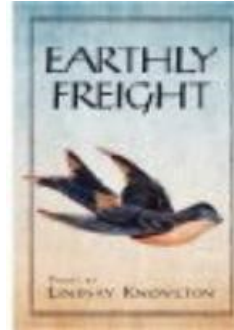


Earthly Freight

Review by M. B. McLatchey

Author: Lindsay Knowlton
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The esteemed critic, Harold Bloom, asserted in his book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) that poets are forever hindered in their creative process by the ambiguous relationship that they maintain with previous poets. The poet is inspired to write by reading another poet's poetry, Bloom argued, and will therefore tend to produce work that is derivative of existing poetry – and consequently, weak. But that was before the arrival of Lindsay Knowlton's *Earthly Freight*, a luminous collection of poems that reminds us of Wordsworth's legacy to contemporary poets.

In his own poems, Wordsworth championed two themes: the healing power of nature and the spiritual renewal that can be found in human memory. Knowlton proves that these themes still have a place in contemporary poetry. Furthermore, she explores these themes with a candidness and authority that casts her poetry very much in her own century. Simply put, there is no "anxiety of influence" evident here.

In taking as the title for her collection a phrase from Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality", Knowlton calls up the central themes of Wordsworth's ode – and indeed, these are her themes as well: namely, the timelessness (immortality) of childhood days and the nurturing bond between the child and the natural world. In "Summer", the book's opening poem that is dedicated to her deceased brother, Knowlton paints a scene from her childhood that, in turn, identifies the book's critical tension between what was and what is no more:

Evenings, there was no fending off
the cicada's washboard rasp, the frog's pistoned din,
a rhythm so dry and insistent
it seemed even the pond gasped for air,
but the days, the days
were different, as if we inhabited
a stopped moment, and August
had held over for us
to skim another stone or line-walk
the tracks behind the old mill.

The "stopped time" that the speaker and her brother "inhabited" in this poem is the same idealized childhood existence that Wordsworth longs for in his *Intimations* ode: summer, a

time when the school calendar stops and the days stretch out aimlessly; a time when Knowlton and her brother lived in the natural world more than in a human and social world. August “held over” for them – suspended them in its timeless feel – so that they could play: “to skim another stone or line-walk/the tracks behind the old mill.” For Knowlton, as for Wordsworth, it is through play that the child becomes an apprentice to nature and absorbs nature’s lessons of compassion and generosity. Or, as Wordsworth puts it, it is through play in the natural world that the child becomes “father to the man.” By associating these lost days with the untimely death of her brother, Knowlton reminds us of Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems in which he celebrates the everlasting youth of a girl who dies young and in which he laments the inevitability of adulthood and death. Knowlton offers us the same lament in “Summer” and throughout this collection. “Why didn’t we see,” she asks, “what obstinacy/made us think we needn’t memorize/the down on your face, your singular voice?/ We were children,/and Nature herself conspired to ignore the bitter dispatch/ hidden – oh deftly hidden/in her last asters.”

For all of her alliances with Wordsworth’s soul, Knowlton is very much her own poet in voice and in verse. Whereas Wordsworth went to the well of the natural world for spiritual renewal, Knowlton resists over-idealizing nature’s goodness. In a way that Wordsworth could not imagine, she lets into her poems a skepticism about nature’s capacity to sustain us. Ultimately, this is a skepticism that generates its own brand of sympathy toward human beings: if, in adulthood, we must be nature’s fallen child, then Knowlton praises that child. In her poem, “Marriage”, which actually explores a divorce, the speaker blames no one for broken promises; instead, she holds out to us – as a sort of consolation prize – an anti-hero. About a hermit who appears in the poem, she says, “But who knows – maybe he spent most evenings/worrying his memories,/keeping up the heat in his stove,/knowing that to be human means/dreams hardly ever realized, /vows and needs sadly out of whack.” In “Temporal Meditation”, the speaker confides, “I’ve seen too many beached dreams,/hopes wedged against doors and walls/that even Hercules couldn’t begin/to ease”. And finally, in “Flight”, with Wordsworth’s child of nature nowhere to be found, she concedes to the heroic in nature’s antagonist – a hunter. Look at the colorful, even empathetic picture she draws of him: “And if beauty weren’t his for the asking,/he’d filch a little: a ruddy crest,/ a flash of blue off a flexed wing. Then, /he’d teach them never to reach for the sky:/merganser, gallinule, ring-necked,/golden-eye.”

Finally, whereas Wordsworth tends toward essay-in-blank-verse, Knowlton makes discursiveness a strength. As in “Summer”, so too throughout this collection, her verse lines often give breadth to a style of repetition that veers toward rhapsody: “but the days, the days” or “hidden, oh deftly hidden”. Rather than putting us off, this style of repeating phrases makes us warm to this poetic voice, just as we might warm to someone who seems unrehearsed. As Frost understood, and as Knowlton seems to have learned, the art in dramatic performance lies in its capacity to appear as anything but art. In capitalizing upon the meditative and self-reflexive mode, Knowlton plumbs the capacity for poetic speech to ring true.

In a season when publication so often depends upon the various tastes of juries and judges, Knowlton’s self-published book sounds a battle cry: put poetry first and let history be our judge. *Earthy Freight* commands the attention of the taste makers.

Reviewed by M.B. McLatchey, April, 2010.

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