

Two Poems

Christine Walde

A Note about Christine Walde's Poems

In late 2004, I began some independent research into Sylvia Plath's poem, "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)," believing that Plath's poem may have been inspired by another Rock Lake, further north in Ontario, one hour east of the border at Sault Ste. Marie. What particularly lured my interest was that my family owns a camp on this other Rock Lake, which during the 1950s and 1960s was a popular destination for anglers and campers alike, a fishing camp that advertised regularly in Field and Stream. I was married there. Vacationed with my children there. Immediately, I wondered: could Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath have stayed at my family's fishing camp on Rock Lake, instead of at Algonquin Park? I contacted Karen Kukil at Smith College to confirm the exact location of the Rock Lake that Plath and Hughes visited. Karen could only tell me what Hughes had written on the back of one of the photographs which featured Sylvia sitting cross-legged at a picnic table: "Rock Lake, Canada." The landscape behind her looked strangely familiar. After contacting Steve Enniss at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, it was later confirmed in a postcard that Plath had written to her mother from Brimley, Michigan that Plath and Hughes, had, indeed, stayed at Algonquin Park. Yet I could not shake the feeling that they had stayed at our Rock Lake. I began to write a series of poems based upon Plath's and Hughes's trip through Canada, and their stay at Rock Lake.

An interplay of narrative fact and fiction, these poems explore questions of landscape, history and identity. While based upon the historical facts of Hughes's and Plath's trip, the poetry collection also explores the opposing story of another nameless couple also camping together at the other/another "Rock Lake", as well as encompassing other poems about events during the time Hughes and Plath were in Canada, suggesting unlikely connections between time and place. The two kinds of poems run against each other, imagining the unknown, playing with the possibilities, countering each other, testing the limits of what poetic "truth" can hold.



Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)

We never did look for the vision pits. Those
Thirty-one rock-lined indentures in the earth. Each one
Barely big enough to accommodate one or two people —

Where the Algonquins would lie and wait in quest for
A vision of blessing from a spiritual guardian
Forty metres south of the Madawaska River entrance to Rock Lake.

We should have gone to find them. Instead we
Spent our hours wandering along the edge
Of the shoreline, staring at the ridge behind, decoding that

Stand of trees to see if we could see where
In the twists of birch or cedar if there still might be
A sign of the campsite where you both once stayed.

The other campers must have thought us crazy. Sneaking
Onto their sites. Trying, maybe, to steal their stuff. And we
Archaeologists of a kind, examining the hieroglyphs of reeds, studying

Each pine, combing over the terrain of each empty campsite, looking,
Wishing, wondering if this could actually be the one.
We never did find it. Though we thought we came close. The landscape

Played too many tricks with us, teasing us here and there, so that each
Vantage point became the same, depending on where we were standing.
Me with *No Other Appetite*. Holding up your photographs like a lens

To look back through time. Such hard-covered mockery. And then the inevitable
Slap of the present: stinging now, now, now. And always the future pulling us
Forward. What weary futility abounded between us. No wonder you feared for Lethe.

The morning of our departure, we went into the water
To take away what we could, to procure the something
We could not find. The lake was cold and glittering, a black

Jewel we slipped over the fingers of our skin and was cleansed by.
Underneath, it was all gold. Sunlight bouncing off the bottom
In a magic dance just for our eyes. We swam out, unafraid, knowing

We must have been in the body of water in which, you, too, both swam,
 Knowing that we would never know the answers we
 Had come to find. In our wake, a silver ripple

Of surrender followed us in the blackness. On the shoreline
 We emerged silent and astounded, pale as ghosts:
 Two campers in cloud country, envisioning the long journey home.

Rock Lake at Night III, pike variation

Underneath the water he waits. Black pupil purveying
 The lake's bottom darkness: the night's flat, featureless lull
 Of the coming storm threatening from above
 For the last five hours. You watch, waiting for me to enter

The water: this night, your realm, his dream. In the distance, lightning
 Flares in grey clouds like pillows stuffed with white fire, quietly
 Booming. The deep gleam of water unblinking
 As an eye turned upward to absent stars, swimming

In the pool of his black universe above. I fear
 My body an unsatisfactory sacrifice:
 Not what he would wish for.
 If wishing were something he could do —

To catch the quick glint of what a star might flare,
 Falling in the water and disappearing —
 To where forever worms in the rut of his jaw. Swallowed whole
 As stone and stilled to the dark throbbing

Heart of his earth where no light ever reaches:
 The fug of silt and mud and stone and sunken trunks of logs
 So old to look upon they turn the blood cold.
 But he is used to such depths. Being unbidden

By the seasons which have held him
 And his kin for thousands of centuries; their ancestry
 Unchallenged to the peak of evolutionary perfection: natural
 Born killers, all. Gills undulating still



In the sullen underworld of his inheritance.
Razor teeth clamped in the darkness:
The premaxillary grin.
There is nothing to fear.

At the surface of the lake, I wait: a sheet
Of pale skin in the darkness,
Looking into the deep that lies below.
Behind the line of black trees

You reach out —
And my feet enter the water, freed
Unto the dream of what I cannot see.