

'Stinking of me': transformations and animal selves in contemporary women's poetry

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In her poem 'What Comes After', Lorna Crozier's first-person speaker evades the question of 'what come after' by transforming herself into her 'own big dog' – 'a big sack of sleep/stinking of me.' This short poem exemplifies a common trope in contemporary poetry – that of transformation from human to animal as evasion of the self-awareness of being human. This paper will examine a selection of recent poems written by anglophone women poets in which a first-person speaker becomes, or imagines themselves becoming, an animal. These will include Lorna Crozier's 'What Comes After', Polly Clark's 'Hedgehog', Liz Berry's 'Sow', Kim Moore's 'If we could speak like wolves' and Johanna Skibrud's 'I do not think that I could love a human being' (in which the speaker imagines herself and her lover as bears). These poems offer a reading of transformation into the non-human as a release from human social expectations, whether that is the expectation to be lady-like, as in Berry's 'Sow', or not to 'love so', as in Clark's 'Hedgehog'.

This paper will argue that these poems begin to break from a tradition in which shape-shifting is associated with a threatening or violent identity or sexuality (as in Lucille Clifton's 'Shapeshifter Poems', Laurie Byro's 'Wolf Dreams' or Jo Shapcott's 'Thetis'). I will place these poems in contrast to transformation poems in which the shifting is temporary, or partial (as in Michael DeBeyer's 'Light Somnambulism', or Don McKay's 'Nocturnal Migrants'), and makes their male speakers hyper-aware of their embodied humanity. In her pseudo-transformation poem 'Fox' Adrienne Rich writes '[f]or a human animal to call for help/on another animal/is the most riven the most revolted cry on earth'. This paper will demonstrate that contemporary women poets are finding something celebratory and bold in that cry – an offer of a less socially over-determined self.

Polly Atkin lectures in English Studies at the University of Strathclyde. Her doctorate on Dove Cottage, Grasmere, was conducted under the AHRC Landscape and Environment project, in collaboration with The Wordsworth Trust, and the departments of Sociology, and English and Creative Writing, at Lancaster University. She is working on a monograph drawn from this, exploring connections between Romantic legacies, contemporary creativity, ecopoetics, tourism and place. She is also a poet, and her second poetry pamphlet *Shadow Dispatches* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013) won the 2012 Mslexia Pamphlet Prize and was shortlisted for the 2014 Lakeland Book of the Year.