My Own Choric Song
Jerry Craven
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Reviewed by Troy Reeves, *Concho River Review*

My Own Choric Song is a finely-crafted collection of beautiful and poignant poems by Jerry Craven, professor of English at West Texas State University and author of a previous volume of poetry, *The Last* Running (Ishtar, 1982). The success of *My Own Choric Song* results from Craven's development of an intriguing and credible persona and from the poet's use of that persona as a means of unfolding rich, graphic, striking imagery.

Craven's persona, "L'Anne Weaver," is the primary consciousness and preceiver in the poems. The collection tells a story of sorts of the life of L'Anne, who occasionally lends her consicousness to others–father, brother, husband, lover-whose perceptions are the creations of L'Annes's own memory or imagination. She is possessed of an acute and uncompromising sense of truth and of a keen awareness of the essential stuff of life: the joy of love, the anguish of rejection, and, most of all, the loss of that idyllic childhood that resides in the memories or imaginations of us all.

Craven prefaces the collection with a famous quotation from Bacon: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer." Craven bids us stay. The truth of My *Own Choric Song* is subjective and personal *(My Own* ...), but it is not so equivocal that it cannot bind us together in celebration of universal human experience (... *Choric Song.)* Through the chorus of voices residing within L'Anne we participate in her loneliness, aspiration, love, and struggle to know and to be known by those into whose company biology and the accidents of life have thrown her.

The "autobiographical" events of L'Anne's life, which make up the major sections of the collections include her happy childhood in a Venezuelan jungle; her missionary father's giving her up to the safekeeping of an American couple, who take her to West Texas; her mythic search for a brother who, refusing to be given away, disappears into the jungle; her marriage, which, beginning in rapture, quietly disintegrates after being blighted by the death of a child; her recollections of a lover who visits destruction on all of nature, including her own internal landscape, a unique source of poetical inspiration.

Craven uses strong imagery to reveal the correspondence and conflict between the world L'Anne carries about in her imagination and the external world surrounding her. This imagery confronts the reader with striking contrasts between childhood and maturity, fertility and sterility, freedom and confinement, and external and internal reality. The cover of the

collection–I have never seen a volume of poetry more handsomely presented–reveals this contrast between external and internal landscapes. A barren, orange-brown desert stretches out toward a distant horizon punctuated with buttes, while, in the foreground, the point of perception is framed with deep green leaves and vines. The florid point of perception suggests L'Anne's childhood, early love, and poetical self, while the desert, despite its intense hue, suggests the barrenness of her subsequent, sometimes prosaic experience.

The first poem, "river jungle," which introduces the opening section, "Transitions", is a veritable jungle of imagery. The abstract and concrete intertwine like vines, and synesthetic images intermix like swirling mists. Reading such lines as "Innocent as the ant-bird's song and slow/ as the sun, I bathe in shadows," we are hard-pressed to say just where the abstract ends and the concrete begins or, for that matter, where the jungle stops and the perceiver starts. In this collection we repeatedly encounter the tension between the dispersed stuff of the senses and the unifying self. Yet Craven's metaphors can be remarkably lax. In the lines "I strip red leather from mangos/ to yellow my hands and mouth with sugar-peach fruit," an organic image is used to reveal a very similar organic thing, producing a richness the reader can't keep from tasting. Even the confessional parts of L'Anne's narrative present, rather than mere complaints, poetical images of thought: "I mourned for morning lost/ for a jungle 1, youthful, found free/ of the army ant/ the snake/ and the spider."

Transitions in the character of imagery can be striking. From the lush rainforest, Craven's persona abruptly delivers us into a florescent lighted hospital room, where a dying patient ". . . has come/ to beat back the stroke of time in a white/ room where chromium arms give the body breath." Looking out of the hospital window, L'Anne sees, not the Venezuelan jungle, but ". . a desert willow/ . . shedding summer, leaf by leaf." She adds, "I am shedding my own summer like the willow tree. . .." Contrasting imagery thus reveals the conflicts of L'Anne's experience.

The finest section is "Brother," in which L'Anne imagines what might have become of the brother who ran away. In a richly detailed, descriptive passage, she visualizes him aboard a freighter:

> Tonight he has a lady who helps him with a meal: a sheet of tin holds brick and sand to keep the fire within the wooden deck, and iron mesh suspends their pans above the yellow flames. Preparing king mackerel steaks and onion and the greenyellow juice of Indian curry spooned over steamed white rice, the lady cooks; Les attends the fire, scooping it sizzling into the sea when bowls are filled.

L'Anne imagines her brother a Venezuelan fisherman, a prisoner in a

Panamanian jail, a grubbily sensitive Austin poet, and, finally, a street artist who defines for her, and for the rest of us, the artist's mission: "I offer ... my eyes that you may learn to see/ as I see: art was made for that."

The most moving section, "Marriage," begins with the joy of love: "Washed in prairie sun, you touch my golden/ limbs with the floral spikelet of weeping lovegrass,/ and I search for words: forever and noonday/ young I bring my seventeen years from now/ until forever, loving you, loving, forever." But this love, natural and free, is subjected to the cold formality of ceremony. L'Anne feels trapped ("I am prisoner of the chapel men") as her father, standing before a minister with a baritone voice, hands her over to her "husband-owner-lover." In poignant, understated terms, L'Anne remembers how, as young lovers, she and her husband camped out in the mountains, where they "joined/ hands and bodies there in the litany and vespers/ of the mountain stream." This was their true and only marriage, spontaneous and blessed by nature. In contrast, L'Anne shows us the final moments of their last camping trip: "We extinguished embers of the morning fire,/ talking in hushed tone,/ and without a single tear,/ agreed ten years of marriage/ were enough, then he walked on/ to fish for trout for lunch."

In "Edward," L'Anne, now divorced, hears her lover ask her to jump onto his motorcylce and run away from "dirty-brown skys to coastal waters." His invitation to "Leave the dry thunder of the desert, ride/ with me beyond your paralyzing past/ your dead marriage, to learn again your body's/ fluid movement," lacking the formality of the ceremonial words that sealed the failure of her marriage, fills L'Anne with hope for resurrection of the joy of youth and passion. However, Edward's vision of nature is in sharp contrast to L'Anne's. For him the woods are full of dangers. Projecting to nature the violence he carries within, Edward warns:

> Don't pull the canoe to the bank by grasping grasses,
> for the saw grass can slice your fingers bloody,
> as can the edges of palmetto fans; and thorned
> strings of blackberry vine can cut your ankles;
> and likely we'll find mosquitoes and fire ants.

The affair does not return L'Anne to the rainforest of her childhood (Where there were no fire ants); nor does it awaken new life within her. Edward, a man of violent landscapes, leaves L'Anne only desola tion and literal sterility.

In "the lands within," Craven makes it clear that, just as she discovers the world outside herself, L'Anne also discovers, through experience, the internal world of her own self. External and internal landscapes complement one another, interacting in the images L'Anne carries within. She professes, "I can summon many landscapes/ emerald peacock tropic green/ flowing

with a hidden river/ through a world of gray-green grass/ out form childhood habanera. . . " These images within correspond to varied, sometimes conflicting, states of mind. L'Anne explains that "anger might come with saguaro/ knobbed with spiny cactus frost/ or celebration-sorrow-laughter/ in golden Phoenix citrus fields/ or heavy-eyed despair/ gray as moss on cypress trees." Imagery, in short, is a revelation of the self and a declaration of the truth the self possesses: "From the inward landscapes flow/ passions of so many selves;/ from remembered passions flow/ the landscapes,/ green and gray and brown."

Because L'Anne is a credible and sensitive persona, *My Own Choric* Song succeeds. Through a single consciousness we hear a chorus of voices, into whose celebration of a life of vulnerability, courage, truthfulness, and dignity we are drawn. "I speak", says L'Anne in the final section of the collection, "with one voice/ I am brother father sister mother/ I speak with many voices/ I sit in tiers to hear my own choric song." My Own Choric Song has only my respect and admiration. It is fine work, intelligently crafted and full of vitality. And it is encouraging to read a work based on faith that we do live in a universe where there is indeed unity in diversity. Things mean. We have whole worlds in common. We can communicate. Or, as L'Anne says in her parting words, "In the great and tragic moments of life, in the kiss of my lover, the birth of my child, in the death of father, sister, brother and coming darkness for self, I can do worse than reach for truth, take hold, and set it outside myself, though this be merely poetry."