

'Ecopoet' celebrates the wonders of nature
By Chad Greene
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"Poetry is the last refuge of the scoundrel who thinks he has something to say," Richard Beban declares with a self-deprecating chuckle.

The voluble versifier from Playa del Rey certainly has plenty to say, especially when it comes to the environment. Beban, a former journalist who has also written for film and television, now classifies himself as an "ecopoet."

"Ecopoetry is that poetry that tries to put us in our true place, which is as part of all creation," says Beban, who co-produced the 2003 Freshwater Marsh Ecopoetry Celebration with his wife, Kaaren Kitchell. "People need to know that nature isn't somewhere else that they go elsewhere to connect with."

Beban finds that misperception is particularly prevalent in urban areas, where residents often tend to lose sight of the flora and fauna that manage to survive, or even thrive, on the margins of the paved-over paradise that is Southern California.

Like birds, for instance.

"Talking to Birds" is the title of one of the seven sections in Beban's first full-length collection, "What the Heart Weighs," and the poem "On Guardian Angels" typifies how the former Santa Monica Audubon Society docent transcends traditional nature poetry. Instead of positioning his narrator as an outside observer describing some bucolic setting, Beban has him take notice of the feathered friends watching his own actions:

*Perhaps my angels have all along been birds.
How often am I out of their sight?
Even when I'm indoors, they come
to the window, seek me, keep watch.
In the main, my angels are small, brown sparrows,
who fly like tiny grapeshot & fastidiously watch,
but call little attention to themselves. They even seem
indifferent; but isn't that a perfect disguise?*

As fond as Beban is of reinventing bird-watching as a mutual occupation, it's an entirely different activity involving feathers that provides the central metaphor of his title poem, "What the Heart Weighs." The ancient Egyptians believed that at the moment of death, the gods weighed every person's heart against a feather of truth. A light heart earned entrance into the afterlife; a heavy heart was devoured by a demon.

While that metaphorical myth is only stated explicitly in the title poem, many of the others also evaluate the actions and reactions of the human heart.

"I think the concept of weighing the heart against a feather of truth runs through the majority of the poems in the book," Beban acknowledges.

But Beban says that it wasn't his heart, but his head, that felt as light as a feather when he first saw a finished copy of "What the Heart Weighs" during Red Hen Press' 10th anniversary party.

"My wife had to hold me by the ankles to keep my head from bumping off the ceiling like a balloon filled with helium," he proclaims with a laugh. "To see it between covers, to see it with a spine I felt like I had finally learned the meaning of the word author. It was a helium high."

It is Beban's words, not his head, that will be floating toward the ceiling at 8 p.m. Monday, when he reads with fellow Red Hen Press poet Sholeh Wolpe ("The Scar Saloon") at Book Connection, 4218 Atlantic Ave., Long Beach. (562) 283-5578.

—Chad Greene is a Long Beach freelance writer.

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