

The Elusive Essential M. Travis Lane

M. Travis Lane, *The Essential Travis Lane*. Ed. Shane Neilson. Erin, Ont. The Porcupine's Quill, 2015. 63 pp.

Shane Neilson. *How Thought Feels: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane*. Victoria, B.C. Frog Hallow Press, 2015. 174 pp.

How do you capture the essence of a poet's work? It's a tricky business, especially if that work is subtle, layered, and difficult. Shane Neilson's "Foreword" to *The Essential Travis Lane* immediately acknowledges the problem and seems to back away from the promise implied by the title. The "slim volume" does not include, he admits, "Lane's longer poems [which] are among her best achievements" (8). Nor does it include the short works published during the second half of Lane's career, since these are still widely available in a collection edited by Jeannette Lynes, *The Crisp Day Closing on My Hand: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane*. The essential poems, in this case, are the ones Neilson has "excavated" from "Lane's first five books;" volumes that are "out-of-print" and were "never properly recognized in their day" (8). So apparently, "essential" means early and unavailable. Do I sound suspicious? I'm not. In this sixty-three page collection, the central concerns of one of Canada's finest but least known poets, M. Travis Lane, shine through. Like Alistair MacLeod, Lane set forth her main themes early on, and there is no prolonged apprenticeship period or slow maturation toward fruitfulness. The early verse gives voice to the ideas that have dominated her work for the almost sixty years that she has been living and publishing in the little city of Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Evident in the early work is Lane's career-long struggle to make meaning in a world that does not always lend itself to that endeavour. The natural world is a continuous source of image, allusion, and trope, but Lane senses that we are also separated from it. She struggles to find meaning in natural processes that blunt efforts to create significance. In "Road Ending," from her 1985 collection *Reckonings: Poems 1979-1985*, nature is an ever-present force and language is referential, but encounters are framed in words and perceptions are not secure. We are always a little apart:

What were the words I could not use,
the thoughts I could not think to say?
The white lake shook in the early dusk.
Something was lost we were waiting for,

summer, perhaps, or snow.
("Road Ending," ll. 12-16)

Lane is aware that the world is a place of deep loss. There are traces of presence in relationships and in stories, but people who move through time know that everything is subject to change and rupture. "Colonial," from *Divinations and Shorter Poems 1973-1978*, captures this loss and notes that everything is subject to diminishment or extinction:

Our little bells ring steadily;
beyond them drones
the deaf Atlantic sponging us,
dot on a dull map, from our sight.
(ll. 1-4)

Nature's power absorbs and annihilates; Lane is deeply aware of the existential struggle which must then necessarily arise in the heart of the modern and postmodern condition. We can find no significance around us, except for the gestures we create ourselves, and these are transitory:

A white mist surges from our dreams
and blocks our harbours,
tamps us down conceived
in exile, nothingness ...
Nothing is here.
(ll. 5-8, 14)

Neilson claims that "Lane has documented in poetry a Maritime way of seeing and thinking" (9). Whatever a Maritime perspective proves to be, it is surely infused with this sense of loss, for this is a region that invokes a sense of longing for an always fading past: "for home is a place we've never been. / We would not be home in it were we there" ("Colonial," ll. 20-21).

Lane's early poems, like those of her middle and later period, are unflinching as they articulate the human struggle, but she also points towards strategies and ideals that respond to the forces that haunt us. Like the modernists early in the twentieth century—Robert Frost whose agnosticism was the focus of her PhD dissertation, or T.S. Eliot who articulated his hope in "these fragments I have shored against my ruin"—Lane notes that doubts can be answered, initially and incompletely, by the timeless stories of human culture. Mythologies provide structure if not answers. In

“The Healed Child,” from *Divinations and Shorter Poems 1973-1978*, Lane addresses directly the issues of suffering and pain, reflecting on the plight of an infant marred by illness: “Death kept his tendril fondling / the baby’s head, stitched up” (ll.1-2). The bright girl’s scar is a mark “tattooed on her skin” through which death “cries ‘Mine. Mine.’” But when mortality threatens, Lane frames the fear in Roman myth, noting that we have always struggled with suffering and always hear Proserpine’s “voice / sighing from the grass, still weep / ‘Come back, Come back’” (ll.14-16). For Lane, myth and culture provide initial if ultimately ineffective breakwaters against the currents of mortality.

In Lane’s verse the surest hope possible is anchored in the divine. Lane is not a pat devotional poet. For her, the struggles of the world are real and any understanding of a realm beyond is incomplete. But partial revelation does give the imagination room to move; there is potential in the stories of Christ, the narratives of the divine, and the idea that there may be an ordinary word do impart some measure of grace and some hope of assurance. In “What moves is held,” from her first major collection *Poems 1968-1972*, Lane echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins, in her determination to read the world for signs of possibility and purpose:

For each
has news, a grace, a logic
to pronounce. I speak
as must this handiwork:
What moves is held.
(ll. 19-23)

Lane’s later work explores, in more detail, the frailties of individuals who reach toward God and express the joy and terrors such encounters involve, but the conviction that grace informs our experience of the world is present in the early work. In “The Burning Bush,” also from Lane’s *Poems 1968-1972*, she fully acknowledges the emptiness of our lives, but points to other signs that meaning can be, what exactly... imagined, recognized, received?

‘Look here,’ the bitter night appeals,
the forests burning in its wheels.
I have not seen but I have seen.
Each star exhausts
the pentecosts.
(ll. 46-50)

From the outset Lane's verse is musical, sensitive, and difficult. She has never adopted the kind of open and forceful personas so evident in the work of Alden Nowlan, Al Purdy, Susan Musgrave, and Margaret Atwood. Such reserve, such apparent inaccessibility, has cost her a wide readership. One might argue that many excellent poets from the Maritimes have been ignored in the broad national context, but even in that company, Lane's brilliance has tended to be undervalued. If her voice is sometimes distant and even cryptic, her determination to efface herself and foreground the language, the music, and the imagery of her work, means that readers are given an unusually wide scope to move and interpret. Shane Neilson and Porcupine's Quill are to be congratulated for coming as close as they have to reproducing what might be the essence of Lane's work.

The Essential Travis Lane makes a strong case that readers can find, in her work, a body of challenging, evocative, and imaginative poems. In a collection of essays edited by Shane Neilson and entitled *How Thought Feels: The Poetry of M. Travis Lane*, Jan Zwicky, Jeanette Lynes, and Shane Neilson provide some of the critical ground work which may open Lane's poetry to the wider readership she deserves. The limited edition volume—only one hundred fifty copies were published by Frog Hollow Press—has three parts: the first is a collection of three critical essays, the second includes a compiled collection of statements by Lane about poetics and language, and a third bibliographic section lists her books, anthologies, reviews, and essays.

The most valuable of these sections is the opening collection of essays, which constitute more than half the volume. Taken together the three essays illuminate key aspects of Lane's work and set out opening arguments that other critics hopefully will now complicate and expand. Jeanette Lynes' essay, "M. Travis Lane, Ecopoet," is the most effective of these articles as she uses an eco-critical perspective to track Lane's enduring interest with the politics of space. Ranging through both early and later collections, Lynes argues that Lane both explores the problems of the modern industrial world and "speaks to the coexistence of simultaneous worlds, which in turn...decentres human delusions of supremacy" (94). Noting that Lane avoids polemics at all costs, Lynes traces how the early lyrics expose the exploitative practices of colonialism and implicate the patriarchal conventions which are tied to these destructive habits. In her critique of "male knowledge...and its negotiating of a space for the woman's more explanatory epistemology," Lynes uncovers an ecopoetics in such poems as "Red Earth" and "Real Ants," and confirms that in both the lyrics and the long poems "everything is connected in an ecological

web if only we look” (94). Jan Zwicky’s essay, “How Thought Feels: The Poetics of M. Travis Lane,” meditates on Lane’s convictions about the nature of language, and asserts that her interest in the “weight of associated meanings” “lie[s] at the heart of great poetry” (30). Zwicky argues that Lane creates “powerful gestalts,” an experience in which words associate and culminate in a “dynamic interrelation” in which we sense an “articulated whole;” the parts “inter-determine one another in complex ways” (30). The notion that powerful associations build to a truth that is greater than its individual parts provides an accurate description of the accumulative impact of Lane’s work, but the essay is brief, and it is unfortunate that Zwicky’s evocative description is not tested against more examples. More can still be said about complexities of Lane’s relationship with words. The remaining essay, Shane Neilson’s “The Book and its Cover,” is the longest in the collection and provides a close study of Lane’s long poem *Divinations*. Neilson pays close attention to the intricacies of her “masterwork,” and provides a valuable analysis of how Lane responds to the James Hampton’s “The Throne of the Third Heave of the Nation’s Millennium General Assembly,” a colossal folk art assemblage which was discovered in Hampton’s apartment, after his death, and is now housed in the Smithsonian. For those unfamiliar with Hampton, and Lane’s reimagining of his work, Neilson walks us through how the Fredericton poet responds to the powerful themes of revelation, divine knowledge, and apocalypse, and explores how both creators foreground the essential role of freedom. Neilson’s work is helpful, but he sounds overly defensive when he keeps arguing that Lane is too often ignored because reviewers have an “anti-devotional bias” (43) and either “struggle with the topic of her faith” or “ignore it like a bad smell” (44). The essay is on surer ground when he simply defends Lanes place as “one of Canada’s very best poets.”

While the first section focuses on analytical responses, the second section of the volume features a compilation of the all the moments in Lane’s poetry that refer to either the issue of poetics or the nature of language. The assemblage makes for interesting reading, though the many brief excerpts soon feel decontextualized. Like a biblical concordance, this material will be most helpful to the scholar who wants to follow up on key works or ideas within Lane’s work. The third and final section, of particular value to future scholars, is a wide-ranging bibliography of Lane’s books, collections, and essays. Most interesting is the thirteenth page, chronologically organized, list of Travis Lane’s reviews, which will certainly aid critics who study the evolving arc of her poetics. Thoughtfully organized, Shane Neilson’s collection of criticism and critical material helps call attention to

99

one of Canada's most consistently evocative and under-rated artists. Given the small publication run of *How Thought Feels*, one can only hope that each volume finds an appropriate home. I know the one on my desk is going to be carefully housed in my university's library, where it will almost certainly not attract the attention it deserves.

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