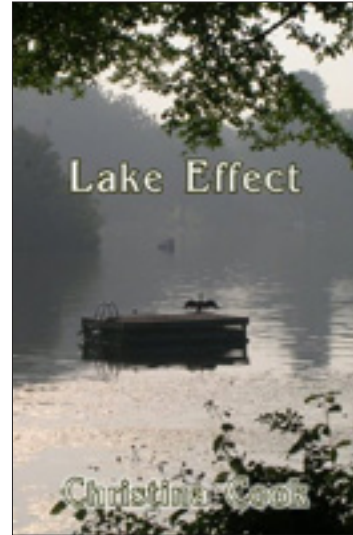


Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Lake Effect
Poems by Christina Cook
Finishing Line Press
www.finishinglinepress.com
ISBN: 978-1-62229-0628, 29 Pages, \$14.00

Review by Dennis Daly



Christina Cook in her book of poems, *Lake Effect*, commingles the universes of life and death onto a canvas alive with natural images painted in a thin and elegant texture reminiscent of ancient Japanese screens. The central construct in this phantasmal paradigm, a rural lake with summer cottage, pulsates with spiritual reconciliation and a stark, almost visionary, clarity. Poems throughout this book touch on the illness and death of the poet's mother and these central poems expand into Cook's comforting and rather stunning world view.

The poem *A Night in Fenwick* mixes the emotions of imminent death with a life force of surprising strength. The poet puts it this way,

*...we sit on the jetty, in denial
of the diagnosis you received today.*

*Darkly, silence passes between us.
Crabs click over the rocks.*

*The tang of salt surprises our lips
as we listen to the day's last waves*

*rattle oarlocks in the dories off shore.
In the morning we will accept it...*

In the poem *Dory*, Cook elevates death into the life's natural goal. It becomes part of a grand bargain. Even without a paradisiacal afterlife of silver fish, it is sufficient. She begins,

*Say something smooth
about a life long committed
to death.*

Let the feathers fade.

*Wooden dories dulled
by waves don't want
netfuls of silver fish:
their rot-soft hulls
are enough. The callused feet
of old fishermen, enough.*

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Even in the extremes of sickness Cook finds images of mystery and beauty. Consider these lines from the poem *Coma*,

*shadows pass
over my skin
like the care of a
quiet night nurse*

*I am immersed
in life, but not alive*

*my tiller-thin thirst
and tilting hull,
my sail's silhouette
slicing a solstice moon...*

When death finally comes the poet adds another twist. The wake becomes a true celebration rather than a melancholy rite. The poem entitled *On the Night of Your Wake* unfolds thusly,

*Stars fall from a constellated open hand,
land like glitter in our hair.*

*We say the night is full of her gifts
and drink champagne, red*

*from rain falling through feverish skies,
we hang paper lanterns from the low*

gnarled limbs of laurel...

In a very short but wonderful poem called *Summer Evening* Cook amalgamates the natural and the mystical into a single metaphor—the lake. She does this by detailing the deposition of her mother's ashes. The poet says,

*...northern cardinals
crimson the shapeshift clouds,*

*we scatter your ash over the lake
and watch your cinder soften,
like last year's peaches,
into water the color of koi.*

The image of the peaches and the flickering multiple-colored koi emits vibrant color and light. There is little grief here, and much hope. Cook seems to use this hope as an impetus in her search for life's meaning. She comes right to the point in her poem *Departure*. She marvels,

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

*I see now how life's only slightly
different from death, in the end.
We once watched whale oil burn*

*an aurora borealis of grime against
the burlap wall. Fur once softened my skin.
If regrets can survive death,
mine is this:*

*so much was done without knowing
what it meant...*

Life forces include everyday duties. The poet upon opening up her summer cottage becomes locked in a conflict between her unresolved grief and family matters. Cook describes,

*I suppose I should be dusting
pollen off the chairs instead
of pouring another glass,
or pruning the rhododendrons*

*before they bloom
through the hole in the screen,
before the shadow reaches
all the way over the cove,*

*once again graying the oaks
as if they'd always been
the parchment bones of birds.
I suppose I should*

*Stop mourning my mother
And put a fresh coat of paint
On the mildewed doors...*

In the poem *On the Sleeping Porch* Cook portrays the profound weight that her family gives to her understanding of life, albeit of a transitory nature. The image of a sleeping porch, which extends into the darkness of night, seems perfect. Here are a couple sections of the poem,

*A luna moth, large
As my husband's hand
Bumps against the screen,
Batting its four-eyed wings
Like lashes...*

It continues this way,

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

*... Scorpio's rising
over the fringed ridge of firs
mirrored in the lake,
while somewhere,
the moth's week-old shroud
slowly becomes one
with the soil.*

*In the trundle
bed beside me,
my son sighs in his sleep: he
is the weight I carry,
the ballast...*

The title poem, Lake Effect, is the last poem in this collection and it's well placed. It sums up the poet's faith in a benevolent darkness which births beauty and consciousness for a time and then draws them back into a primordial night. Cook concludes,

*So while the rest of us drink pinot
noir, discussing some temporal thing
like milkweed slowly strangling the lake,*

*my sons poke black lily buds
with their dessert forks, dissecting them
on the tablecloth.*

*They, too,
believe in the night:*

*finding the petals fresh inside,
plucking them out, one by plush white one.*

Cook's poems succeed in the same way. Poke them enough and they bloom into a lovely plushness.