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## RELOADED Disability Studies Quarterly

Fall 2007, Volume 27, No.4

<[www.dsq-sds.org](http://www.dsq-sds.org)>

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Perrillo, Lucia. *I've Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Laurie Clements Lambeth, DSQ Review Editor

In 1885, ill with cancer and recovering from a severely fractured leg, *Ramona* author Helen Hunt Jackson wrote to John Muir with the hope that Yosemite would bring her a breath of health. Unable to walk through the terrain, she asked if she could ride through on a wagon with attendant care and an ambulance. Muir felt that the woods would not allow access, and further, that the "commotion" caused by her great number of care workers, the spokes and size of the horse-drawn vehicles would frighten his squirrels, wreak havoc with the bears, and disturb the chaparral of his preserve. Nature, as we know, has generally been considered a prize located off the path, limited to those physically able to access it. The tradition of able-bodied self reliance set up by Emerson has since permeated the genre of American nature writing. Poet Lucia Perillo's collection of personal essays *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* explores this subject for an entire book. A former park ranger diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis when she was in her thirties, Perillo constructs a rough elegy to her own ideas of self reliance, to walking, to entering nature as a solitary resident, not just a visitor.

Perillo is painfully aware of the physical expectations set by Emerson and Thoreau, and she compares them to the circumstance of her uncomfortable physical dependence on caregivers who accompany her into the wilderness and lift her into and out of her chair. The essays repeatedly struggle with what exactly constitutes the experience of nature: is it found in naming the flora and fauna, in the physical act of skiing down Mount Ranier, in the use of muscles and tendons to propel oneself through the woods, or in the bumpy ride along a constructed pathway, observing from a seated position? Because the author had previously equated nature with physical stamina — "I was vain about having a body that could paddle me across the sea or climb me to the top of mountains" (1) or "I once worshipped at the temple of physical fitness" (135) — she grieves the loss of that strength, and reluctantly tries to seek tolerance of her new body and find a new way into the wild. She calls attention to the difficulty her narrator has accepting nature half-way, denied full access to rougher, steeper trails.

The introductory essay compellingly links the behavior of an ill tiger to the author's body, and to the common response we have when asked how we are: "fine." We mask symptoms. In subsequent essays Perillo grapples with available choices of disability terminology, alternative therapies and the search for panacea (bee sting therapy, notably, or the Kombucha fungus), dependence on caregivers who never enlisted, body image and sex — a chapter aptly entitled "Sick Fuck." She makes

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fascinating comparisons of her physical state to Job and to Prometheus chained to the rock, eagles repeatedly dining on his liver. This, Perillo contends, is the experience of living with a chronic but not fatal disease, a comparison alive in the book's title, the echo of Eliot's Prufrock who hears the mermaids singing but does not think they sing to him. The vultures sing, but they do not call upon Perillo's narrator, a phenomenon at times construed as something tragic. The narrator sees the self and body as contradictory elements, and she candidly records the times she wishes for death to break the bond between them. Between essays, Perillo inserts "Knowledge Games" meant to act as meditations for observing wildlife (gulls, bats, birdsong) in the present moment and finding satisfaction in it. With each one, however, the narrator fiercely resists, unhappy with her "bad body-luck" (her words), the distance between her body and the ground, the awkward neck placement to see bats in flight. Since this life does not live up to the Emersonian ideal, Perillo resists it. By the end of the book, the grappling has transformed to a low rumble, and the final two essays are wise, lyrical, and astonishing. Who but Lucia Perillo knew salmon could be so beautiful, so beyond human, and yet so like us?

Those who have read her marvelous poetry (most recently, *Luck Is Luck*) will notice a shift between the subtle restraint and well-timed placement of detail in her poems and the casual swagger (she would find my use of that term ironic) and abundance of emotion in her prose. The tone in many of the essays sets the narrator up as a great sufferer who is edgy enough to see through hope's thin veneer. Perillo's knack for subtlety is most evident in moments of lyric beauty when the narrator backs away, avoiding what might be construed as sentimentality. The book's difficulty lies in the uneasy balance between the edgy, angry, overtly dramatic and therefore sentimentally portrayed self, and the beautifully subdued and moving consolation made in connections between her body and nature. It is indeed fiercely honest, but it feels edited to downplay the lyric and turn up the volume on what might be seen by disability scholars as reinscribing ablist conventions of the illness narrative, privileging the body that once was.

"At least it is honest,/ the body apparent/ and not rotting in the dirt" Perillo writes in her stunning poem "Shrike Tree." Perillo prizes honesty in both nature and in her own work. *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* is indeed incredibly honest, in your face with its emotional intensity. Aware as she is that when she writes she constructs a persona, Perillo slips in some commentary about the book's voice as a made thing. This distance from the subject allows a refreshing sense of ironic awareness to filter the painful self-consciousness displayed by the narrator. One of the book's weaknesses is its structure. Each essay may take on a variety of ideas, but they often revisit the same emotional territory, without propelling a sense of tonal arc. Had these linked essays, arranged as a poet would arrange poems, one leading to the next, behaved more like a fluid memoir, the final essays' movement towards something larger would make dramatic sense. While these later essays are indeed rewarding, their tone and wisdom quickly depart from what precedes it; absent is the process of arrival to the newer, transportive observations.

Still, there is much to celebrate: Perillo's honesty, ardent intelligence, and power of observation. Her authoritative understanding of nature fixes this book as an important bridge between literature of the environment and disability.

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ISSN: 2159-8371 (Online); 1041-5718 (Print)

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Poet Lucia Perillo's collection of personal essays *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* explores this subject for an entire book. A former park ranger diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis when she was in her thirties, Perillo constructs a rough elegy to her own ideas of self reliance, to walking, to entering nature as a solitary resident, not just a visitor. Perillo is painfully aware of the physical expectations set by Emerson and Thoreau, and she compares them to the circumstance of her uncomfortable physical dependence on caregivers who accompany her into the wilderness and li Lucia Perillo (1958-2016) is the author of many collections of poetry: *Dangerous Life*, which won the Norma Farber Award for best first book; *The Body Mutinies*, which received the PEN Revson Foundation Fellowship and the Kate Tufts Poetry Award; *The Oldest Map with the Name America*; *Luck Is Luck*, which won the Kingsley Tufts Award and was a finalist for the Los. Angeles Times Book Prize; *Inseminating the Elephant* and *On the Spectrum of Possible Deaths*. For Lucia Perillo, who spent a great deal of her life as a park ranger, nature is so essential to her identity that a complete withdrawal from it would equal death. In *I've Heard the Vultures Singing*, Perillo confronts, in stark but funny terms, the ironies of being someone with her history and gusto for life being suddenly unable to walk. ("Ground-truthing" [Read Full Overview](#). Former park ranger and award-winning poet Lucia Perillo presents *I've Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*, a memoir of the ups and downs in her life. When Lucia was in her thirties, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* recounts the difficulty of coming to terms with losing the ability to walk. She had to give up some of her favorite outdoor activities, [Read Full Review](#). Lucia Perillo grew up in the suburbs of New York City. She earned a BSc in wildlife management from McGill University in Montreal and worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before earning an MA in English from Syracuse University. Perillo was the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Dangerous Life* (1989), which won the Norma Farber Award from the Poetry Society of America; *The Body Mutinies* (1996), winner of the Kate Tufts prize from Claremont University; *The Oldest Map with the Name America* (1999); *Luck is Luck* (2005), a finalist for the. Her collection of essays, *I've Heard the Vultures Singing* (2005), is a clear-eyed and brazenly outspoken examination of her life as a person with disabilities.