

THE POETRY OF RED LANE

Fraser Sutherland

*Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the ground, I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.*

Theodore Roethke, "The Waking".

THE POEMS Red Lane left when he died in 1964 at the age of 28 are as direct and brave and manly as any in our literature. They speak from the depths of pain but are full of joy. To excel in suffering is the saint's way; the poet must do something less, and more: to blow the pain into a bubble of purity. This is not so much a way of living as a way of making life anew, beyond fashion, swindle and falsehood.

Blowing bubbles that will not burst is the poet's job, and was Lane's. He did it by talking, simply talking, and asking all the right questions at the right times.

A poem is a poet
who writes poems
for everyone
who is listening

Are you listening?

("What Is A Poem Is A Poem Is A Poem")

This poem is one of the first in "The Surprise Sandwich" section of Lane's *Collected Poems*, a group of "children's poems". They are of course children's poems for adults.

Lane will use a simple, child-like question at the end of a poem again and again. For one thing, it disarms the reader. For another, it puts the poem at the very centre of his own concern. In one of the poems the boy describes all the

games he's played, "the House Game", the "Follow The Leader Game", "the War Game", then asks:

What if the Games I play are Really Real!

And then I think

Would I still like to play games
if they are Really Real?

And then I wonder

But I still play games

Do you?

(“The Games That Seem”)

There is no moral here, only a twist that points up Lane's superb pacing. An even better use of this skill comes in a very funny poem, "The Lunches That People." Here, the boy reflects on the weird sandwiches mothers make for their hapless sons:

My best friend always brings Surprise food
that his mother wraps up for him
and doesn't tell him what it is
And one day
his mother wrapped up a fresh egg for him
instead of hardboiled
and when he tried to peel it he was Really surprised.

But the poem is not all a play on the phrase, "Really surprised." Near the end, the tap is turned and the flow changes:

Well
I guess if you were to stop and think about it
you would find that the lunches kids and people have
are only as important as the lunches kids and people have not

If you know what I mean

That is the first turn of the tap, then the other twist: "Do you know what I mean?"

"The Lunches That People" has a close rival for sheer fun in "Breakfast Is," which tells how the boy's family came to eat their dog's favourite breakfast. The fun stops, however, in another poem that is full of wonder at the world, a wonder that is mixed with fear and pain. There is also the dignity of living mixed in, of

being able to suffer and, with luck, survive intact. Wonder, dignity and waiting
— to see what happens next :

Wherever I go
whatever I do
there is one thing that is always happening
and that is me.

Each of the senses gives something to the poem, one by one each a witness to the wonder of selfhood. To slightly alter Heraclitus: no one ever is, but everyone is becoming :

And I have tasted blood in a crust of bread
And I have touched the brow that tells the head
And I have smelled the sweat that made the sea
And I have thought that Everything must be

(“Is Happening It Happens To”)

In his other poems, Lane will use what might be called his active voice. For we are not just acted upon but are forced by the dictates of life to act. With Lane’s poetry, the act becomes a search, and the search itself is what matters. “. . . so I just keep pushing away at the margins and searching for the truth, whatever,” Lane said in a letter in 1963 to his brother Patrick. The poet is amazed at his own life, and his life is the last thing in the world he would deny.

Ah
how simple to break
such a chain
by simply denying it

But then
I was the one who forged it
and I hesitate

Hesitate
to deny my own work.

In a sense, this is the pride of the craftsman. It is a pride founded in pain. Pain may be good for you, bad for you, but it must be dealt with somehow. One way is to put it naked in the harsh light.

The girl “was a virgin/and she wanted to be brave,” the boy was drunk and made her stand undressed in front of him :

I laughed
and said

Ugh
For Chrissake
Cover it up

and she raised her hands
up to her face
and covered her eyes

COVERED HER EYES

And O
the emptiness that racked me
as my soul overflowed

(“Margins X”)

The same technique applies to what, for want of a better term, one calls stasis in the midst of joy. The poem describes the man and girl fusing in the act of sex, in the fulness of the moment :

then
my eyelids flickered
and I saw her suddenly

STARING EYES

and my soul fainted

(“Margins XVI”)

Sorrow is the other side of callousness. The poet recalls making love with a girl in a field covered with snow. She left him later for another boy and he told his friends that he had “laid her in a snowbank” and that she had “come down with a bad case of bleeding piles.”

Now I hear she is married
and has a child
and I cannot stop the bleeding

(“Margins II”)

There are two who bleed, then. It is grim to think that Lane himself died of a cerebral haemorrhage. In another poem he would remark :

And the feeling is constant
I have
the feeling of nearing now
a destination

(“Margins XIII”)

One wonders if he knew that with that destination there would be no more searching.

The sense of being menaced is always present in Lane. Take for instance, a poem that concerns deer-hunting. The man shoots what seems to be a deer:

Yes
it is a deer
lying dead in the snow

Hell
I knew it
I knew it all the time

Dead

My friend is hunting to the left of me
somewhere
in the fog

(“Margins XIX”)

Who is the hunter, who the hunted? Either way, there is menace like that in Raymond Souster’s “The Groundhog,” in which “The half-wit hired man is blasting imaginary rabbits/somewhere on our left.”

Again, walking home at night the poet meets a dog that growls. This is the black dog of despair, a pariah dog like those in Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*. But here, man bites dog:

I began to whistle

softly
brokenly

then
the dog turned his head
relaxed
moved slowly around me
away from me
and when it was well away

HYAH
YAH

I shouted at it
and it ran into the night
and I laughed aloud

for all mankind
and the night echoed back the laughter
(“Margins XVII”)

The sense here is not of that insipid ditty, “I whistle a happy tune . . .,” but of relief like rain on arid fields.

I have likened Lane to Souster but there is one important difference. Even in the sharpest of Souster’s snapshots there is something effete. The man with the camera is not the man of the street. But Lane’s poetry is working-class: fighting in the Army & Navy Service Club in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba; hitch-hiking to town; drinking draught in the beer-parlour. This poetry may not be more “real” than any other sort, but it was Lane’s choice of subject. The poetry is not anti-bookish but it is fiercely against putting thought before honest passion. One poem deals with the “mistakes” of George Bowering:

you argued with me that
intelligence came before knowledge
and went away
believing you were right

Bowering has a choice of making further mistakes, Lane says:

The first mistake will be made
if you go back to university
in the fall
or ever again.

(“Big Benzedrine”)

Lane had to take the straight, the direct way. Sometimes this way would yield the clearest and most startling results. For once, I will quote a poem entire.

There
in the earth light of sunset
up to his knees in a field of dandelions
central to the working hum of bees
the child in golden thought
stands monument
to the forms of reality
Hey!
Come on home for supper.

(“There”)

There it is, as clear and fixed and final as an Andrew Wyeth painting.

There are two kinds of loss in Lane's poems. Five of his poems deal with the loss of a girl: one girl dies, another leaves him. In the wildest sense, these poems deal with *social* loss. There is another kind of loss which finds its code in the poem beginning: "Green pastures now . . ." The poem holds the gorgeous image of

a young girl
riding a brown horse
and her long blonde hair flows out behind
as the horse gallops by

When they gallop away, "gathering the distances/heads back hair streaming," they leave behind "a path of brown and gold."

they go
and I cannot stop them
gone.

At the poem's end Lane says

from the hills beyond
they are indistinguishable
and the hills beyond

("Margins XXIX")

This is what I have to call *metaphysical* loss, and contained in a symbol more subtle and profound than anything in D. H. Lawrence. To be left behind, looking at hills with the girl and her horse somewhere among them, is a matchless vision of loss. The loss of beauty, the loss of God, the loss of hope that dwells somewhere in the hills.

The darkness is closing in. There is in Lane a sort of moving in the dark. But there is no fumbling and no failure, only sure movements among the rocks of despair, anguish and ennui. By being in the dark, he is made more aware. The pain, though, is always there. At times, Lane's lines seem to ask along with Souster's:

How long before the emptiness will go, or will
it always
Go on killing and aching and crying here in the darkness.

Lane's poetry does not give an answer — it is too wise for that — but it gives

a way of walking over rough terrain. One poem does this in the same fashion as Ernest Hemingway's story, "Big Two-hearted River." Both are about fishing trips, and about knowing the limits of the line. It is a kind of courage:

casting out my line
watching
the small artificial fly
looping out
to the limits of the line

Lane is always walking, often at night. In one of the best poems he walks, hears an owl hooting, and is afraid "of what may be in front of me."

I begin to talk aloud
asking and answering
in different tones of voice
as if I have companions with me
and we are carrying on a conversation

closer

and I pick up a few stones
and on the strength of my companions
throw the stones into darkness

and I no longer hear the hooting
on the road I'm walking.

Lane is not as excerptible as some poets because to remove a line is like taking away a step from one of his walks. I have not discussed the Lane poems which have failed, mainly because there are so few of them. Sometimes, however, his wit has too much flash and shimmer, and not enough weight. Sometimes, too, they are too private, as in the "Acknowledgements" section of *Collected Poems*. The poems addressed to Bowering, Irving Layton, Lionel Kearns and Milton Acorn are in places less poet to reader than poet to poet. But when Lane is truly walking he never stumbles.

The last poem in the collected edition is a fable, "for Milton Acorn, ultimately," about the plight of a sponge who must absorb life with his whole being, unlike the lucky sieves who just let life run through them. It is not easy to absorb life, and wait to be squeezed by God. The squeezing yields "All seed womb breath dust tears." To protest about being a sponge in a last great shout of courage is futile, and fatal:

And God changed the sponge in to a grain of sand
And turned and walked away from the beach.

(“Death of a Poet”)

This is a God who walked away. Lane was a poet who had a sure and total knowledge of his own life and gave this vision away for nothing more than the solace of your walking by his side.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ All the Lane poems are from *Collected Poems*, eds. Patrick Lane and Seymour Mayne (Vancouver: Very Stone, 1968.) Because they are wisely arranged, I have discussed them in roughly the same order as they appear in the book.
- ² Quoted in Louis Dudek, “Groundhog Among the Stars”, *A Choice of Critics*, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto: Oxford, 1966), p. 169.
- ³ Raymond Souster, “Ersatz” in *Canadian Verse*, ed. Ralph Gustafson (London: Penguin, 1958), p. 222-23.