

## Culling Washington

cull (noun): a selective slaughter of wild animals

*“Since the Sandy Hook tragedy, there have been over 1,500 mass shootings”  
-- Gun Violence Archive, October 2, 2017*

I don't want another moment of silence -  
we cannot measure the value of victims  
in time more brief than the holding of my breath.

First Connecticut, then Florida, now Nevada.  
Carnage continues its nationwide tour.  
I grieve for Las Vegas tonight, shed tears they cannot hear -  
five dozen moments wracked out of me, each silent with death.

This horror is the latest in a self-inflicted trail of tyranny  
where the only thing worse than the news  
is the goddamned monotony.

It will happen again, tomorrow or Tuesday or soon;  
two-thousand shootings the next deafening milestone,  
too short of compassion for Congress to care.  
Rapid-fire noises will hush another choir,  
bind families and brand them with pain,  
each tagged by the toe with an ever-more-sickening number.

Your response is to be quiet. That is all you offer.

Mothers and daughters will dread the nights to come,  
drown in anguish, set an empty seat at dinner,  
call a cellphone just to hear "I'm not here" one more time.  
Fathers and sons will stoop low, try not to be crushed  
beneath the critical mass of your moments of silence.

Give me *something*. Give me whispers, white-hot loathing,  
anything but haughty thoughts and sterile prayers.  
How is it that you claim to represent the people?  
Your complicity in our ruin runs red down your cheeks.

Your blind eyes see no way to compromise  
as we suffer in stasis, terrifying noises  
stalking our lives and invading our dreams  
with their gaping holes of sound.  
With each semi-automatic shout you plant,  
a salt-stained crop of misery grows  
and poisons our land with brine.

We are no virus to eradicate, no herd to cull,  
but I smell a sickness deep in your ranks.  
You should be the ones excised,  
torn from legislative flesh,  
ripped from ballot box veins in a bloody November.

I pity you, seeing you freeze deer-like  
in the headlights of your constituents,  
any ephemeral moment of humanity  
crushed beneath the NRA's boot.

I pity you, I truly do,  
and I would ask the wolves to spare you  
but I must observe another  
moment of silence.

## Train Meditations

People sleep, or don't,  
the restless and the rest of us  
all facing forward hoping for a future  
when we can stretch our legs,  
step off lurching midnight cars,  
gaze up into prophetic starlight,  
and taste the bone-sure soup of being home.

Couples hope for privacy and find none.  
Teenagers abide the journey,  
suffering mutely into their screens  
with the hope of Wi-Fi at the next stop  
so the world can know their pain.

America yawns open its vast midsection  
in tandem with our muddy consciousness.  
We pass ducks in sodden gullies,  
derricks ducking indefinitely,  
sagging barns and sad bars,  
rusty campers denuded of tires,  
sky and peeled paint, sky and shabby silos,  
sky and sky and sky sown onto horizon  
with threads of mountain haze.

The Milk meanders nearby,  
pushing Sioux pride downstream  
to be diluted in darkness, chemically treated  
until nothing of the old gods remains.  
Land usurped, laws and legends re-written,  
tribes huddle in towns with foreign names  
for the same flats and hills their ancestors rode.

This is not fly-over country so much as forget-me country.  
All roads are assigned a number,  
as if abandoned dreams could ever be counted.  
Cinder block pylons bake chalk-white like buffalo skulls,  
obscene stalagmites with no bridge to hold up and no river to wade.

Cattle with nothing better to do stand still  
and make conversation with scrap iron.  
Fortress walls of hay and graffitied box cars  
arrange themselves like pieces on a game board  
that someone we have never met plays  
because it is the only game he has ever been taught.

The tracks are persistent, never left or right,  
eyes always focused on a new destination.  
With a whistle we leave another piece of nowhere,  
leaving those that leave the train to wonder  
if the grass is greener at the next stop.

## **There Is No Discrimination Here**

Birds natter away as the day exhales,  
tweeting as many characters as they wish.  
Their merry conversations float above ground  
just as oil avoids water.

The green beard is trim and even,  
a graceful caretaking in memory  
of those without worry for chores.

Faith mingles without shame;  
skin color is not measured or categorized.  
Each deep box speaks the same earthy verse  
with its velvet tongue lining.

There is no discrimination here.  
Politicians shun these grounds,  
allergic to the lack of indecency.

It remains open to the rest of us,  
this theater of tolerant remains,  
escorted through time by feathered bards,  
every name arcing backward to a foreign home.

## Rigid Conversation

*And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
-- Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"*

This wall between us is stale, overgrown,  
a rough vertical pasture of moss and lichen  
set in place by prejudice of times past,  
built one grudge at a time by insecure neighbors.

Much has been made of walls lately,  
enough that I take this everyday afternoon  
to look carefully at the overlooked barrier.  
Over the years it has seeped into the background,  
pushed past identification to assumption.

Today I hold court with the boundary of my property,  
asking directly its cause for concern, its hard reasoning.  
Until the root of fear is known, the stony Why sown,  
this wall and I will stare past each other  
with a barren void of compassion between.

Whispers flutter on the breeze east to my ears:

*They are not like us, look different, sound askew.  
They are the Other, nightmares beneath my bed.  
I refuse to trust because I do not know them.  
I refuse to know them because I do not trust.*

Sorrow curdles my steaming tea as I pull deep breath to respond:

*You are not like yourself north to south; your colors skew.  
No two bricks in your belly are a pair, each pocked and worn,  
beautiful weathered fingerprints earned through long years.  
There are no nightmares beneath your soil.  
Each person opposite a wall is another Other,  
but you are their own Other to trust or refuse.  
Look beyond yourself and you will find the neighbor  
you have yet to meet if the gate is opened.*

## State Fear

Deep fried guns, flags, and a side of freedom!  
Nothing more patriotic than a sense of self-over-civilization  
inflicted on anyone without firepower to match a  
red, white, and blue arsenal.

Have you tried the new treat this year?  
Semi-automatic fear, dipped in anguish,  
boiled in greasy xenophobia, and glazed with frosting --  
a veritable heart attack whether eaten or internalized.

A bold sugar script boasts of national pride,  
screaming "MADE IN THE USA"  
even as those who toiled to create such treats  
are not pale enough to partake in the vision of our future,  
are not fluent enough to convince us of community.  
Those hopeful souls peer at our wary faces and see  
battered bigotry glaring back with one cold eye  
capable of ending their long-fought, hard-won dream.

Threads of death swirl and stick to that barrel,  
a festive slice of rainbow festooning the tool  
used to silence the party of Other,  
push back the left under the guise of the right,  
a slick-red silencer put into mouths like gunpowder candy  
or pointed at rainbow flags held by "fags",  
a six-chamber skeleton key to countless memorials  
that sob beneath spasming rides and judgmental stars.

Shells drip from your delicacy, scattering to the ground like portents.  
I hold only words, nothing so sterile and solid as your teeth of danger,  
but I warn you: history is written in the cursive of my ordinance.  
Its pages, chapters, books, and libraries  
all whisper the dangers of isolation and mistrust.

Think carefully now. Too much is at stake.  
Given one shot to save the world,  
will you reach for your weapon or my hand?