

Hayley Harvey

“If I lived dedicated”

Rick Campbell. *Provenance*. Blue Horse Press, 2020.

The reality of our human condition is defined by what we have undergone in our past and how we let those experiences affect our future. Rick Campbell’s book *Provenance* is a collection of coming-of-age instances, where the human need to create something one can find contentment in is achieved through the hardship and trials of simple existence. In “In Cheyenne I Consider My Father in Surgery,” the narrator feels burdened with conflicting emotions about their father: “You ought to be alive, but this / far away, I don’t know.” The narrator understands he should care about this event but he doesn’t want to, and the distance mentioned in the poem is a physical manifestation of those ambivalent feelings of growing apart. Humans find that connections that are traditionally permanent, like familial ties, have ways of haunting their futures when they attempt to distance themselves. Part of growing into our individuality is deciding if those connections are going to hinder or help our progress in life. Rick Campbell’s collection invites us to assess our lives on an unbiased canvas, where accepting our individuality is painful, but a responsibility we must embrace as human beings.

Told through different voices spanning several years, *Provenance* details the value of learning from mistakes made and witnessed while growing up so that navigating the future is bearable. Human connectivity often determines how we develop. For example, within families, raising children to work in the same fields as their parents can leave little room for individual experiences. The family then goes generations without social mobility, and with society holding familial loyalty to a high standard, people do not deviate. We get stuck in this pattern where not learning from our history leaves us doomed to repeat it; cleaning muck off our clothes only lasts as long as our break from returning to work in grueling embers. In “Ash,” Campbell highlights that feeling of connection to where we are from and how we cannot escape its grasp:

Ash in our air, ash in our taps,
ash in our bath, ash in our gutters,
in the cracks of our sidewalks. Ash
smeared cars, windows, the siding
added to our houses. Ash

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rain darkened the stained glass
of St. Joseph's Catholic Church
where ash coated pews, the collection
basket, our mumbled prayers.

Our curse as human beings is the remembrance that darkens our memory, just as the rain darkens the windows in this poem. The things we leave behind have already left their mark, encapsulated in all recesses of our memory, found in the unlikeliest of places—baths, gutters, even pews. The structure of “Ash” feels like that cursed remembrance, a caesura in almost every line that unfailingly pulls the reader back to how inevitable the ash seems. The repetition in this same instance draws attention to how aggravatingly uncomfortable this familiarity is.

That isn't to say that memory is evil, as it also offers us the power to better our futures. This collection is heavy with themes of remembrance and reflection, and humans tend to repeat mistakes they are unaware exist until they learn better. There is beauty in abandoning that which makes us toxic, coming into a new age of learning. In “What I Might Want Today,” Campbell reveals the growth from the selfish desires of the young to the more mature desires of the adult:

All of this being, as they say, in the eye
of the beholder. If I lived dedicated
to the pursuit of beauty what old roads would I walk,

how parallel the roads to truth? Could I get
there from here, in this little poem? Yes,
because nothing is given?

As with “Ash” and “In the Long Dark West of Fargo,” the lost, drifting feel of this poem invites a connection with the reader. A lot of the definition I gain in my life grows from the mindset that I wouldn't be living to pursue my dreams had I given in to the turbulence of my upbringing. As a human defining my existence by what I have experienced, that does not mean I have to appreciate that life as it was presented to me. Others who share this brand of trouble have a connection to the human condition described within the lines of Rick Campbell's poetry. Those old roads referenced in “What I Might Want Today” are the same type of roads that I traveled throughout my life, long and full of obstacles and opportunities to grow as a person.

Rick Campbell is a frequent contributor to *Kestrel* and served as guest poetry editor for *Kestrel* 33.