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 **"We are Not the Language": An Interview with Ed  
Roberson (Part 2)**

Kathleen Crown

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"We are Not the Language"**  
**An Interview with Ed Roberson (Part 2)\***

*Kathleen Crown (bio)*

Crown:

I've been reading *City Eclogue* in manuscript over the past several days. Even though you tried to prepare me by saying that you are "misbehaving" in this book, it was full of surprises. So much of your work has been about beauty—and it still *is* about beauty; but this book is also full of what is *not* beautiful—compost, garbage, droppings, vulgar language, the street, the presidency, the news. I would like to start by asking about the "Stand-In Invocation," in which you set up that urban grittiness for the reader.

Roberson:

You'll see another version of that poem in *Atmosphere Conditions*, in "The Wanderers"—a different poem about the same experience in the subway. The experience as it happened was in *Atmosphere*. In this one, I gave her different things to say, different things to represent, and a different position. She's the muse that you talk to, but she's not going to talk to you. I wanted attitude. I wanted her to be one of the beautiful New York women, Beauty itself. But she had an attitude, herself, about what Beauty is, how you regard her, and what's going on around her. She doesn't trust you. Even though she's going to give you—she's going to give me, and you're going to read—the poem, which she supposedly does not bless, she's not going to act like she did. That's what I wanted to get across.

Crown:

Formally, *City Eclogue* reminds me of *Lucid Interval as Integral Music*, with the line that divides the page, and the under-voice coming in, and the "she" who is addressed. But in *Lucid*, "she" is Lena, the newborn daughter, who is a blessing and a positive, powerful, and nurturing, or at least nurtured, presence.

Roberson:

Well, Lena and I both have grown up. [*Laughter*] The voice, underneath, formally finishes the poem, because the last two lines, the couplet, isn't there. It's there by attitude, but it's not there on the page—the mumbling, that look she gives you. The under-voice is what she really

says.

Crown:

What about the word "testifies" in the lines

No. One more of the feeling un-invoked  
spoken out of these days' put you through **[End Page 748]**  
proofs before granting you speech testifies  
she is not the mouth of anything you wrote

(*City Eclogue* 15)

I'm wondering about the tradition of lyric invocation, and how it connects with the act of testifying.

Roberson:

When I said the under-voice finished the form of the poem, underneath the line, what I meant was that this is a sonnet, and the couplet is this rumbling ("ould've / ould've") as she walks away. It's a joke on the "coulda woulda shoulda" that negates anything that's said before. She's not going to testify that she actually did this, even if she did. She might give you the poem, but she's not going to support you. She says you're on your own; you've got to take your own responsibility for what comes out of your mouth. The rumbling sound at the end, "ould've / ould've," actually fits the form. The first line of the poem ends "could've." And so "short of," the last words of the poem, under the line, is a slant rhyme to that. So she knows the form: "her tongue's just sharp and short of."

Crown:

You did something similar in one of your earlier books, *When Thy King Is a Boy*, putting things out on a grid.

Roberson:

Yes, the whole book has a graphic structure. There are a couple of poems that swing from one side of the page to the other in a kind of rhythm, and that almost is a voice in itself.

Crown:

Where did the poem start?

Roberson:

A couple of places. *City Eclogue* has some references to the big "clean-up" movement when Giuliani was mayor of New York.

Crown:

Cleaning up Times Square?

Roberson:

Yes, that...

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**“WE ARE NOT THE LANGUAGE”**  
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*by Kathleen Crown*

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\* This interview was conducted August 26, 2005, in Princeton, New Jersey.



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