after dessert
in a neighbor’s dining room, when I was twelve or thirteen
and had already started to go bad--a hell-bent gamine.

Wild One is not so much a book about “coming-of-age” as it is a book about a confusing, tumultuous life which both amuses and baffles the author. Day seems constantly to be asking, Why ever did I do that! As a young woman, she argues with her mother--which is one of the reasons she marries so young. Later, phoning Day “constantly,” her mother seems boring. Yet her mother’s death leaves Day devastated. One of the great strengths of the book is the author’s keen awareness of paradox and contradiction. Even at thirteen, she knew that “bad” seemed “good.” *Wild One* is like one of the answers Day fantasizes giving to her Ph.D. qualifying exam: “We want,” she writes, “to map the cobwebby brain, / where astrocytes cluster like stars / at the edge of space.” “The universe,” she says, “folds on itself.” Probing, wondering, testing, “folding on themselves,” her poems do the same thing.