

Patrick Lane / THREE POEMS DRINKING BAD WHISKEY

An angel's yellowed grimace
leers through the grease and steam
of the cafe window where we sit
listening to the talk of our tired bodies.

We stop to watch the small dark girl
with a scar draped across her throat
like a choker of swollen pearls.
She picks a scab off her lip

and sucks the sudden blossom
of blood into her mouth.
Her old man empties her purse
and hussles her back to the street.

The cold breath of winter
bellies the window behind her.
A year's bad living
drip from the angel's eyes.

The talk returns to the empty bottle
and the immediate possibility
of somewhere else
anywhere else to go.

WE TALK OF WOMEN

Sitting in the cookhouse
in the long last hours before sleep
I trade drinks of scotch for tea
with the chinese cook.

His skin is the texture of ricepaper
and his eyes, narrow and black
as crow's wings against the sun,
move below fine wisps of grey
that drift on his forehead
like moss on a yellow-pine.

We talk of women
in the cold distance of the Andes.
I tell him of a girl in the mountains
of my country where winter locks
the people inside barriers of snow:

Patrick Lane

All I can remember
is her hands. When they touch me
they struggle like captured birds.
Three months and her face
is the suggestion of light
in the window beyond us, eyes
cold as the barbs of stars
strung on the wire of night.

Moving like a piece of alabaster
born in stone he motions me.
I follow him into his room.
Lighting a candle he leads me
through a dance of startled moths
to the wall beside his bed
where drawings of a woman
delicate as dry wings
hang against splintered wood:

This is my woman.
She is as young as wind
that rises to melt snow
in the wrong season.

I nod and sit on the low
mattress by the wall.

Over warm wine, heated on a candle,
we quietly talk:

If I could tell you
what she is, I would say
she is made of leaves
and her touch is the sound
of the breath I take
when I climb a mountain.

Yes, I said.
And her memory is winter.

THIRTY BELOW

Men on the pond
push logs through constant ice.
Faces stubble with frost.
No-one moves beyond the ritual
of work. Torment of metal
and the scream of saws.

Everything is hard. The sky
scrapes the earth at thirty below
and living things pull into pain
like grotesque children
thrown in the wrong season.

Someone curses.
Pulls his hand from the chain.
His skin has been left on steel,
blood frozen into hard balls.
He is replaced and the work goes on.

Everything is hard.
Cold lances the slow dance
on the pond. The new man trembles
out of control.
He can't hold his pole.
Someone laughs,
says it will be spring
before they shut this damn mill down.