Line Dance (review)

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West's views on art—both functional and aesthetic—need to be located historically in terms of the Communist Party's stances on the revolutionary potential of "folk" art, for instance, which led to the Left's "adoption" of singer/songwriter Aunt Molly Jackson—a couple of whose songs were printed in the definitive collection *Proletarian Literature of the United States*—and her resultant "spoiling" in the eyes of West. In *A Hard Journey*, there are moments when West's literary strategies come off as oddly individualistic. I say this with no intention to slight West's own, singular vision. Rather, I would have Lorence use his research to show that there was an organizational context for the cultural side of West's work as well as the community-activist side. West's relationship with the Left African American poet Langston Hughes could serve as a case in point.

But this suggestion is emphatically on the order of a request for "more." I was fascinated and engaged by *A Hard Journey*. I was challenged by the book, and by the example of West, to rethink my own assumptions about regionalism, political history, and approaches to activism, especially the ways in which different generations of radicals have been concretely connected to each other up through the present. Lorence's work will significantly advance our understanding of the history of the American South beyond existing strictures. I'm convinced, in short, that we do need Don West—and that Lorence has succeeded in bringing him to us.

Barbara Crooker. *Line Dance*. Cincinnati: Word Press, 2008. 78 pages. Trade Paperback, $17.00.

Reviewed by Rebecca Foust.

Line Dance is poet Barbara Crooker's second full length collection of poetry, and one that more than lives up to the high standard set by her first book, *Radiance*, which won the 2005 Word Press First Book Competition and was a finalist for the 2006 Paterson Poetry Prize. Several poems in this collection ("Poem on a Line by Anne Sexton," "Simile," "The VCCA Fellows Visit the Holiness Baptist Church,"

"One Song," "Gratitude," and "When the Acacia Blooms" to name a few) were written during the twelve residencies Crooker spent at The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, a colony for artists and writers located in Sweet Briar, Virginia, and much of her imagery derives from the flora and fauna of that region. Old fashioned flowers like peonies, roses, goldenrod, and asters bloom in these pages, along with morning glories "whose blue mouths are open to the sky/whose throats are white stars" in a poignant expression of loss and longing in "Blues for Karen." The poems are alive with the wings of juncos, chickadees, woodpeckers, swallows and mockingbirds; a cardinal is "the very essence of red," ("One Song"), finches are "little chips of sun" ("At the Thistle Feeder, Finches"), and a hummingbird is "quick as thought, and just as elusive" ("Hummingbird"). "Gratitude" gives us the entire aviary in a single, vivid image:

> How many times have I forgotten
> to give thanks? The late day sun
> shines through the pink wisteria with its green
> and white leaves as if it were stained glass,
> there's an old cherry tree that one lucky Sunday
> bloomed with a rainbow: cardinals, orioles,
> goldfinches, blue jays, indigo buntings,

The book's title makes a pun on the stylized dance form (think the "Hustle" or the "Electric Slide") and also on the way that a line of poetry can dance when the sound and meter are right. In developing the musical motif that runs through this book, Crooker draws from a wide canon which includes Jazz ("Hard Bop"), Gospel ("The VCCA Fellows Visit the Holiness Baptist Church, Amherst, Virginia"), Rock ("Me 'n Bruce Springsteen Take my Baby Off to College"), and the primitive percussions in "Rhythm Section," one of the handful of poems that treat with great delicacy and restraint the subject of Crooker's autistic child. Musical images crop up in unexpected and refreshing places, such as in this description of a winter blizzard in "Valentine:" "Now the snow is busy, composing its small white music, the little notes tumbling/off the staff." Dance images also make graceful gestures, with two poems actually set in the dancing schools of the author's youth ("Miss Susan's

Dance Academy" and "Sonnet for Mr. Rutherford").

In its most literal sense, a line dance is a formation of people dancing in rows and following a specified pattern of synchronized steps. Crooker plays off the literal meaning in the title poem, whose shape on the page mimics the weaving, linked-arm wedding dance that the poem describes. Likewise, the titles of the opening poems for each of the book's four sections evoke the music/dance theme: "Breath," "Line," "Miss Susan's Dance Academy," and "One Song." Crooker's music is all-inclusive, the music of life itself, and in her world even eggplants and sunflowers chime in or turn a step. The title poem's wedding dance embraces everyone the speaker has "ever loved," including her ex-husband and "his soon-to-be-estranged second wife, the one he left us for." The theme is reiterated as a coda in the last poem, aptly entitled "Gravy" for the wonderful whole that transcends "those/little odd bits and pieces, the parts that could/be discarded but aren't." Even in this poem about mixing flour with fat to make the least pretentious of sauces, Crooker still manages to sustain the dance/music motif as the speaker's spoon becomes a "baton" and the gravy itself the "music, the bubble/and seethe as it plays its score." Here, gravy represents the same unity achieved in a song from an arrangement of notes or in a dance from the pattern of its steps. The rejected, the disaffected, "the difficult uncle/or the lonely neighbor invited out of duty," the autistic child, the ex-husband and even all of his future ex-wives—all are part of the "holy family of gravy," disparate notes that somehow finally, improbably, blend into a coherent and beautiful song.

The image of a line as it is manifested in a line of poetry is another motif that runs through and unifies *Line Dance*. In one of my favorite examples, Crooker likens a poem to "a clothesline hanging/between two trees" in which "the words, hung by wooden/pegs, move with the wind" ("This Poem"). Lines can be literal, like the "two straight lines across shellacked pine" in the floor at the Dance Academy, or the human line made by the interlocked arms of dancers at a family wedding. In the hauntingly bleak "Zero at the Bone," lines are "unwritten" on a "blank text of the snow." Sometimes lines are even empty spaces waiting to be filled in, such as those in SSI forms in "Climbing the Jade Mountain" or in a remedial English test failed

by the speaker's son in "Simile." Line shape varies in almost every imaginable way, from the geometric "pyramid of X's" observed while ascending the Eiffel Tower to the "sinuous loops of the Seine" in one poem inspired by Crooker's travels to France.

Crooker devotes an entire poem to the subject in "Line," the poem which lies at the heart of her book. In a clever technical inversion of the notion of a straight line, she begins with circumlocution—a series of negations telling what she does NOT mean by the word ("not what someone hands you in a bar" and "not what you use to go fishing"). What she is talking about is something more fundamental and metaphorical, "the spine, the matrix, the core/of what's laid down, then played over and over,/improvised, embroidered, embellished," what "moves away and then comes back." Here she is referring, of course, to the theme that underlies any jazz improvisation, and also to the plumb line that runs through this book from beginning to end: themes of family, simple faith, nature, and the joy and gratitude that is possible even in a world that includes winter, death, and children lost in a knot garden of Autism. Autism is a "labyrinth," she tells us, "of false twists/and turns, blind passageways, spirals that lead/nowhere." But above it, "chevrons of geese wedge/their way across the sky each autumn." In other words, there is a theme, a plan, a way through and out of the knot garden, even if we can't always divine it.

The notion of variations-on-a-line unifies *Line Dance* thematically, but it is also a technical device that Crooker uses to connect and organize the poems, arranged so that each inclines to the next in what appears to be a natural, almost inevitable sequence. This device is most evident in the first section of the book where the theme of a father's death and the blue of a "blameless" sky in "Breath" lead directly to the elegiac "Blues for Karen," in its turn seeded with the image of "this old blue world" that sets up the cartographic images in the two poems that follow. A close reader of this book will be rewarded by the discovery of a daisy chain-like string of images and words that connect one poem to the next by means of repetition of an image, word or sound from the preceding poem. This movement of one piece towards the next and hearkening back to pieces that came before is yet another expression of the variation-on-a-line theme, another enactment of the dance that gives the book its name: "two steps forward, one step back"

("Knot Garden").

From the first to the last poem in the collection, Crooker sustains and embroiders her themes about family, art, and identity and the result is a *tour de force* jam session worthy of any master jazz musician. The analogy is an apt one, for she uses the same technique of exquisite control within artistic parameters over the material that she seems so effortlessly to spin out for our delighted eyes and ears. "I'm riffing on the warm air," she exults, "the wing beats of my lungs/that can take this all in, flush the heart's red peony." And when Crooker joins the trees to "bend to the sky" and "clap their green hands in gratitude," this reader does too, thankful for the opportunity to read this remarkable and beautiful book.