

Review: *A Habit of Landscape* by Shelley Armitage (Finishing Line Press, 2023) by Cheryl Chaffin

Shelley Armitage's poems capture moments of seeing, watching, understanding, and feeling. These intimate poems allow the confluence of the past and present, with both a historical and personal tone. Having read her impeccably conceived and composed memoir, *Walking the Llano* (2016), I understand the author's desire, as expressed in a publisher interview, to develop into poems those long moments of recognition in the world—encountering an antelope (“Antelope and I”), reflecting on the meaning of pictographs (“Plainsong”), considering lowing cows and an aging bull at pasture, remembering her father and grandfather (“Counting Cattle with the Fathers”), meditating on two dying trees entwined (“What Beauty Does”)—that she had not been able to fully render in her memoir. These moments fermented within her and this poetry collected here is the compilation of that ripening. The collection also celebrates an experienced scholar and prose writer's debut as a poet and her openness, even vulnerability, to learning poetry's particular and demanding craft. This is her first book of poems and I reflect that poetry allows a lingering, a return to, a long look and a movement of feeling through line. **The line gives space to a world.** Armitage's poems give us, her readers, a world—again and again. To read *A Habit of Landscape* is to understand the preciousness of a limited time on earth. It is to join up with the writer-poet in the habit of seeing and pausing as a means of being and knowing in the world. This wisdom-theme prevails in these poems, in the memoir, and in Armitage's edited journals of Peggy Pond Church in *Bones Incandescent* (2001).

Compellingly, the poet suggests (“Invitro Bandstand” and “She (Un)Names Them”) another self that did not come to fruition. “They name her./But is she any of these—so much water/and blood under the bridge.” The statement contains the force of a question and a truth—without need of a question mark. I muse on this alternate self who had hardly emerged and was then swept into another life with adoptive parents. Who would Allison Profitt have been? How would her life have evolved differently from Shelley Armitage? For a moment, the poet permits the notion of another life that failed to manifest and meditates on its origins, particularly the existence of her mother, an origin herself of life. Perhaps, then, *A Habit of Landscape* is a return to beginnings, to a personal history to understand the present in its collective, historical, and individual manifestations. As a collection, these poems knit themselves together as a story. They linger on the etymologies of words, names, species. Etymology guides us into origins. The histories of words are the histories of ourselves, our stories, our ancestors, our ways of knowing. If poems can teach us how to live, as William Carlos Williams ventured when he wrote “men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there,” the “there” found in these poems is a most precious teacher.