

When animals tell stories

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Abstract

In his poem “Mute Swans” Canadian poet Patrick Lane writes: “There are no stories, but that I make them so.”

“Something About Rabbits”, is a prose poem, ostensibly a “story” about a rabbit colony at the University of Victoria, my alma mater. But another narrative enters this piece: that of the young law student learning a new discourse - a new way to investigate reality and document it.

As a legal analyst and poet, I ask myself: What is the relationship between our everyday experience of things and the words we use to describe what happens? In the legal milieu, words and narratives often escape from their original compound and propagate. My poem asks: What happens to our sense of meaning or truth when language is cut off from the physical experience which first led to “the story”?

Something about rabbits

It all began at the university residence, or so it is said. A dorm room, a student alone, but he has two rabbits in a cage and we know where that leads. By the time you can tell them apart, the “he” and “she” have turned into “they”.

When I arrive, I think I know about names, the birds and the bees. But in the amphitheatre, my first law professor says: “*You must ask yourself what the reasonable man on the Clapham Omnibus would do in the same circumstances.*”

The boy lets the rabbit family loose in the field. The colony becomes a continent, plants and grasses stripped, million dollar turf an *aperitif*.

In second year, I learn about guilty and innocent: “*We are advocates, not finders of truth*”. This time we wear robes.

Outside moot court, I witness foreign students feeding rabbits they think are *wild*. At Easter they name newborns. Some are run over on their way to find food. At a fundraising dinner, university donors are given stuffed rabbits as gifts.

In my last year, I find myself lost in what they teach is a “*legal fiction*”.

Under cover of darkness, the administration captures rabbits old and young, cages and flies them to a rabbit *sanctuary* in Texas.

At graduation I receive parting words: “*Watch what judges **do**, not what they say.*”

Soon the headline reads: *Trouble in Texas: Canadian rabbits escape from their compound, are shot with rifles, farmers angry over lost produce.*

At the university, new students arrive, drawn in by the story of wild rabbits alive on campus. When truth dawns, these fresh young minds dig up lawns in protest. They plant vegetables in memory of the dead they never knew.

De minimus no curat lex: the law does not concern itself with trifles.

Reference

Lane, P. (2013). Mute Swans. *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact*, 4(8). Available from <http://www.connotationpress.com/a-poetry-congeries-with-john-hoppenthaler/2011/february-2011/744-patrick-lane-poetry>