

THIS BEING ALIVE

Last Poems by PATRICK LANE

Bitter

It is the honey lands you will leave,
the land of the bees and the fat birds calling.
It is the ash and grit of the fires you want
if only to weep over the memory of dry springs,
the long dreams that are the skulls of horses.
The empty marrow bones with their strings of red ants.
Surely you remember coarse salt on your tongue.
Come to me from beyond the fields and streams,
the sweet lands, the places of fruit and blossom,
the song of the falling water and wild birds.
Let your heart be the sound of the wind seething.
Sift with me the withered seeds in your fists.
Lie awake among stones in the creek beds.
Listen to the wind in the discarded flutes of the bones.

How Many Times Have I Taken Out My Death?

How many times have I taken out my death?
Was there ever time to see the stars
from the stink of False Creek mouth
where I drowned myself over and over
my body slipping like a born lamb into the blood
that is the salt water of this other, older birth,
my mouth opening to drag the sea in,
the risen fish breaking into air.
Death, you sullen flame, come
find me in the waters of my birth. Don't let me
live so long that I must call you friend, following
you as a dog does, servile, whining.

Brightness As of Bone

Light moves among the fine brushes in the crazed jar,
and the jade frog on a silver box, the two stems of yellow orchids,
and the hummingbird mask terrible in its carved intensities, and
the small birds at the feeders, sparrows and siskins, the spare nuthatch,
the cold winter coming on, and the pen I use now to find myself
in this poem, this formal letter I am sending to you. This mind
that reels me back to the boy I was in the army barrack on the hill
five years after the war, and the soldier who looked so old to me
and looking back know he was barely twenty-five, the one who offered
in the dark a film of the liberation of a nameless concentration camp,
the dead men lying like broken sticks in the road between the huts,
and the few men alive too, their rags against the fence, thin hands reaching out.
And how the soldier told us of one barely alive who cried out
when he was carried through the barbed wire gates, how he turned
in the arms of the man who carried him, his bones reaching back
into that darkness, the sun blazing, the heat tremble of the dust,
and the day, and the air still, a single fish leaping from the pond,
its bright body flashing for one moment as it fell again into its element.
And light moves slow among the fine brushes in the yellow jar,
and the jade frog too that is beside the pen, the one I took up, the one
that made its wounds upon this paper, and how I have tried to understand
the soldier who made me watch the film, the flimsy tin wheel
clacketing, the film jagged in the poor dark, and another boy, my friend,
crying, and the man telling him to stop, to be quiet, and the boy
no older than I was, barely ten, the soldier shouting –
and I don't remember now if my friend stopped his tears or only
stifled his cries, and how I knew as I watched that I was being changed
by what I saw, and how I understood then the word *forever*,
and all such words, the pen, the orchids, the carved hummingbird mask,
and the jade frog, and the light among the brushes, their intensities.