

Book Review

WASHITA.

BY PATRICK LANE.

MADEIRA PARK, BC: HARBOUR PUBLISHING, 2014. 80 PAGES. \$18.95.

In the afterword to *Washita*, Canadian poet Patrick Lane describes how his left hand and right brain struggled together to relearn the letters on the keyboard after his shoulder froze. After decades of writing and publishing poetry, Lane felt that he was experiencing a second childhood. Yet he found that this painstaking process sharpened his attention to the practice of writing as he pared away adjectives and discovered the infinity of distance between simple letters.

Lane, however, is concerned not with eternity, but with the expanse between all the selves we have been and will be, as well as the innumerable traces of others that we carry with us. As he puts it, “I am lost in an imagined cemetery. / I have brought out my dead” (“Midden” 40), and he has a lifetime of dead on which to reflect. They aren’t triumphant and shrouded in glory, either—“No, they arrive like turnips pulled winter-burned and cold from the soil” (“Arroyo” 9). Family and friends frequently emerge from the past, attended by feelings of guilt and loss. “Forgiveness comes hard” (“Bokuseki” 13), and it comes at the cost of many years, difficult feelings and old memories.

Many of these dead are animals. Animal lives are intricately intertwined with the issues that most preoccupy him, from an acknowledgement of transience and impermanence—“It was a trout rising made me see what a day is, a ripple only” (“Solstice Coming” 58)—to the sufferings that animals, too, undergo, as one snowy owl “starves perfectly” in the midst of winter (“Incoherence” 32). Lane, a hunter, refuses to sentimentalize nature or the hardships experienced by wild animals; he nonetheless has a “reverence for things” (“Rust and Worn Edges” 48) that does not fit well with the devastation that humans have enacted on animal lives and habitats: “The shame of my people is without beginning, without end” (“Tradition” 67).

Guilt and shame are heavy emotions, and part of Lane's contemplative project is to examine the feelings he has invested in his memories. "I have nothing left to offer but a worn Washita stone" ("Swarf" 61), he writes, and these poems represent an attempt to resharpen memories that have grown leaden over time. How one ages and deals with the muted ache of the past tumbles as a refrain until Lane can no longer place himself with any certitude: "Was I the blade or the stone?" ("Swarf" 61).

The years may exact a toll, but Lane gathers fragments of beauty as well as loss, folding the necessity of art and creation within uncompromising depictions of nature, aging and death: "I create to keep my world whole a little longer" ("Poets, Talking" 46). Yet his laborious writing process also encourages a newfound closeness, where it is "amazing how the images slow to an intimate crawl, / each word a salamander peering from beneath a stone" ("Solstice Coming" 58). Once again, nature and animals are essential to Lane's ethical and poetic landscape. To help render this intimate geography, he draws on Spanish and Japanese words as well as Chinese and Tibetan spiritual traditions. These traces most often appear in titles like "Hiragana" and "Mujo" as the poems flow through the alphabet, from "Arroyo" to "Wishing Not to be Aloof Like Stone." All of them try to reconcile with the dead, to learn how to carry sorrows that shift through time and that "are as small now as a koan carved on a grain of rice" ("Wishing Not to be Aloof Like Stone" 72).

Washita begins with a frozen, immobile body and memories that turned the dead into worm-riddled dust. By the volume's end, there is another image of motionless in the reflection of still water, but this time it is accompanied by a desire not to be aloof like stone, but to have "the other world come alive again in me, old songs and soft birds" (72). Like the doe Lane killed when he was young, the blood flows freely from her throat and through his memories. The poems in *Washita* encourage readers to reconsider our personal aging process as well as the dead we carry with us, urging us not to stay aloof but to face the depths of our difficult emotions, no matter how bloody.

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