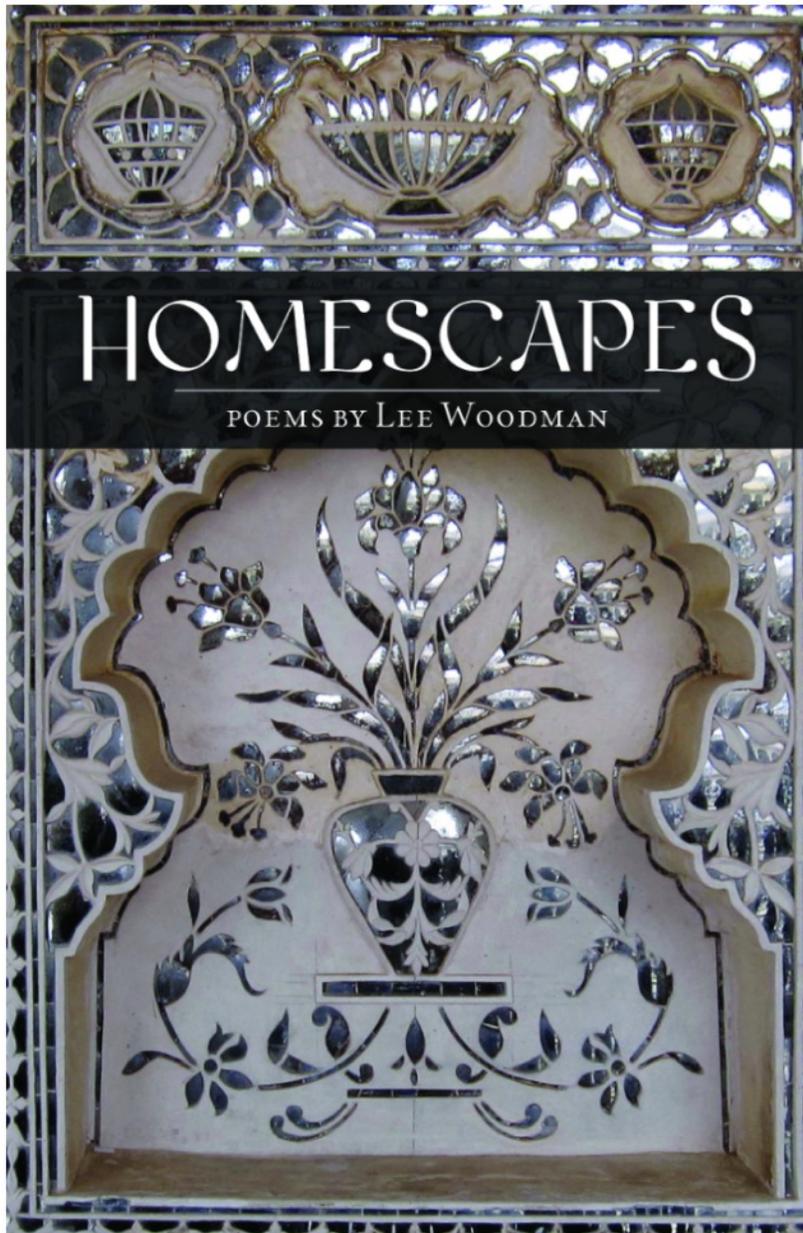


HOMESCAPES by Lee Woodman

Finishing Line Press, 2020

57 pages, \$19.99

Review by Tanner Stening



Every so often, there are poems that come together in a single volume to depict both the exotic and the ordinary places one gets to call ‘home’ during a lifetime. Not only does Lee Woodman’s *Homescapes* render these formative places—parts of India and New England, to name a few—with fine lyrical detail, but she returns to them after decades have passed with the clarity of their assimilated meanings. She returns to them with an artist’s understanding of their value to a life.

I met Woodman at a writers conference in New York City in 2018, when many of these poems were under construction — or better put, under refinement. At the time Woodman had few poetry publishing credits to her name; but it was clear that the poems she had been working on then had already reached a maturity of expression. They were musical, elegant, with joyous debts to Modernism’s singsongy forms and rhythms. Some two years later, *Homescapes* would go on to be selected for publication by Finishing Line Press—just several months after she won the 2020 William Meredith Prize for Poetry for her debut collection *Mindscales*.

Homescapes is a look back at a lifetime of relocation—at the indelible moments and impressions, from preadolescent infatuation “at the American Embassy in New Delhi,” to an heirloom necklace “studded with rubies” left to the speaker, who first saw an Indian jeweler sketch the very gems sixty years ago as a child living in India (though she is American). In “Ruby Necklace,” she dons the precious stones in Washington, D.C., all those years later—a gesture that speaks to the durability of memory, and to the storied journey of objects: “I wore it to the Kennedy Center not long ago, rubies cascading / Down the deep décolletage of my green silk dress / Pearls spreading across frosted gold branches, / Diamonds aglow, I was almost...”

But relocation comes with risk, upheaval, alienation. In the first section of the book titled “India,” the speaker recalls a nanny who threatened to lock her in the bathroom “and dangle red

chilies / across my bare labia lips.” In a later poem in the section, she remembers riding her first bike and confronting a rabid dog, and even later, in “Climbing the Rohtang Pass,” which is a meditation on those who didn’t survive the perilous journey through one of the world’s most dangerous mountain passes: “I felt airborne into China, hovering over mounds of ice. / Perhaps those frozen souls below had chosen to stay there. // The rush of wind, vast endless view could drown us all— / a sensation of snow under our bellies for the rest of time.” Our 12-year-old year speaker, even then, “understood how daunting the climb.”

For Woodman, the drive to inventory the central places of one’s life is not about collecting souvenirs; nor is about revision—the fictionalization of one’s past to suit an illusory sense of self. No, *Homescapes* is about illuminating the past, preserving in language what is essential to one’s particular understanding of oneself. Therefore, description becomes elucidation; the act of rendering the irrepressible details of what lives in memory, for Woodman, is a life-giving exercise.

And Woodman’s descriptions, her ability to recollect at tremendous depths—become reimmersed in memory’s sensuous ingredients—combined with her lyrical ear have made for many compelling poems in this collection. From “Trees Live Longer Lives,” a poem in which the speaker attributes a profound wisdom to the lone “voluminous Hemlock on my mountain”:

“What we pass fleetingly, the wizened one protects:

boisterous bickering of blue jays and squirrels;

black bear with brown muzzles, growing fur for the season;

Siberian Iris, bursting perfume through raindrops;

overjoyed children, galloping with laughter;

sad conversations between lovers no longer.

The Hemlock absorbs all life's events:

attacks endured, sun saluted, sorrows sustained.

Its supple trunk carries the load, leaves clapping their memories.

I hope never to witness rings or scars,

but to revel in its graceful branches reaching ever higher, blowing us messages.

For my revered tree will have longer thoughts than we, and

longer longings.”

Homescapes is also a moving tribute to family—to the speaker's parents, who are the source of many tender and heartfelt singular poems. Woodman writes about them with clear-eyed appreciation, humor, and compassion, from their early presence in the “India” poems, which are filled with discovery and adventure, to their later decades of decline. Her father, a World War II veteran who first initiated her into travel, is in a later poem hunched over a roll top desk, working in vain to give shape to his own experience in words: “He glares at the blank page, / swears when the pencil breaks again, / sweeps the paper stack away.”

But Woodman does not fall victim to this particular silence, though it is clear from this distinguished second volume of poems—poems that are at times rapturous, gusting with the velocity of years and the sensory data that spills from them—she is empathetic to those who've suffered speechlessness. *Homescapes* is a testament to the perseverance of the writer and what lives on, ineradicable, in the writing-consciousness.

---By Tanner Stening, Poet and Journalist, MassLive