

Patrick Lane

Barthesian Wrestler

“...I coughed for an hour, my chest feeling like the subject of a poem by Pat Lane...”
GEORGE BOWERING (64)

Why has Patrick Lane, a major Canadian poet, become a figure to be mocked allusively, to be dismissed psychoanalytically? For example, in reviewing Lane’s *Mortal Remains* among the nominees for the 1991 Governor-General’s Award for poetry in English, Cary Fagan (while acknowledging Lane as a previous winner) asserts he “shows us a wild frontier with frightening consistency” (C6). Although ambiguous, the reviewer’s assertion seems directed less at the notion of a consistently frightening setting or subject for the book, more at the diagnosis of its author as obsessive, as writing out of repetition compulsion, from malady. In brief, through a predictability of theme Patrick Lane has become within the context of Canadian poetry nearly as familiar a persona as Irving Layton (passionate self-embrace) or Margaret Atwood (coolly ironic feminism), and reaction to Lane’s persona (complicitous witness to violent suffering) *now precedes, often displaces, and even replaces a response to his words, lines, and books*. Lane’s role has become that of Barthes’s wrestler who

presents man’s suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks. The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering; like a primitive Pietà, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction. (Barthes 20)

A poem typefying Lane’s art as it emerged in the sixties,¹ “Wild Horses,” uses image, subject, theme, and tone in a way that through later recurrence would create his persona as simultaneous victim and victimizer:

Just to come once alone
to these wild horses
driving out of high Cascades,
raw legs heaving the hip-high snow.
Just once alone. Never to see
the men and their trucks.

Just once alone. Nothing moves
as the stallion with five free mares
rush into the guns. All dead.
Their eyes glaze with frost.
Ice bleeds in their nostrils
as the cable hauls them in.

Later, after the swearing
and the stamping of feet,
we ride down into Golden:

*Quit bitchin.
It's a hard bloody life
and a long week
for three hundred bucks of meat.*

That and the dull dead eyes
and the empty meadows. (*Sun 52*)

The wish that opens the poem, “Just to come once alone,” repeats itself insistently—perhaps once too often—like a wish that can’t come true: death is the only possible encounter between man and wild horses. Narrating the self-destructive slaughter of untamed animal life (analogous to the central incident in Arthur Miller’s script for *The Misfits*, where men kill the last wild mustangs for dogfood), the speaker of Lane’s poem recognizes an ambivalence of self isolating him from both the dead horses and the (apparently) unanguished men. The vivid image of “raw legs heaving the hip-high snow” registers an empathetic sense of cold and pain, and connects through alliteration to “high Cascades,” which, as oxymoron, indicates an emotional descent. Lane’s unobtrusive skill in using place names of British Columbia can also be seen in the phrase, “down into Golden,” whose name fits both monetarily, “three hundred bucks,” and ironically, “All dead”; Lane’s use of a casual curse, “bloody,” parallels this technique of maintaining a prosaic, naturalistic surface while subtextually establishing his theme of victimization. The murderous “trucks” and “cable” that technologically supersede the horses implicate the speaker, and specify a partial cause for “dull dead eyes” in *humans*.² For Lane, the Barthesian wrestler, “...Defeat is not a con-

ventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood; it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration..." (Barthes 22).

The much anthologized poem, "Mountain Oysters," is gathered in 1972 with "Wild Horses" in *The Sun has Begun to Eat the Mountain*, and likewise through animal imagery illustrates defeat as duration, but in finding linguistic form to express victimization through castration,³ Lane now makes conspicuous use of rhetorical figures:

The rams stood holding their pain,
legs fluttering like blue hands
of old tired men. (*Sun* 124)

The empathy accorded to the mutilated rams through simile and personification again involves complicity (and the figurative linkage deconstructs as "coercive," as inappropriate emotional appropriation), since the speaker "enjoyed...the deep-fried testicles" (124); nevertheless, having acknowledged—even *celebrated*—his guilt, the speaker moves beyond accessible definitions of hypocrisy, and, consequently, Lane, in the concluding lines quoted, "completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness" (Barthes 16).

In Lane's next major selection of poetry, *Beware the Months of Fire* (1974), the reader as voyeur watches "the spectacle of suffering, ...an externalized image of torture" (Barthes 20). This book's repetitious, and relentless, focus on the pain created by human violence can be sketched easily. The opening poem, "The Bird," takes as its central image the dying of a bird because it has been caged; the second poem, "You Learn," likens the speaker to a breast-shot bird; the third, "My Father's House," through a variant on the children's rhyme, "Step on a crack,/you break your father's back" (*Beware* 3), expresses grief and guilt for a murdered father; the fourth poem, "Because I Never Learned," with "the fragile skull collapsed/under my hard bare heel" (4), images disturbingly the speaker's memory of killing of a kitten; the fifth poem, "Act of the Apostles," visualizes the growth of children as a mode of cannibalism; the sixth poem, "Last Night in Darkness," describes the burial of a pregnant cat that was burned in gasoline; the seventh, "Three Days After Crisis in Cuba," narrates the shooting of a crow, and so on. While individually many of these poems are shockingly intense, collectively they seem formulaic. In a review article, Christopher Levenson suggests that Lane's concentration "on brutality and ugliness may be...partial and...sentimental (because excessive)..." (279). Implicitly, the epigraph to *Beware the*

Months of Fire, taken from Céline's *Journey To the End of Night*, refutes such criticism:

"The greatest defeat, in anything, is to forget, and above all to forget what it is that has smashed you, and to let yourself be smashed without ever realizing how thoroughly devilish men can be.... We must tell...everything that we have seen of man's viciousness...."

Six years later, in an explanatory note to *The Measure*, Lane paraphrases Céline's statement about the artist's responsibility to record human cruelty: "If there is a violence reflected among them [the poems] it is only because I care deeply for the many lives I have seen wasted uselessly" (back cover). Nevertheless, with such thematic predictability, Lane has begun to approximate the role of Barthes' wrestler whose function "is not to win; it is to go through the motions which are expected of him" (16).

However, Marilyn Bowering, in "Pine Boughs and Apple Trees; The Poetry of Patrick Lane," argues that there comes a significant affirmative shift in his art with *Unborn Things* (1975) because "the separation between self and object is blurred. The earth is not 'other.' (If you become one with place, you need not fear it.) The myth of the dying/resurrected god emerges as solution" (M. Bowering 30). Lane's title poem can be interpreted as exemplifying an atypical affirmation⁴ in such lines as

One with unborn things
I will open my body to the earth
and watch worms reach like pink roots
as I turn slowly tongue to stone
and speak of the beginning of seeds. (*Unborn* 7)

Yet, this same poem restricts—and maybe negates—optimistic readings of fulfilment and resurrection by including a dog that drowns and old people who "stumble into the jungle"; a single line, "and the child draws circles in the dust," implies the futility inherent in the cycle of birth and death.

A more representative poem from this period, one canonized by Margaret Atwood in her edition of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*, is "If," which, with brutal clarity, records female victimization:

Like that dying woman in Mexico
who fled her family by fucking a burro
on a wooden stage in Tijuana
you are alone and I am drunk again
on tequila, refusing to die,
hearing the madness of the burro

as the woman wept in pain. You are
 naked and I no longer want you.
 If I could choose a last vision
 it would be the dream of the knife,
 the dream of the death of pain.
 Put on your clothes.
 I am obscene.
 I am one of those who laughed
 when the burro dropped her on the floor. (NOBCV 291)

Céline and Barthes converge here in Lane's reflexive narration of defeat. Like the wrestler—but *not* as mere *image* of pain—the woman within the poem “takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and pillory. It is as if...[she] is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all” (Barthes 22). But the self-accusing speaker within the poem also is more than unhumiliated spectator—as is the reader whose (*inadvertently?*) *assaultive eye is placed on a voyeuristic continuum*. The poem itself in publicly drawing attention to Lane's self-defeat can be compared to

[t]he gesture of the vanquished wrestler signifying to the world a defeat which, far from disguising, he emphasizes and holds like a pause in music, corresponds to the mask of antiquity meant to signify the tragic mode of the spectacle. In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one's suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a liking for tears. (Barthes 16-17)

When “excessive portrayal of *Suffering*” (Barthes 20) lacks tragic form, and catharsis is impossible, does pathos become sentimentality?

Scenes of viciousness alternate with gently lyrical glimpses of potential intimacy in *Old Mother* (1982), especially in the China poems, such as “Lotus”:

A lotus, pink as a child's mouth,
 opens. The girl by the pond is so still
 the strangers on the bridge do not see her
 and do not hear as she carefully repeats
 their words over and over under her breath. (Lane, OM 75)

The girl's nearly silent efforts to echo the speech of foreigners become—in Lane's metaphor of hopefulness—a “bridge” across silence and separateness: a muted, naive alternative to alienation and violence. However, elsewhere in the book, “All My Pretty Ones,” ending with the slaughter of a barn-full of chickens with a double-bitted axe, conforms perfectly to Lane's established persona (even though the poem, itself, is seemingly derivative of Ondaatje's description of his protagonist in *The Collected Works of Billy the*

Kid shooting a barn-full of drunken rats). *Old Mother*, with the savage Monarch series at its core, leaves a dominant impression of Nature's irremediable and excessive cruelty. Again, Barthes's comments on wrestling offer illuminating parallels to Lane's practice and persona as a poet:

Since Evil is the natural climate of wrestling, a fair fight has chiefly the value of being an exception. It surprises the aficionado, who greets it when he sees it as an anachronism and a rather sentimental throwback...; he feels suddenly moved at the sight of the general kindness of the world, but would probably die of boredom and indifference if wrestlers did not quickly return to the orgy of evil.... (24)

Winter (nominated for the Governor General's Award in 1991) brings together brief, bleak, blank moments enlivened only by "transgressions" (Lane, *W1*). This reader knew "from the start" that like all of the "actions,...treacheries, cruelties and acts of cowardice" of the Barthesian wrestler, Lane would "not fail to measure up to the first image of ignobility he gave me; I can trust him to carry out intelligently and to the last detail all the gestures of a kind of amorphous baseness..." (Barthes 17). In "Winter 3," there are echoes of "Wild Horses" in the harsh "necessary" victimization of mammals:

Surrounded by crystals
 he will peer down their breathing hole
 smelling the sweet simplicity of their mouths
 deep in the blue cavern where they sleep
 and then
 he will take his spear
 and thrust it through fold after fold of snow
 holding it there while they twist
 just below him in the cold. (3)

Another poem, "Winter 18," can be read as a conflation of "If" and "Lotus":

Naked in the empty room
 the young girl offers herself. Such a forlorn gift,
 such hopeless dance; so incomplete
 with only innocence to offer. Her love, so awkward
 without wantonness: *transgression or transformation*.
 A simple defeat. (18)

In some ways, "Winter 6" is a yet more unsettling artifact because its opening reads like a parody of a Pat Lane poem:

The guests have arrived at last. The old
 woman in rags who pushes a steel cage

filled with her life, and the man with dogs,
the two pit bulls who whine with eagerness
at the end of their tethers. The young boy
with the burns on his face and shoulders
stands by the piano where the girl with no legs... (6)

The concluding stanza has “[t]he host...sitting in his study, staring/at a painting from the Ming Dynasty,” thus shifting the poem from victims (and victimizers) to victimology from the perspective of a connoisseur: is this intended as literary autobiography, as self-criticism?

In “Estimates,” a poem from *Mortal Remains* (also published in 1991), Lane seemingly takes as his subject someone reacting to his persona of violence:

Did you ever kill anybody? the woman who was driving
asked. (47)

It is precisely at this juncture that Lane must internalize his exterior persona, and thus distortedly react to “the image of passion, not passion itself” (Barthes 19). In poems like “Father” and “Mother,” Lane voices his sense of artistic failure, “Each time I try to create you I fall into intricate lies” (20), and later lines (e.g., “a world of green blood”) seem self-consciously “poetical.” In *Mortal Remains*, where he seeks to understand his bitter, destructive familial past in relation to his present self, Lane’s language wavers; “as in the theatre, one [wrestler or poet] fails to put the part across as much by an excess of sincerity as by an excess of formalism” (Barthes 21).

But where Lane *differs* utterly from the Barthesian wrestler, and what spurs on his most compelling poems, is an insistent emotion: suffering is unintelligible. His best words, lines, and books induce strong emotive response through the clarity and cruelty of that poetic insistence—and the reader suppresses the epistemological fear that the poet’s persona in its textual superimposition must necessarily occlude any directly apprehended knowledge of the poem as a pure object. In both the creation and the reception of his works Lane can, at times, be defeated by his habitual role as the poet of uncathartic defeat. Consequently, a critic like Cary Fagan can argue that Lane’s “loving portrait of lost men seems less a tragic vision than a revelation of male narcissism” (C6), and Patrick Lane’s audience, with fixed expectations, reductively observes him “pinned to the ground, [where] he hits the floor ostentatiously to make evident to all the intolerable nature of his situation; and sometimes he erects a complicated set of signs meant to

make the public understand that he legitimately personifies the ever-enter-taining image of the grumbler, endlessly confabulating about his displeasure.” (Barthes 18-19)

NOTES

- 1 In the agglutinative publishing history of Lane’s poetry, which involves self-publication, small presses, pamphlets, broad sheets, and shared anthologies, as well as a dozen books, earlier materials frequently become incorporated into later ones. *Patrick Lane: Selected Poems*, which is subdivided into three decades, “The Sixties,” “The Seventies,” and “The Eighties,” offers the best perspective on his work.
- 2 An interesting tonal contrast to this lament is “The Cariboo Horses,” where Al Purdy through half-comic elegizing mutes the angst-edged imagery of “Wild Horses,” and omits the implied self-laceration set down by Lane.
- 3 Lane’s “complicity” explains why the sombre tone in “Mountain Oysters” counterpoints that of Alden Nowlan in “God Sour the Milk of the Knacking Wench,” where castration is cursed indignantly (and facetiously).
- 4 Nowhere is an awareness of isolate sentience, of separation, more striking than in Lane’s poetic dialogue with Lorna Uher, *No Longer Two People*, where the title’s premise of union becomes ironic. The book’s final poem (written by Lane) emphasizes distance, not intimacy:

Alone at night
I look down upon your sleeping
hear the unborn crying for release.
Castrate, stripped of seed, I break
a trail through the snow.
There is no looking behind.
Everywhere the wind covers my passing. (*NLTP* 51)

The savagely barren imagery, “castrate, stripped of seed,” conveys hostility and dread of the void, rationalizes departure.

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