

'Unraveled Knots', by Robert Leach

Review by Matthew Macdonald



unraveled
knots

robert leach

What is most evident in the poems from Leach's retrospective collection is his talent for expressing the elevated in the simple. In 'Young Osprey in the Nest', Leach writes of the bird's desire to free itself from the nest, seeking the endlessness of the sky:

*A claw,
Strong before its time,
Impatient to be past
This part of life,
Browbeating
Dead wood.*

In these lines, I'm transported to an unknown experience, one I will never have yet feel like I grasp very clearly. This is a theme that transcends the poems in the collection itself. The revelation of the deeper in the shallow occurs many times across these poems. Take 'Hands On', where the narrator contemplates the co-existent power and tenderness of his father's hands:

*Yet his big scrapers could scamper freely
Across a keyboard like a skittish Little White Donkey*

*Or elegantly curvet,
Serenading a doll.*

This retrospective, which moves across the length and breadth of a poetic career that started in the 1960s, is grouped less by theme or chronology, but more loosely into what can best be described as 'abstracts'.

Time and Place, which opens the book, allows Leach to go fishing in the well of nostalgia and pull absolute gold from the seas. In 'Novodevichy Cemetery, Moscow', Leach writes:

*Rain overwhelms -
Water everywhere -
Under foot, under clothes, under every tree,
As if heaven couldn't weep enough.*

The awareness and - and perhaps more tellingly - the limits of humanity allow Leach to pull seemingly unconnected threads of life together in ways that are mutually illuminating. What is clear is that sixty years of crafting verse have granted Leach a great sense of the core of things.

In 'February Sunshine', the poet elaborates on the power of the early spring sun in a deeply revealing way:

*On my back I feel
The hug of February sunshine
Like the start of a love affair
Treacherous
But true*

The poems of *Unraveled Knots* are wide-ranging, covering lands as close as Lancashire and as far as India. No matter the home of the poem's story, the same craft is evident in them all.

'Malabar' (from 'Fragments of India'):

*Bee-eater on a branch
The boatman's steady straining at his punt pole*

Poet breathing

'Disused Railway, Shankendshiel, Scottish Borders' (from 'Railway Lines'):

*Gullies guttered with snow bones
Under a goose grey sky,
And the bent grasses
Shushing and feathering.*

The padded footprint of the animal kingdom lingers across many of the poems, but it is in the Beasts section that, naturally, they appear most often. In keeping with Leach's style, these poems present animals as both animal and human and something more, seen in 'Spider' -

*In the window, silver strands stretch
In octagonal, dew-spit asymmetry,
Fragile trip-wires set-squaring
Between jamb and lintel. A feather of breeze
Makes this deathtrap dance*

and in 'Dead Cow' -

*Outrage swirled. We demanded,
How often does the farmer come up here?
Why doesn't he minister to his herds?
And, How long before rigor mortis sets in?
And, When will decay commence?*

This collection - presented as a melding of poems, and without the delineation of when each one was written - gives Leach's work a timeless quality that elevates it to a higher level of craft. The fact that most poems lack distinct spatio-temporal designation again ensures these poems are not and cannot be pinned to a place and time, making their emotional message deeper and more lasting.

While there are connections to many parts of existence, the passage of time, specifically via the seasons, is evidenced across the book. Many of the poems take place in a specific seasonal place and that seasonal marker is highly informative

to the content and tone of the poem, as in 'Autumn Leaves':

*This year the autumn leaves
Are more beautiful than ever.
I swear it, gasp at
The grizzle of russets, almonds, dusky oranges...
[...]
Now nothing moves, no leaf
Drops. Even eternity seems stopped.
Time is a bleared mirror
A silver snail trail
And winter will soon be here.*

Unraveled Knots is a collection that brings the mundane to the fore, and encapsulates that reality in the light of humanity's relationship with the seasons. The poems are equally optimistic as they are realistic or even pessimistic - 'Love Feast' manages to cover all three - and they are placed together in ways that are both illuminative and healing, the words both forming and cutting knots in life and in the heart.

Unraveled Knots is published by Olympia



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