

Poems of hope, gratitude, and perspective

## **The devotional, political poetry of Barbara Crooker**

by [James Crews](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Some Glad Morning**

Poems

By Barbara Crooker  
University of Pittsburgh Press

After reading through the exuberant poems in Barbara Crooker's ninth book, I began to look at the world with different eyes. I found small, seemingly ordinary things to praise and felt myself transformed by her example of radical gratitude for this life just as it is. I recalled the words of the Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast: "In daily life, we must see that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but gratefulness that makes us happy."

As in her first book, *Radiance* (2005), Crooker's poems remain grounded yet wide-ranging. She offers up masterful ekphrastic pieces about paintings by Hopper, Cézanne, O'Keeffe, and Renoir alongside glimpses of everyday hopes and doubts. Whether she's finding her inspiration abroad or close to her home in Fogelsville, Pennsylvania, Crooker mines each instant for wisdom.

"It's May," for instance, revels in the lushness of early summer:

The evening primroses unfold  
their four-petaled skirts, ruffled flounces around  
the edge of the bed, and the lupine's spires  
sway in the breeze.

Her passion soon overtakes her, and after a litany of natural beauties—"pink coneflowers, black-eyed Susans, Russian sage"—she wonders quite reasonably:

Why aren't we on our knees? Why aren't we  
picketing with placards and day lilies, demanding  
an end to GMOs, a reduction in carbon emissions  
and the use of fossil fuels?

These lines exemplify much of Crooker's work, which strikes a delicate balance between devotional and more realist urges. What makes her poems so necessary right now is that she never turns away from current events. She allows the poem's voice to veer directly from the pleasures of nature into the overtly political.

Crooker has been aptly compared to Mary Oliver. For all of Oliver's undeniable strengths and popularity, however, she seldom admitted certain parts of daily life

into her poems. Crooker insists that poetry can't ignore our country's divisions or the climate crisis.

Crooker has metabolized Horace's famous directive in "Ars Poetica" that the poet should both "delight and instruct." In the luminous poem "Peaches in August," she writes: "When the rest of the world seems to be falling apart . . . the one thing that still seems solid / is these peaches, hanging fat and golden on the tree, heavy / with sun and rain." Look around, her poems urge readers, especially in the midst of grief or despair, and find something close by that you can appreciate.

For Crooker, hope always rests in the small moments, whether looking at a timeless painting, drinking beer in Maine with a dear friend, or lavishing attention on cooking a delicious meal. The wonderful "Fifteen Bean Soup" is a gratitude list naming the ingredients, people, and objects that made this meal possible—a kind of praise song for the pots and bowls, the farmer and rancher, and finally the housewife, "lost in history, who figured / out this recipe, the proportions, who added in the harmony." The ability to elevate the preparation of soup to the level of a sacrament is evidence of Crooker's immense giftedness, honed over many years of practice.

Since finishing *Some Glad Morning*, I've found myself returning to it repeatedly, especially when I watch too much news. Crooker gives us permission to take pleasure in the world even when we feel there is no time or energy for such luxuries as gratitude and joy. As she begins "Poem with an Embedded Line by Susan Cohen,"

When the evening newscast leads to despair,  
when my Facebook feed raises my blood pressure,  
when I can't listen to NPR anymore,  
I turn to the sky, blooming like chicory . . .

With this simple turn, she's reminding us that we can choose how we see our lives and how we use our attention.

Crooker doesn't shift her vision to the sky as a way of escaping from the world. Nature, she believes, in all its abundance, provides us with the most reliable source of "steady light." The poem ends with these open-hearted lines:

At my kitchen table, all will be fed. I turn  
the radio to a classical station, maybe Vivaldi.

All we have are these moments: the golden trees,  
the industrious bees, the falling light. Darkness  
will not overtake us.

In this instance, as throughout the collection, you can't but believe her.