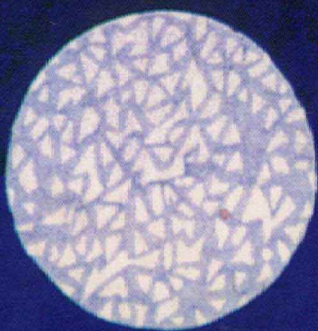
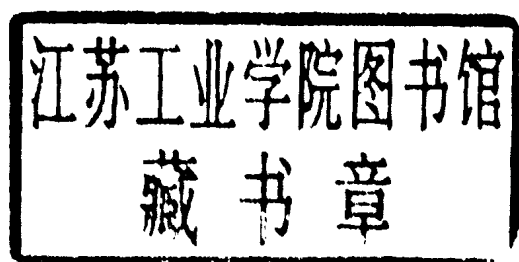


*Patrick  
Lane*



SELECTED POEMS:  
1977–1997

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## BOOKS BY PATRICK LANE

*Poems New and Selected* (1978)

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*Mortal Remains* (1991)

*How Do You Spell Beautiful?* (short stories, 1992)

*Too Spare, Too Fierce* (1995)

SELECTED POEMS:  
1977–1997

*Patriek Lane*

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THE CANADA COUNCIL  
FOR THE ARTS  
SINCE 1957

LE CONSEIL DES ARTS  
DU CANADA  
DEPUIS 1957

*For Lorna Crozier, my companion of these twenty years.*

“All this talk and turmoil and noise and movement and desire is  
outside the veil; inside the veil is silence and calm and peace.”

ABU YAZID AL-BISTAMI (?-C. 874)



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THE MEASURE



# THE MEASURE

*for P.K. Page*

What is the measure then, the magpie in the field  
watching over death, the dog's eyes hard as marbles  
breath still frozen to his lips? This quiet repose,

the land having given up the battle against sleep,  
the voices crying out beneath the snow.  
It is the cold spear of the wind piercing me

that makes me sing of this, the hunger in your eyes.  
It is the room of your retreat,  
the strain in the hand when it reaches out to touch

the dried and frozen flowers brittle in their vase,  
the strain when the mind desires praise ...  
the music as of soldiers wandering among their dead

or the poor dreaming of wandering as they break  
their mouths open to sing as prisoners sing.  
Or soldiers marching toward their devotions

or the poor marching or the rich in their dark  
rooms of commerce saying this is finally the answer,  
this will allow us the right to be and be. To be

anything. In the field the rare  
stalks of grass stick stiffly into air.  
The poor, the broken people, the endless suffering

we are heir to, given to desire and gaining little.  
To fold the arms across the breast and fly  
into ourselves. That painless darkness. Or stand

in the field with nothing everywhere and watch  
the first flakes falling and pray for the deliverance  
of the grass, a dog's death in the snow? Look

there. Stark as charred bone  
a magpie stuns his tongue against the wind  
and the wind steals the rattle of his cry.

## JUST LIVING

It isn't just violence I told them  
in the warm white room below the prairie snow.  
It's just another story I no longer know  
the truth of, tell it now to hide the holes  
when conversation dies. The stories  
are like fossils locked in Tyndal stone,  
just there and no one knows the meaning.

We were five hours over mountain roads,  
the tourniquet wet red and him in the seat  
lifting the stump of his arm each mile  
looking by the glow of the dashboard lights.  
*Jesus*, he kept saying between cigarettes.  
In the pink ice-cream bucket between us  
the severed hand sloshed in the melting ice.  
He never looked at that.  
And then the usual madness, the nurse  
wanting his name and birthdate, demanding  
his wallet's proof until I lifted his sleeve  
and showed her. He grinned at that.  
The sight of those veins and tendons  
made her turn away. The doctors got him then.  
I asked one if he could use the hand  
but he said it was probably dead. Too many hours  
and, anyway, they couldn't put it back.

On the night-road north  
I thought of the saw and the flesh still  
hanging from the teeth. They didn't wash it off,  
just let it cook in the cants coming down  
off the rig. But that hand in the bucket.  
The ice had melted. I emptied the water out,  
looked at it curled like an empty cup,  
a dark blue spider sleeping. Strange  
how the sight of it didn't matter much.



I thought of drying it out and giving it  
to him when he got back. I laughed at that,  
could see it hanging in the sun  
outside his window at the shack.  
The light dancing on the nails,  
maybe using it for a bird feeder,  
whiskey jacks perched on the fingers  
eating suet from the palm.  
I thought those things.  
When you're pushing your life  
down a tunnel of light  
it goes like that. Night and mountains.

I stopped at Mad River bridge.  
I'd been driving then eight hours.  
But here's the strange part.  
I took it out of the bucket and held it  
there in the night. It was just meat  
you understand. It could have been  
a club or a tool for scraping earth,  
like when your arm has gone to sleep  
and feeling it you know  
there's nothing there. What do you do  
with the pieces of yourself you lose?  
I knew I couldn't keep it and I couldn't  
give it to his wife. Bury it?  
What for? The life was gone  
and he was still alive.  
It was cold and it was night and I  
had shift work in the morning.  
I threw it high off the bridge  
and for one moment it held the moon  
still in its fingers before it dropped  
into that darkness down below.