



***In Earshot of Water: Notes from the Columbia Plateau.* By Paul Lindholdt. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. 146 pp. Paperback \$19.00**

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The author of this collection of essays tells us at the end of the book what the title means when he writes how “(h)undreds of hours spent keyboarding, piloting cars down highways, and watching projections on screens make me ache to lie down within earshot of water.” Such a desire is especially poignant given one thread of a story that traces its way throughout the book: the death of Lindholdt’s oldest son, Braden, in a kayaking accident in Puget sound. Water is not only life giving; and nature is not always kind.

Numerous U.S. writers over the past decade have worked to articulate the truth about the post natural world we now inhabit—in southern junk yards, eastern bogs, and suburban yards. Nature in the Pacific Northwest is similarly altered. In spite of the beauty of the region, and the abundance promised by timber, salmon, and farms, this is also a place where Superfund sites are located, where there are heated debates over dams and salmon migrations, and layers of cultural practices that are deeply loved, but not always good for sustainability or a new environmental ethic. The place where the author grew up (Kent Valley) was once a farming district with fields of “squash, broccoli, or cauliflower that appeared somehow indigenous to the place.” In the chapter entitled “In the Shadow of the Government’s Blind Eye,” parking lots and industrial parks now cover the fields of childhood, the changes becoming what Lindholdt calls a “kind of second nature,” or a “sacrifice region—once gorgeous, fertile, now gone to commerce.”

Many of the themes touched on in the collection are familiar (the loss of Eden), but Lindholdt is able to go beyond this and find new territory in the complexity of the region. His voice is a particularly engaging one, with a sharp eye for detail (a woman is described at one point as “fragile as a cracker on a mattress”). More importantly, he doesn’t linger or belabor the obvious. His prose is above all, nuanced. He moves along, coming at his themes from a variety of different directions, using a number of different techniques. Memory, description, literary reflection, deep knowledge of issues, history, flora and fauna and vivid characters are woven together in essay after essay to provide a layered, affectionate, yet deeply troubled picture of the Pacific Northwest today. There is a lovely essay “Genius Loci” dealing with one of the most humble and yet interesting birds in the region, the nuthatch, a bird that crawls upside down

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searching for its food—what to do when these engaging birds begin to hammer on the walls of the author’s house in Spokane (a house, moreover, which encloses many troubling secrets)?

The chapter “In the Shadow of the Government’s Blind Eye” is not only about changes to the Kent Valley, it’s also about working at Western Processing, a company that began by processing animal byproducts and later, dangerous industrial waste. The book’s fine descriptive prose is especially strong in passages that describe the unimaginable. As the author’s younger self prepares to light a cigarette as he stands where the soil is being prepared for another sludge pond “I could not believe my irritated eyes. Vaporous flames were playing across the sawdust bed I had patted flat. The flames appeared so light, like hummingbirds hovering above flowers, that I wasn’t certain at first what I was seeing. The reaction was kind of sublime; the chemical sludge, that is, had turned into gas.” The story of that place and that time is layered with the memories of Dwayne and Mike, men Lindholdt worked with, the injury he endured in an accident, with the authors he read and reflected on trying to make sense of his experience working in this dangerous place (Rebecca Harding Davis, Edward Abbey, Emily Dickinson, Richard Hugo), and with larger political outcomes: legislation passed in the Carter era, a trial between Boeing and its insurers in 1990, and the relationships between government, military and industrial interests.

Another chapter that demonstrates this kind of multilayered, nuanced approach is “Wrangling with Rodeo.” The opening sentence draws readers from contemplation of eons of time to the precision of the present moment:

In the northern Rockies of Washington State, Ice Age floods carved channeled scablands some fifteen thousand years ago, right at the spot where I sit with my son and wait for the Cheney Rodeo to start. The show’s sponsor—U.S. Smokeless Tobacco, the owner of Copenhagen and Skoal—has emblazoned its name on all the glossy programs and the arena banners.

Reed and I perch on bleachers, whose paint is flaking from decades of hot sun. The coarse slats promise a rash if we lean back. Dressed in sandals, shorts, ball caps, and t-shirts, we feel out of place—and we are. Most everyone else wears cowboy hats.

In four lines we are asked to contemplate the largest possible length of time and a small flake of paint; in such a length of time it is perhaps a bit hubristic if not silly to talk about the “greatest nation on God’s green earth” as the rodeo announcer proceeds to do, and yet that is part of a cultural phenomenon that Lindholdt is probing in this essay. How gently he introduces his son, the two of them perched on bleachers, father and son going to the rodeo together, spending a day together. And yet they are uneasy; the hot sun has flaked the paint, and lets the reader know that there is something a little run down about the rodeo enterprise in Cheney. The author and his son are dressed differently from the rest of the audience, making them feel out of place.

Perhaps a lesser author would have taken off from this point to condemn rodeos. But I think what Lindholdt is trying to do here is understand rodeos; and this is an attractive part of the author’s persona throughout the book. Many times when reading nature writers I know precisely what the values of the writer are; how easy it can be to condemn something; how comforting to find a fellow traveler. This is not to say that Lindholdt does not offer his readers a

solid ethical center, but only to suggest that this writer demands more of his readers than easy condemnations. The entire collection points to a conclusion that things are complex & complicated, and to truly understand, you have to listen and observe carefully. Small rural towns have complex cultural and societal elements; not to take account of that is to miss an important part of the cultural/natural interface where we all live.

In “Wrangling with the Rodeo” these virtues are especially on display. Lindholdt knows and has talked to two engaging characters—a bull rider and a Rodeo Queen—who are deeply invested in their rodeo roles. Lindholdt portrays these two as people who are proud of what they do, who love the life of the rodeo, allowing us to glimpse the sense of excitement and importance the rodeo plays in many people’s lives. At the same time there is opposition to rodeos from animal rights groups. Lindholdt also touches upon the Mexican roots of the shows, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, Robert Altman’s film; but finally there is Lindholdt’s assessment that rodeo is a kind of “stunted Chautauqua” which exists because it seems to gesture toward a simpler time. Yet as Lindholdt’s essay demonstrates, in terms of its origins, relationships between animal and human, between competing political and cultural groups, the rodeo is anything but “simple” entertainment.

In the introduction the author mentions that he has moved “inland” from Seattle and felt the need to tell friends why he had moved. In a sense this book is an effort to understand that move as well as the enlarged sense of the region which is his home—its history, natural history, and culture, as well as how deeply personal events become inscribed in landscape. As such it offers a wonderful introduction to the Pacific Northwest, but it does go further in a graceful and multi-layered approach which opens up rather than “explains” this region. What has happened here is terrifying to admit (decline of the salmon) but we can at least come away from the book with a deeper understanding of why the changes which occurred happened, and perhaps we can also hope that by understanding how and why these things happened, the future will bring some form of healing to Cascadia.