

THE DEATH GROWL OF THE UPRIGHT BEAR

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The work included herein is a collection of poems tied together thematically and structurally, like most collections of poetry. Though I do not adhere to strict or traditional formalities in any of these poems, great care and has been taken with respect to word choice, spacing, line-breaks, and the overall sequencing of these poems by considering theme, tone, spatio-temporal and political concerns, and the imagery that appears throughout these poems. My aim has been to make these lines as lean and spare in their language as I could, especially in those pieces concerned with a certain diction and cadence of language I heard growing up. Other, perhaps more experimental pieces, attempt to draw together these linguistic considerations with a so-called "prophetic" tone, or "biblical" tone, as well as occasional meta-poetic moments.

My time spent studying through the years has been divided between creativity and criticism, and not always divided evenly. I believe I'm dealing openly with what poetry is supposed to be, and in this case poetry about a person's memory and the past, both in personal and public terms. Wading through both creative and critical ground has given a number of different voices influence on everything I put to paper,

from philosophy and theory to poetry, and (oddly enough) mostly prose fiction. The meta-poetic or embedded critical moments are there and, on at least one occasion, directly reference the idea of "archaeology" from Foucault with respect to memory.

I hope these features make this an enjoyable read, and add something, if anything, to "the conversation" that stretches into the past.

Accepted by: _____, Chair

The Death Growl of the Upright Bear

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I. What the Bear Left Behind

For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods . . . the great, silent motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events.

—Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*

Walking Through Dirty Spider-Webs

You know, I believe in ghosts,
in the way one might reach a hand
through the glassy roof around a person's mind
and pull the brain backwards—
any direction really—

using a spider-web sometimes.
That's one trick a ghost will use.
Bringing you or me back to some place and what we may have done there.

The dates and years of these things matter less and less,
next to the places and pictures.

I remember where we've lived,
and I know others do this too,
I remember where we've lived and dig up my lifetime this way,
the way scientists and story-tellers do,
and I can understand this
digging into the dark and dirty mystery that is behind us like faithful dogs.

I don't always like the pictures or letters there,
but I believe I understand the place.

Years From a Field in Wolverine

My stomach is dull by daylight.
I have put my fingers in my jacket—
each one still aches with the numbness I felt after I had kneeled and ran them through the
 frost tacked to the dead-brown grass,
the dark grass still shadowed over,
the sun peeking at the leaves covering the far side of the pastures.

After these years I can think of afternoons away from school,
when the snow's top layer would be frozen because the sun
had been out earlier in the day.
I could crack it with my fist and draw my palm across.
The warmth of the blood would let it run, dark and red,
and what light there was would show that it smeared a little—
before it sank into the ice and the snow.
Then, I believed in a revelation, and that I had seen God in the brown and dirt of creek water
 behind our house.
There were things like money and time that really never let our lives be that way.
For a few seconds, there was a sting like a bee sting that the cold would take away from me,
while I watched from the edges of the shadows
walking their course across the ground.

Now this field is a place I have not seen for years.
Maybe ten years.
And that last time was in a Spring I barely remember—
when I was little and everyone I knew was my age—
when we heard the faith from churches that were white—
when we depended on the faith of our parents to be solid.

The Lord was Reading Comics in a Tattoo Shop

"God is in the color of things."

This was told to a six year old

who started buying comic books and praying every day.

Many years after Batman sat glaring over Gotham,

it was noticed that people like to feel good after wars, earthquakes, and hurricanes.

So someone invented disco, bellbottoms, the hair pick as we know it, and eventually navel piercings.

Now a person can have a tattoo on the ass

or the small of the back (kind of sexy)—

and apparently, in comic books,

some heros and villains can go naked without anyone in the city really noticing.

Stringing One's Shoes as an Act of Interpretation

The table is a dark wine color.

It tells of knives and the mixing of strings in shoes—
the gromet and the cup—they're here.

Irresistably twelve stories underground.

Unterwelt.

The cuff, the counter, and quarter.

Encyclopedic collections of all words imaginable.

They all describe your shoe.

Apples and Ice

This weather is a madness itself,
what with the ice
shattering people's orchards and cars.
Different towns all share some degree of
the sun having gone to sleep hard through the storm.
This is something people will talk about for a while,
then in short clips
where the larger story will change
into busting pop cans in the car.
Folks will keep an eye on the cracks
in the bridge across the creek.
Smaller apples might come this year.

Gritty Collapse

There is a different season to loot to.
We have been left deeply, between leaves of brilliant red
and orange, and the ones that are brown and deathly pale.
From walled ranges and falling barriers in colorless landscapes,
with mud and dust—one must hope.
There are windows and concrete curing in places with blood
loping gray and ruined.
Inside each building where children sat scribbling in color,
there is an air that carries only dirt and death,
and smells from wooden cabinets that have been crushed—
burned from heat and war.
Rustling leaves, clean as paper,
teach us to die.

Fixing the House and Looking at Newspaper

Jamie's house is white with stripped patches that are white themselves,
like shadows in black and white movie,
pocked with nails and screws.
If it were cleaned and the walls fixed,
there would be plaster tape-strips all over the floor.

The lady beside me on this bench (where some people come to think about their lives) has
picked up her hair-brush and turned the newspaper over,
all this before the pictures of blood that make me think of the ways we drew pictures when
we were little,
a white place between the ground and sky.
She folds the paper so the headlines won't show.
I know she'll throw it away,
all its headlines black and white, too—
first I think of the garbage truck that will pick up and crush the trash tomorrow morning—
A sense that the paper is saying what it should not,
that the headlines are good.

II. The Terrible Things the Bear Had Done

each must make a safe place of his heart,
before so strange and wild a guest
as God approaches.

—Li-Young Lee, "Nativity"

Dark Comics at a Late Night Convenience Store

Imagine two hands clasped,
backgrounded and sepia toned clouds floating
and leveling across.
They smell like gasoline.

I believe that we will all work inside each neon-signed convenience store,
watching red cars drive by swallowing every burned soul running the stripping west-to-east
and back.

The consolation is a crossword puzzle,
43 packs of assorted cigarettes (no ultra-lights mind you),
and store that sells sandwiches,
whole ones, Alaskan cold,
and the sandwich meat in blue packaging that is just as cold,
without one distinct basket, loaf, or slice of bread,
fresh packaged and sweet around the edge with a brown ring.
Think of that brown ring for me.

Between the bats,
my infernal squeaking crickets (who have found their retirement home for the last three hours
of their lives),
and a modern-day six shooter with no bullets—
this imagined thing just might save my life from a bloody crossword panoramic theme—
smattered across a newspaper beside my gunned dead corpse—
which is maybe what the hands are about in the first place—

and keep in mind that the crickets have chosen the men's restroom as their spot of
recreational relaxation,
with its very own sauna that is only occasionally warm.

The hands are not like the numbers one jots down at least twice a day to prove you've done
your part in economical terms—
at least as far as cigarettes, beer, and gasoline are concerned.
Sort-of-speed pills perch behind the counter beckoning those who could not afford more
luxurious pursuits for the evening.

But, it is interesting if you only make a half-imaginative leap to think what happens in the
mixture.

And it is a shame that even in this place,
at my particular store location,
I still sell more sinus medication than anything else.

Death Growl and the Red

I.

A bus with every child would be found
 with the driver—80 years old, handcuffed to the steering wheel,
 and staring blankly at the bark of a tree.
 No philosophy has mattered for some time
 except that which Matthew puts in the mouth of Jesus,
 "He who is not with me is against me."
 He might be tired of looking
 like an egg-white prophet.
 Pictures like these stay nameless.

Some believe everyone must be touched.
 And then they touch
 with the blood pouring forth.
 So they mark red and dark tears
 on those who do not carry
 the same smell or blood.
 They paint with these things and mud
 as if the water there was pure and clean,
 though it was not in the past.

But those who did not kill Jesus
 were to blame every year since his death.

II.

There is a lake that is brown on some days and tinged with green. The surface is ruffled by large fish swimming in directions towards and away from each other, but never crashing or sinking each other. Markers on graves are of two types—the older ones cut by hand and hammer, and the new ones with sharper angles, and letters all cut to the same depth.

III.

What has been written for these past centuries should be carried to a cave, moving away the
 rock and wrapping every terror in the cloth that is left there.
 It does not snow there much, but the sand is the same.
 And I would take the inversions seen in the eyes of the killers,
 thinking I had been filled as a child with tenderness, letter blocks, and blades of grass
 pricking at my heels and toes.
 Bones and teeth would have been in those fields I was able to walk.

There would have been snow here, though—
 sliding downhill
 through cold-grey days and hardened cow dung
 with black plastic bags.
 And once it had melted,
 I wanted more snow—
 fishing was still many days away. The drop of summer sun had not yet been imagined.
 And I know my friends were not thinking of sand.
 I would have it snow to make the details on land in the Spring.
 The erosion and moving of bits of ground where water would make new marks, like a
 signature.
 I would not write God in the snow.

IV.

Everything but Death comes to me and makes me work and give up what I have...
 Sometimes I growl, shake myself and spatter a few red drops
 for history to remember.
 Then—I forget.

Everything but Death has come to me.
 I wake up every morning to either redborn sun or the greyness
 like the backs of people floating in the sky.
 Bodies laying this way are the same as they look when dead in the water.

Everything has come—
 and what hasn't we stripped from our own backs
 and each other's backs.
 Men have worn the skins of the dead to change themselves and the world
 under the ruins of the big modern temples,
 under pillars and flags of a false Greek,
 its philosophers thinking softly.

Giving Vendors Money While Watching for Foul Balls

Tables are solid and only make sense in the way they are used.
 Holding other flat things like plates or napkins,
 or things like baseballs caught in the upper deck—

not the lower one, not by the field
 at a Major League game,

but the place from where people throw graffiti and trash.
 That place that's cheap and can rain shit on everyone else—
 hot dogs, nachos, flyers for one event for another,
 and the wonderful stomping movement that wants the whole park to crash.
 A buckle and stretch and give of things can be felt
 here where foul balls are hit, ones to be placed
 on shelves in houses and apartments where families live,
 staring from the table to the shelf
 (these things being different gods themselves to the oldest people).

Memories and life move within the money
 between fans and vendors—
 a good thing if you've paid four dollars for a hot dog.
 A ball like this will quietly sit on a shelf or table, though,
 knowing the gods of these two places come from rocks,
 pointing fingers in the directions the sun would set or rise—
 the places the outfield is turned away from so everyone can see the damned ball.

III. Ghosts That Stare Back at the Bear in the Old Places

These fellows will
grow up into mountains, they'll moulder like abandoned
mills. Will memory ever scatter them over the
earth in the sky?

—Tomaz Salamun, "gabrce"

Remembering Legos in the Mornings

We sat in the bar of one five-star restaurant.
This place was dark with
lamps that had plain canvas shades on the tables,
the light flowing toward the warmer side of gray.
White in this kind of plainness is not like
sheets from different beds in the house.
Sheets like this are full of different kinds of love
from the ghosts children make for
the amped darker nights of Halloween.

Now in the early morning,
"I love you" is awfully quiet—
that simple and only time we are left to ourselves
and I am sure I haven't yet sinned and we still love each other.
These morning conversations last little more than five minutes
after waking up twice and rushing to pee.
I know when I open the door the cats will rush to their food and I will think of several things,
like the Legos we talked of once.

The Names.

My mother's parents died well before I was born.
I've only seen pictures of her father who she named my brother, Paul, for.
My name is David and my sister, the oldest,
is named Marian.

All our names can be found somewhere in the Bible.
I thought about this several days ago when I was watching the news
and pictures of Israelis tightening and fitting gas masks.
Being born around this kind of change and death must make people feel
that fate is hunting them down with a dull wheat blade.

But I don't know my siblings as I don't know my grandparents.
Whenever I think of Marian I think of the new stone tile she laid in her kitchen.
Going to her house lets me know I never want to sell anything door-to-door.
And I especially do not want to do it when I find people still building a house with spaces
they can't see
and most likely don't know about.

I do know the tiles in my room are coming up from the floor,
and my sister's tiles are beginning to crack,
I think because the house is not leveled right in her kitchen.
She can lay a bottle on its side in the floor
and it might roll to either side of the kitchen.
Breaks and cracks always come out so stark this way.
There are no photographs of the tiles,
but if I had to describe them to you, then I would say "slightly copper colored—
only without the brightness of pennies."

Really, I don't know my grandparents from either Mom or Dad.
I've met Dad's parents a few times and I'm not sure what they look like,
though I'm supposed to look a lot like Grandpa.

While I was thinking about the news,
I formed a belief that if I would pull the tiles up,
the time when the next bomb might fall would be there.
I keep wondering if the family members that die are still people we can know.

The Black Iron Railings

In the afternoons, my mother and Cathy would sit at our yellow kitchen table
and divine their futures on columned paper.
I watched them begin each conversation talking which debts were paid
and which ones were still gathering weight.
I understood there was more worry in the talk than for the numbers she wrote.

My father and his truck had pulled away,
the bed full of things,
earlier—in the summer.

Each day, I would wake,
and begin with a cold walk to the bus stop.
It was at the end of our lane. And by the time I would reach the main road,
my breath would hang in front of me,
then make its way back into my chest when I breathed in.
My mouth would hurt,
and the cold stung my chest, pushing my heart faster.
My denim coat was very little against the frost that didn't seem to come much, for a time.

My mother has a few friends now,
especially on long summer days and afternoons when the sun hammers against the porch and
black iron railings.

Scratch-Biscuits

The paneling here is simple—
 wooden,
 copper-colored like rusted metal parts scattered in a bin.
 My bedroom's floor tiles are the same,
 but loosening from their places.
 I sometimes think of drawing on them and jumbling them like a picture puzzle.
 I would never want to figure it out.
 I am afraid of this concrete with traffic lights and brick and cut grass
 outside of my windows.
 It will muster out of me my worry for Granny Blue when she died,
 and the hope I felt in helping bury her.

This house, I hope, is the last place I will stay
 at the foot of this mountain,
 screaming that I was not bothered by the rain running off and carving into it
 like long, thin twine wrapped around an arm or a piece of chocolate.

There were days when the rain would follow lightning in the summertime,
 and at night the pond beyond the hill in front would reflect the lightning, the flash carrying
 over the trees.
 I don't think it was ever struck.

It was a place where people drank,
 smoking cigarettes and grapevine when the fog rolled up making the ferns close in the damp
 and dark,
 the rock and its people having loved and died for years.

For a while, I kept a tab on the fish I caught and let go in the pond.
 But the same ones kept taking the bait after a while.
 So I stopped, thinking I had been wrong again.

Our neighbors before then were friends of my momma and father.
 This smell in my house now reminds me of theirs
 when I would sleep over with their son—
 it is decay and clutter,
 the unimaginable rising of scratch-biscuits in the morning while we covered up with damp
 blankets to hold off the cold and wet air in the house,
 with the blankets slowly dry-rotting later in the day.

God, you must know I dread this winter in my house.
The windowpanes are single and thin.
They'll freeze and the melting ice will run into the paneling to stay.

But, for now, in the summer,
I haven't really smelled the white birch or oak trees,
or felt the breeze except in the summertime and sunshine is not so comforting as it is beating.
The birds and dead animals are normal to me,
but I have seen movies that have made me cry about the houses I grew up in.

One of the Houses I Had Affairs With

Cracks in this piece of glass,
I remember this too,
were never complete.
They would not go through the window and neither would the ghosts.

The floor might have fallen through by now.
Maybe the house itself.

None of the scattered magazines
had pictures that interested a sixteen-year old boy.
I left some bottles lying on the floor,
spider parts crusting inside the density of glass.

The magazines did not have the photos of
women with flat tummies and long hair.
A sixteen-year old boy with an abandoned house.
A gravel road that hadn't seen traffic in many years.

Piles of straight logs were a hundred yards past the house—
cut down and left there and I thought,
at the time, they had been forgotten.

The First Vapor-Trails I Can Remember

On the hillsides here,
the ones stripped to dirt that then grow short grass,
I've never seen this anywhere else,
a clear starlit night (and a moon helping it)
can twinkle in the dew collecting there
with the first bit of fog.

All this let me and my friends see when we played at night.

And we would wait for the dew to run off the slope
and know it didn't move that way.

In a scene like this one
it can be understood a person's past
is more a place than a time.
But not like the slate cliffs shelving these hills
into certain spaces.

My birthday means less than the fact I was born,
and born in Hazard, not Lexington
like most I grew up with.

That dew and wind-twitched grass
fired the brain, making all the memories
like work makes muscles,
or maybe children make messes,
pulling stale bread crumbs from
the decked, lint depths under the couch cushions
stained on their undersides.

Build a Conversation

Many of us drew faces in our schoolbooks.
We could look in it,
or at the blackboard or our paper.
We would draw a face and believe it would tell us to do these things,
like take the chalk or
I would cut something into the desk.

Once this was done,
even marching to the principal's office did not matter.
The face was already there,
and I believed they were afraid of what it could do,
that it could watch them.
At recess I would pick grass from the playground,
carry it in and place it on the pages where the faces were.

Even outside, in the dirt and air,
smoke could carry itself in every teacher's clothes.
Even if they did not smoke.

The Upright Bear

I think Jesus could walk out of the mountain
during the dry parts of the summer,
carrying the fog with him.
It hardly rains from June til August anymore,
except in the storms that run out from behind the mountains
like hell-demons with electricity
that turns the hillsides all over black
straight down to the road,
sometimes leaving a crisp and muddy deer carcass in the open.
Small churches sit at the bottom of the hills
I grew up in hollows and small towns
where the churches became smaller
when the preacher stalked the pulpit like an upright bear,
howling at Hell, wailing toward the congregation
who might be struck by the devil any moment, now.
I thought then Jesus would be clutching the carcass of a dead animal,
and knew most men could not carry this carcass out on their own.
I know, too, there were children that died today.
I know some of them cried and wanted to be somehow saved.

Seeing the Webs Afterward

But I do remember, too,
when the sun would drive the rain back
across the hills into places that were
way far away then,
with the different struts of light
like an old Heaven that was up there
reaching down and touching the woods.

Our cats would ignore the birds.
I understood then
and I think I understand now—

the light slipping past the leaves
and webs slung lower to the ground
(you could see this in the summer)
into those soft cemetery grounds—
the faded tombstones here, up from people's homes.
The family is here and kept close,
at least for this time.