

Upper Rapidan September

In my body
I feel the drum of a rhythm
born long before this September day of blue clarity
as water flows
around my legs over moss slick rocks
past my feet
in your clear gemstone-flecked river bed
Brookie Buddha-like
hidden in your murmur cave
where I've watched you before
in pectoral fin paddle
caddisfly wait

Patient hunter
of June July August long light days
now settled
into the dying season
you see and don't see my rod
stick-like among stick-like branches

Invisible line carries
my barbless dun-speckled dry fly
insect cousin in dead float
around a boulder into your aura
where you wait in hunt of mortal stakes
where I also wait
in my own blood-born search
I bend to you this fall day
with cold closing in
in time of yellow leaf float

My waxed fly mimics
a slight-winged insect drift
as your blood takes you
mine responds in kind
perceptible swirl
hook slips in sets
in sharp pain
into the corner of your translucent lip
pain soon swept under
by an upswell urge to live yet longer
if for only one more
daylong breath surface mist play

In taut line my rod
takes your struggle into its bend
and it's only time now
till my hand cradles
your spent body
and I fall
in waterside kneel
to thou my brother
brother thou

Incantations of West Risen Jerusalem

1.

At field side a child drops
dusty gravel
through his fingers an October afternoon
in white light heat of cotton picking
Alabama. My father
in the lean time
he was born to, that waited for him. There
my grandmother
bent down in black and white
hitch-hauling a nine-foot rented pick-sack
five cents a pound sack and all

In fever I have searched
for our root incarnations
in the wild inception roads of Virginia
Bacon Hollow, Blue Ridge, Shenandoah
a church risen for every graveyard
bairns fled from lands
of night-tripping fairies
stumbled hope into a vast consecrate
their bodies corded like ridge pines
arms and legs in knotted supplicate
knees bowed to rock
fire wind earth rain
clear nights when moon fled clouds
threw shadows on spectral wolves
firelight flicker on wind-tossed leaves
smell of bear
smell of earth
smell of human
Monacon, Yesan, Tutelo, Siouan
Saponi, Manahoac
gathered shadows
of those who breathed the world into being
as the world breathed them into spirit
red ferns on the forest floor
the blood returned
of those who walked with God

2.

My mother a grandchild of immigrants
on a later boat

3

regathered in their tribes
in lands not yet wrested
from rocky soil of Iowa and South Dakota
angle-bent peasants from lands of kings
every day a battle
against white wind, uncertain rain
for a wrestled freedom for the landless
in prairie that arced the sky
land for which their sons and daughters would squabble
to possess what could not be possessed
men a step ahead of their plough-shaped shadows
women in lives given over to children
together they furrowed the buffalo prairie
raised barns to hold wheat, corn
hay. Chicago a distant stock yard
New York and Washington foreign as Vienna

In the flu of nineteen-eighteen
the mother Susanna, eyes dry of tears
body reduced
to despair and exhaustion
offered in prayer her fevered body
and those of Kathryn, Ruth, Esther, Rachel
in ashen resignation
to the dust the body will become
and there came a great light
in the dark night and a voice like a cathedral
I am the Lord thy God
and I have come with healing in my wings

3.

Have you seen God? I ask
now that stars no longer reach their light
to the streets of Brooklyn? I lie awake, bridge in my head
in my apartment package with the sound of banshee ambulance
carting the dying in ritual machine
in place of shaman hands and priest ablutions

In the fourth watch of the night
I drop down the elevator
like a rock learned gravity's alchemy
on the parkway Frederick Douglass and John Brown
stumble together shoulder to shoulder
the boy Gabriel and Nat Turner
take form in wisp shadow of shadow
Dorothy Day and Sojourner Truth

4

gather in revenant mist suspire
Howard Zinn listens for voiceless voices
a police searchlight pauses on me, passes on
shines clear through Cesar Chavez

Now walking blind
I feel the Appalachian reach to Alabama
the soil of the buffalo descends in snow
the voice of the land comes in rivers
swollen by rain, soil, gullies, creeks, all that merges
human voices come from wagon tracks worn through rock
from cracked highways that never pause their tire hum
their light traces spilled in constant loss
rumble of rivers, rumble of voices

As street light fades, light
such as bridge glow is dimmed by sky, bridge
such as body and stars circle, body
such as moth flies round in winged hum, moth
such as river whispers under ice, river
such as wolf rests aside in body calm, wolf
such as people incant by firelight, people
such as lamplighter damps flame, lamplighter
such as curves cables ascend, curves
such as entrances they enter, entrances
such as circles water circles, circles
such as chants that heal us, chants
such as flows we enter, flows
such as waves we breathe, waves
such as specters we summon, specters
such as murmurs we listen for, murmurs
such as ones we were, ones
such as one we are, one
such as One, in forever, we will be

Sudan

Clouds held the sky low this morning
Sun occluded behind false mountains
Of a gathered horizon-long cloud mass
Higher, yellow light dusted the edges
Of a procession of stilled winter strati
Light then spilled over in crystal water

With the sun there came up a fierce wind
And I thought of the northern white rhino

Leaves ran the ground like small animals
Tumbling over themselves fleeing
Fierce demons in pursuit
My cap flew off at the bridge
Into the water where ducks and geese
Sheltered along the shore

The last male northern white rhino, Sudan,
died age 45, March 19, 2018. He is survived
by his daughter, Najin, and granddaughter,
Fatu. There are no others. He died at the Ol
Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya as his daughter
and granddaughter were quietly grazing.
There are no others

The wind now burned water from my eyes
And I had to close them and walk in the dim
My clothes ripped off my body. How strange
I thought, to be naked on the Earth
My flesh now stripped away
My bones clattered down the road

And in the end of time and times
We shall have no arms to gather
The heart of the heart
Of gentle savanna grazing beast
Or meek insects that renew the earth
In their lives and quiet deaths
Their steadfast bequest our inheritance

The ancients said God weeps
At the killing of even the worst sinner
And maybe it is only this
The deepest grief, that can save us
Now at the hour of our death

Black Language

At the end of morning silence, still with bird calls
A girl's voice rings clear like a bell: *Washing powder*
Twenty dollars, twenty dollars, washing powder

She is a child and with Africa you must start with the children
Let me say their names: Gaspar, Randall, Small D, Yellow Woman
Ahmie, Hawa, Prince, Thompson, Peter, Blessing, Rita, Fatu

Patience, with her small boy, skin prickled in yellow bumps
Wrapped in a lappa. *He is sick*, she tells me: *Do you have*
Some small thing to give me? He is sick, some small thing

In one hand she holds a roll of bills, seventy to one US dollar
A man rolls down his car window and yells, *It's a scam!* Yes
It may be. But I give her the price of one of my meals, admission
Of my guilt, absolution of responsibility for one more child
Thank you, yah, she smiles and tucks the money into a fold
But it is I who should rightly give her thanks for her blessing

Back to Gaspar, Randall, Small D, three small boys wandering
The golf course I played Saturday in my colonial leisure
In the Africa my cells remember after sixty thousand years
Of wandering in the madness of my ancestors that I've brought
Back with me in eight hundred types of shampoo, in the name
Of God, with my love for sale, and the culture of nothing sacred

In the dark jungles of Lofa, under roots of oldest trees
Are said to live small people whose feet point backwards
So they appear to be leaving. These people, it is said
Can give you a charm that will shield you from bullets
But they are retreating with the trees, charms turned dust
Feet wrenched straight, their black language no longer

Lost Kisses of Cinema Paradiso

i

I fell asleep last night
and woke again this morning
thinking of lost time
in an ocean city we made ours
faded and now risen in gold coins
from a quiet deep time fluid memory
adrift among lotus islands adrift

Fish maidens who strung your hair
in jasmine strands with fish bone comb
fingers aglow in coconut oil
sun over ocean sun over earth
sun over sun over skin
in white hot day black hot night
seeped in unknowing

The city bus that took us alone
on the sea side road
carried no other passengers
no conductor no driver
solely us two in an ocean
shrunk in heat to interior
past attendant poolside chairs
under oblivious stars

Hotel staff gone for the evening
our room a cave
you and I and no other
given over to mystery play
tangle in jasmine infused air
wet skin on wet skin
subalterns of bodies
we trace learned by fingertip

Broken breath swell
given over to primeval strings
beyond knowledge
forest blossom of unknowable
language of entanglement
till god and goddess
descended in flesh incarnate
given over to another

I heard chords of silence
in your breath exhalations
after twenty three hours labor
after nine months
of temple silence
of cathedral quiet heartbeat
growing in inner and outer glow
in fullness of time

The doctor and nurses
engaged in animal chatter
among themselves
subsumed into the deep silence
that surrounded you and the one
you already loved
in your earth motherhood
moon dark to light

For you I was not there
incidental to concentration
in your hum of two bloods
given over
to fontanel first dive
into a world of frontiers
not yet released
from the gemstone flecked fishnet
somehow fallen into my hands
eyes open to light
all I could think
how brave his first look
how calm his body
how defiant
his first earthly cry
and the words
dear one dear one dear one dear one

And you fallen to sleep
after life given and taken
settled back to a slip of a body
in deep stillness
as all the lights in the room
shook fell to crystal
and the child within sifted
to one child this one child all

The Agra night
was naked light bulbs
mingled smells
of sweetmeats and flowers
of bubbled open sewers

The three-wheeled motor rickshaw
twisted slowly
through street lanes
as flotsam bumps slowly
through rocks of a low river
through constant noise
noise upon noise
voices gathered into hum

Mumtaz away in her moonlight tomb

There were no
strings of orchids
rings of insects
calls of night birds
no bat shadow acrobats
no sky passage of clouds

In that dark descended night
we were passengers
jostled through light and smoke

Then a baby monkey appeared
amid shadows
roped to the driver seat
he peered out
in huddled fear
clutched to the pant leg
of his replacement mother
tormentor and one constant

He clung to the smell he woke to
in bird song mornings
the smell that carried him
through the dust of day
to flashing night
the tattered scent of love
that remains
when nothing else