

"WITH A MYTHICAL BEAST / STUCK IN MY BREAST":

KAY CLOSSON -- THE ARTIST AS WOMAN

by

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The following article will attempt to explain the creative forces of Kay Closson -- wife, mother, poet, short story writer, singer, piano player, guitar plucker, critic-reviewer, ad writer, song writer, novelist, teacher, student and human being -- through the discussion of several of her poems. In that she is a creature of nature, nature is involved. In that she has mostly lived in Kansas, geography determines her creative environment. In that she is a woman, her gender influences her work. The progressions and movements of her physical, emotional, logical, and musical life are reflected in her artistic creations. These movements and progressions are cyclic and involve the natural harmonies of the seasons of nature and life.

Some biographical information about Kay Closson will be necessary in that the style and content of her written works are often determined by what occurs in her personal life. Kay Closson, born Donna Kay Long, was born in Hutchinson, Kansas on October 18, 1937. As a result of contracting polio at the age of four, she spent her childhood fairly isolated from the world of other children. Her parents, relatives, tutors, the many weeks she had to spend in hospital and the treatment she received there were the major influences on how she came to view the world.

Her early education was private. The piano became a method of expression; she started training for a possible concert career. In college, as a music major, she realized that there were other areas of personal expression that were being neglected -- her love of people, her intellectual interests, and her writings. As she turned to nourish her writings, the concert dreams fell aside. Closson's poetry now sounds the chords of the music of her life. The notes are spectacular, riveting, compelling, and meaningful.

Kay Closson's written works, which span twenty-seven years, from the spring of 1951 until the spring of 1978, provide the major insights into her creative abilities. Some of her works have been published in journals, newspapers, and magazines such as the Smith, Squeeze Box, Microkosmos, the Sunflower, Gazebo, Ms. (two poems written in collaboration with Anita Skeen), Ontario Review, Duck, and Saltillo. Another source of information for this article is a series of conversations between Kay and me which began in August, 1977 and continued until April, 1978.

Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion on the difficulties

of being both a creative artist and a woman is to illustrate one major problem with one of Kay's poems and examine the attitude expressed there.

straws and pebbles

in my lifetime i have known
sunssets, excellent sex and mountains
but much of my time
is used up by straws and pebbles

i do dishes and laundry while
poems sing inside my skull
scrub floors to use up my lust
stir cocoa while tilting
with dragons of green, gold and silver

i try to remain content
camouflage myself in straws and
pebbles; so clever that i cannot
find my own eyes in the mirror¹

During one of the conversations with Kay, she revealed that the expression "straws and pebbles" is borrowed from a statement by Anne Morrow Lindbergh.² Lindbergh used the expression to symbolize the ordinary daily tasks necessary for comfortable existence. That the poet must spend precious time on the mundane chores -- dishes, laundry, scrubbing of floors -- when her imaginative, creative, and sexual energies are begging for release creates a conflict that is unique for the woman as poet. Traditionally, the male poet has a place for creative work and a wife who takes care of the housework, the children, the telephone, his typing and filing, the errands, and his ego. Kay, as mother to Kathleen (age 18), to Eric (age 12), and to Joel (a very busy 5 year old), as wife of Jed, and as poet, must play her family roles first and her creative roles second -- her office is where her work is, a corner of the living room. The last stanza of "straws and pebbles" expresses another aspect of the results of the conflict between having to spend time on chores and not being able to spend time on the poet's other needs. She tries to remain content but by doing so is not being true to herself. It seems almost good that the poet has camouflaged her own eyes so well; for if she could see the pain of the disappointment reflected by her own eyes, the conflict would be greater than what is expressed.

"Desperate for harvest," another poem from the unpublished Bordello Songs, reveals the difficulties that the poet encounters when trying to write while at the same time trying to relate to the many other facets of her life. This is one of the very few poems that mentions the poet's children; she rarely mentions specific family members in her poems. Although Closson might use "you" to indicate

a family member, a husband, a lover, a friend, the "you" often serves as a general rhetorical address.

desperate for harvest

the cold bothers me this year
 my children's noises break the air
 it is increasingly difficult
 to find the bridge
 between these pages
 and the rest of my life

desperate for harvest
 i work this page as though
 it were the earth itself

you ask me
 what is this poem about
 and i cannot tell you
 that it is about your breaking
 me into fragments and tossing
 me to the winds like
 so much confetti

if you were to lift the poem
 from the page, peeling it
 layer by layer
 you would see life, damp and
 fecund with grubs, rotting
 leaves and white shoots of grass

On one level, the poem is a lament about the difficulties of writing; on another level, the poem concerns the creation and destruction cycles of nature, art, and the poet herself. Nature, in the form of weather, bothers the poet. The children's noises, which are distractions -- not necessarily annoyances -- infringe upon the poet's writing time. The last four lines of the first stanza almost give the impression that the poet is nearly ready to give up on either the writing or the rest of her life. "Bridge" becomes a powerful word in this stanza as a link between the nature outside and the nature inside the poet. In the second stanza the poet exhibits great strength to contrast with her weakness in the first through the connotations of biological and artistic images. She will "work this page as though / it were the earth itself," which suggests the plowing, sowing, nourishing, growing, and, finally, the harvest. As a woman, she must do this for her children; as an artist, she must do this for her art. The processes are an integral and necessary part of both art and nature. The third stanza is layered -- the literal, the "you" in the poem, either personal or rhetorical, is creating a psychological conflict for the poet; the subtle, the fragmentation of the poet is like

that of clods of earth thrown by the plow with the confetti referring to the earlier "page"; the more subtle, the poet's fragmentation makes her a seed to be sown for creation; the allusion, that there is, here, an unconscious reference to the Isis-Osiris creation myth. The fourth stanza returns to the poem and allows it to be peeled, like a fruit or vegetable of nature, to reveal the realities of life and art -- "grubs, rotting / leaves and white shoots of grass," which can be interpreted as images indicating parasites, death-destruction, and birth-creation.

Closson protests the housewife role in a more recent poem entitled "list." The poem begins as a grocery shopping list. Then, the list is interrupted by indented lines which explain that the poet writes poems, stories, and novels. These indented lines are interrupted by the continued shopping list. Then, the indented lines contain another indentation which is more prose than poetry and which is, itself, indented for another list. Lines which specifically refer to the problems of the writer as woman are:

sometime i live inside a brown bag, holes
torn for my extending arms to perform their
tasks, . . . recently, during what my
therapist refers to as one of my hypomanic
phases (i prefer to think of it as a period of
intense creativity) i was a butterfly not yet
dry in the sun . . .³

With the last lines of the poem the poet threatens to make a list to "Pack bags . . . Call cab / Catch the 2:19, non-stop." Is it any wonder that Closson, who pulls a thirty pound vacuum cleaner with her eighty pound body, who cooks three meals a day, does dishes, nurses sick children, listens to the family's hopes and fears, breaks up the children's squabbles, performs the wifely duties for her husband, who is in constant danger of injury from falls of misplaced crutches, whose own health is so very fragile, would want to make a list to "Pack bags . . . Call cab / Catch the 2:19, non-stop"? But the woman, as the poet, makes the list a poem and goes about fulfilling her duties and living her life.

Up to this point the discussion has concentrated on the difficulties encountered by Closson, the poet as woman, in the roles of wife and mother. It is not that the poet does not want to accept the responsibilities of her many roles; she does, in fact, accept them, but that the needs to create her art demand recognition and the conflict becomes a struggle with the juggling of priorities. The complaint involves mostly lack of time -- there never exists enough time to do all that needs to be done.

One of the female artist's unique abilities is that not only can she give birth to a work of art, as can her male counterpart, but

that she can give birth in nature. Sometimes the birth is not exactly what is anticipated, as is shown in the poem "anniversary":

anniversary

her heartbeat undetectable
 i became a coffin for ten days
 a carrier of death
 more ultimate than the plague
 i remember that last vibrant
 leap inside me, how the lack of
 movement followed like silence

on the tenth day you donned your
 healing robes and plastic hands
 i saw how tightly the muscles
 contracted around your eyes
 cold sleep crept
 up my left arm, spread the length
 and breadth of my tongue
 the huge circle of light
 began spinning, taking the very
 core of my brain with it
 i felt myself falling into space
 as in a dream, unable
 to scream for help

a few deft touches of your knife
 and i danced crazily
 into a sterile bed, very flat
 after nine wasted moons

perhaps it would have been
 easier had i not given
 her a name⁴

Although the experience of giving birth to a dead child is one shared by many women, it is an unique experience for the female artist. It is the creation-destruction cycle complete in one act. As an act of woman, it comes at great emotional and physical expense. Unlike the creation of the "perfect" piece of art, then its destruction, which would produce emotional consequences for any artist, the creative growth of the fetus involves the very cells of the female artist's body and mind. Closson's "anniversary," although very personal, does not pound at the reader for sympathy. The tone is such that the poem seems a calm, cool, matter-of-fact description of a stillbirth. "anniversary" leaves the emotion to the reader with the possible exception of these lines: "how the lack of / movement followed like silence." The final stanza hints at more about the sorrow of death than it actually says. The poet's use of understatement is as effective in this poem as it is in many others.

During 1974, Clossen and her family lived on a farm near Argonia, Kansas. Inspired by the farm, she wrote a collection of yet unpublished poems called To Name the Bird from Its Shadow. Most of these poems deal specifically with nature's creative and destructive cycles. Many of the poems expose the realities of farm life and the objects of nature associated with farms. At the farm, her life was both traumatic and relaxed; she loved and hated the isolation. One of her more pleasant experiences was seeing so much of nature so closely. Although the volume of poems has not been published, the poem "i seldom find what i seek" does appear in the 1975, spring/summer edition of Saltillo.

i seldom find what i seek

while searching for bees
i saw smoke
and ran
not only Curly's field
in flames
but ours as well
for the fire had jumped
the road

you were driving home
when you saw the smoke
sweat dripped
down your back before
you even reached the fire
you thought
it was the house

all that night you
dozed in the truck
with fifty-five gallon drums
of water and a shovel

as it was
we lost the sandplums
and you spent several days
mending fence

Farmers, like the one mentioned in the poem, must try to protect their own property since there are no fire departments every few blocks. He must mend his own fences fast if he has livestock; he cannot afford to wait for an insurance check. The many details mentioned in the poem and those that can be ascertained from the speaker's stance, are a calm reflection of facing the necessities of farm life. The speaker of the poem lets it be known that there are two possible panic points -- when the speaker discovers the fire (although she runs, she does not desert) and when the "you" discovers the fire. The situation does not warrant panic, but it does

require action. We are relieved to discover that the fire's damage seems to be limited to the sandplum thicket and the fence.

Another poem from To Name the Bird from Its Shadow which deals with creative nature is "nexus."

nexus

i kneel upon the earth
sowing in the seeds
make peace
with the newly-horned ram
and the two-months colt
able to name all sounds
draw them to me
as i would children

i wait
for the first rain
after planting

This poem enchants with its simplicity and peacefulness, which is reminiscent of Genesis. The speaker of the poem sows the seeds, names the sounds, then awaits the natural nourishment of rain. The creative planting becomes a joint effort of woman and nature.

Kay Closson's "wind change," also from To Name the Bird from Its Shadow, describes a part of nature common to Kansas and the plains states.

wind change

fields of dust
rise, cross roads
into my eyes, nose
down my throat
the dry sienna fog moves fast
layers everything
my skin apparent with it

dust
fills the sky
removes fences, sheds, the barn

a few feet of clear space
constrict around me
i reach out
try to maintain territory
but dust sifts through my fingers
no matter how quickly
i make fists

when i can see nothing
 i tumble inward
 groping
 my breath shallow
 through a damp rag⁵

Since it seems that the wind never stops blowing in Kansas, the title, "wind change," indicates either a change in direction or speed. In this case, the literal explication of the poem indicates that the wind has delivered a dust storm. The speaker of the poem accurately describes the physical elements of the storm and portrays common human reactions to it. When the speaker's skin becomes layered with dust, it is time to consider the possibility that the dust from the natural storm may be hiding another kind of storm. It is possible that the dust storm symbolizes personal trauma or conflict. If Closson's poems are peeled back, they often reveal a subtle layer or two beneath the literal. The poet admits that sometimes she deliberately conceals another meaning beneath the surfaces of her poem.⁶

Another poem relevant to the realities of farm life is "the gleaners," from To Name the Bird from Its Shadow.

the gleaners

we found the four-months calf
 near the creek in the west field
 dead

took it for autopsy
 and we watched
 as the entrails
 spilled onto pink grass
 rubies shone
 from the vet's
 clear plastic gloves
 as he made his divinations
 the heart emerged next
 enlarged

heart and entrails
 stuffed back into their cavity
 the skin laid across the opening
 just as flies began to gather

laboring
 we picked up the calf
 by its tail and legs
 gave a mighty swing
 to get it back into the truck
 missed

the calf's head wobbled
 crazily in disbelief
 now a broken neck
 as we swung again
 we got the calf into the truck
 then headed home
 for division⁷

Although the death of a young calf is both unfortunate and a cash loss for the farmer, the practicalities of life are observed in taking the calf for an autopsy to make sure the meat would be suitable for human consumption. The incidents after the calf's death, which in itself is humiliating enough for any dead beast, become a bizarre experience. The details of the autopsy, of the gathering of flies, then of the breaking of the dead calf's neck hardly seem conducive to good eating, however practical it may be.

Closson repeats many words and images with varying degrees of similarity. For example, the word "fragmented" appears in various forms in many of her poems. Often the speaker of the poem feels as if the fragmentation is personal -- psychological or physical -- as in "desperate for harvest." In "vortex", a poem that on the surface describes the effects of a tornado, which is a common element of the climate of Kansas, the speaker of the poem says that "after the rains move on" she will "walk down the drive / sorting fragments." In this poem the fragments refer to both the speaker of the poem and the things of nature disturbed by the storm. The poet's adeptness at double or triple meanings of words, images, and entire poems exhibits itself frequently. In "you missed the rainbow" the poet floats out the door into the "soft rain" before fragmenting. The consequences of fragmentation are shown through gentle images. She tells the reader that "if you don't catch me" soon "you may have to wait / for the next rainbow."

Another image which frequently appears in Kay Closson's poems is the composite image of light and sight. Light, for Closson, represents a revelation of truth; it, also, shows the relativity of truth. In many instances, light is used as a tool "to magnify or reveal allusions through physical constants."⁸ In "loving" the speaker of the poem describes the overwhelming power of truth through light images:

. . .
 polished by our hunger for light
 each surface a careful plane
 to catch the warm sun
 we gather light
 as trappers acquire pelts
 light courses toward us
 with contrived promise
 blinding, charring

it burns craters
 right through our flesh
 to the marrow, infects us
 we will never be the same again.⁹

Vision in "loving" becomes obscured by the smoke from the revelation in the next stanza of the poem. Sometimes, light illuminates; sometimes, it destroys.

Kay Closson's repetitive use of falling and space imagery reflects her own needs for personal space. When one shares space with others, a value becomes attached to space. Closson, as an artist, must have that space, with defined boundaries, to create; as a woman, she must have that space to organize the family and the roles she must play. When the boundaries of her space are violated, she must, essentially restructure her life. In the poem "a scent occurs within my head", she does restructure her space with these lines:

. . .
 i left. you did not believe i would.
 all the seasons of my loving
 had spent themselves on you
 until at last the sun exploded
 our world was scattered
 through our space and time
 and neither of us could span the distances¹⁰

Within this poem, physical space images are presented through the description of rooms and psychological space images through the thought processes of the speaker of the poem.

Three of the more interesting images that reappear in Kay Closson's poems are those of Pegasus, the unicorn, and the phoenix. Kay explained that when she returned to Kingman, Kansas after her hospital treatments, one of the first things which indicated that she was safely home was the Texaco sign.¹¹ In "Smokey the Bear died last Tuesday," the death of Smokey provokes images of Pegasus.

Smokey the Bear
 died last Tuesday

replaced two years before his death
 part of my passage from childhood
 like Burma Shave and that red-winged
 Pegasus poised for flight
 from the high bluff outside
 my hometown

it seems that origins are
 constantly replaced
 by cloudshapes and shadows
 while i am
 sucked up like a fragile flame
 on a stormy night
 riding Pegasus
 back to my dreams.

Although she does not explain the personal significance of Pegasus in the poem, Pegasus operates as the chief image of the poem in memory of Smokey.

The unicorn appears calmly in unexpected places. In "i sit watching you move" the speaker of the poem says "day after day he visits/ inside her head/ while she tames unicorns." In another poem, "cage" the speaker of the poem laments her entrapment behind a wire mesh. She learns to adjust to the cage and to perform from her bondage:

. . .
 my tongue became a long
 coil inside my mouth
 and when the pacing stranger closed
 its eyes, i gently sent
 my tongue to the edge of a little pond,
 waited for the unicorn to dip his
 lovely horn into the water, brought
 the purified liquid to my mouth,
 one drop at a time through the night.¹²

In an unfinished and untitled poem written January 3, 1974, Closson gives more information about unicorns:

Done with toast crumbs for the day,
 I work,
 waiting
 for the unicorn to keep his appointment.

Hysterically, dogs bark as I make my bed.
 I run,
 hoping
 that the unicorn will wait until I brush my hair.

The door of my shelter is open and ready.
 I look,
 trembling
 as the unicorn pauses in front of my gate.

. . . although the same fires have consumed me countless times. Always I rise from my own ashes, a myth even to myself, unable to comprehend why I bothered to return. There seems to be a strident song always forcing me awake, to sing its variations one more time, one more time.

Kay Closson, as the woman and as the poet, creates from two perspectives--nature and art: her creations, both natural and artifact, are unique and unusual. Her creative processes parallel the rhythms of nature, define and discuss nature, and exist in nature; her artistic abilities illuminate, expand, and provide growth in her personal life. Almost like the phoenix, her life is re-created by her art each day. Creation, itself, is a great strain as Kay illustrates with "fire turning to ice," from the volume fire turning to ice. This poem presents many of the views and feelings Kay has about writing:

fire turning to ice

I saw firefighters creating
ice sculptures under hazardous conditions.
I, too, create under hazardous conditions;
no extra pay; the fatality rate
much higher in my profession
than in theirs.

My poems are shimmers and rainbows
of heat; they turn in the sun and cast
shadows; they are weapons; they ignite
fires and extinguish them, but most
often they break and dam and drown me.

If only there were safety gear or
sets of rules I could depend upon
to establish appropriate moments
for taking risk.

Watch out. Here it comes.
Escape while you can
And never look back;
I am fire turning to ice.

In "fire turning to ice" Closson discusses the difficulty of creation. Her creations become instruments of both pleasure and pain for her. Kay Closson's poetry is a magical record of woman as artist as woman.

Someday, when the demands of the many roles her lives diminish, when she can devote more of her time and energy to writing, we may expect to see Kay Closson seated on the back of a fresh unicorn on the evening news.

NOTES

- ¹Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 16.
- ²Kay Closson, interview-conversation, November 12, 1977.
- ³Kay Closson, "list," Fire Turning to Ice (unpublished and unfinished volume of poetry), p. 1.
- ⁴Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 9.
- ⁵Kay Closson, Gazebo, Spring, 1978.
- ⁶Kay Closson, interview-conversation, November 12, 1977.
- ⁷Kay Closson, to name the bird from its shadow, (unpublished volume of poetry), p. 24.
- ⁸Kay Closson, interview-conversation, November 25, 1977.
- ⁹Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 1.
- ¹⁰Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 26.
- ¹¹Kay Closson, interview-conversation, January 15, 1978.
- ¹²Kay Closson, "Cage."
- ¹³Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 12.
- ¹⁴Kay Closson, Bordello Songs, p. 30.