

Fresco, *The Forlorn Virgin*, Dirbi Monastery, Kareli, Georgia

"The genetic diversity of Georgians is underestimated because women rarely immigrated into the region, and the studies are based upon mitochondrial DNA, which is only transmitted through the mother. The 2000 plus year history of repeated invasions of Georgia from the south, up between the Black and Caspian Seas, were, as much as anything, invasions of women. Few peoples in the world have an ancestry more dominated by rape.

Contemplate the Forlorn Virgin of Dirbi, and its corrosion by violence; remember that the monastery was a nunnery, and don't forget that Stalin was born in Gori, just thirty miles away. The faux culture of a State based on the abstractions of Marxist ideology did not so much supplant a culture, as take root in a poverty of violence where the peaceful transmission of cultural wealth from family and society to child had been rendered impossible" -x.

Paleo-Violence in Plaster

We saw it first in Pernambuco
as we sat for the first night on our stoop
of a rustic farmhouse roofed with thigh-molded tiles,
watching enormous toads emerge from the orchard—
to the scent of orange blossoms, jasmine, chicken shit—
as the sun pissed its blood and sank. A boy
appeared out of the darkening
tunnel through the trees,
walking up from the river, he was the youngest son
of the family of caretakers we had unwittingly
dislodged by buying
the farm from their landlord.

We were in danger, he said. You'll need a gun, he said,
and pointed to the cold flurry of bullet holes
we hadn't seen before—a heavy-flake snow in the plaster
cast of the house, perpetually falling around the windows.

I saw it again, and again, even next door, in the boarded-
up house where Jose de Deu's brother was murdered.
We'd pried open the door, and in barred shafts
of biblical light, a host of tree frogs leached
to the walls, disappearing through roof tiles,
as if they were the severed tongues
of the survivors lunging for the cover of a time-
darkened mouth. And there, in the walls, fell
the same, heavy-flake snow.

The silence that each violence had scarred into the wills
of the living, there, was so palpable, that poverty for me
became, not so much an absence things,
but a drought, a truth drought in floods of silence.
And when the real drought came, dust rose,
but what I saw were insurmountable drifts of snow.

As She was First Painted

Midway through her last eutherian trimester,
her heart riddled with doubt
and the future clouded, as the eyes of rabbits,
slung from the belts of weary hunters.
It had, at most, been an unamazing dream.
She could brave the market as well as anyone,
and once she'd passed a spot of bronze
to hear a teller weave the Greek and Roman stories,
and had shyly scoffed at all the shapes
the so-called gods would take
to relieve an earthly passion.
But now she came to question how trusting she,
and how unmiraculous he
had been—so unlike a raging swan, or shower
of light. To be sure, the angel had been bright,
but only with an earthlike radiance,
as if the shadows in her room had conspired
to be nowhere near his eyes and hands;
and she had seen a Roman slave with equally
clean and shiny hair. Worse, she had never
once said no to listening to tales of shipwrecks
the soldiers like to tell, and their funny,
awkward rescues from despair;
and her people had seen her talking to them there.
She had imagined her time laid up with the holy baggage
would be more graceful than this. She'd accepted
the vomiting, and hardly noticed
the bugs of lamb fat that stuck to her chin
as she scraped the pot for more stew,
but even the colostrum that seeped through her
swollen nipples repulsed her now, and worse,
if the baby kicked at all, his kicks were as weak
as the spastic reflexes of any half-living thing.

Dirbi Now

The snow, the snow, for eight
centuries, the snow,
by Monguls, Turks, Persians,
Khwarzem, Timur,

Dagestani, Turkestani,
Germans and Russians, over
and over, each war the same:
the men arrive, the women die,

or go.

Only the Dirbi Virgin remains
confined within the Dirbi walls,
a wedge of fresco
in deepening drifts of snow.

The flurries of projectile
scars and holes
now render her forlornness
as beleaguerment by cold.

And the fossilizing swelling
above her lap, which once gave
hope to others in confinement,
conceals the reluctant slouch of

transformation, slouching
still, as with newer gods from
somewhere else, toward the same
old Bethlehem to be born.

The Death of a Whale

it isn't the
harpoon kills
the whale, it's
the line
from which they can't
be rid.

their nostrils are
a field of nerves--
vaginally sensitive--
to feel the shed
of water, the snap
of air, each time
they rise, and time
each blow and breath
to land between
the caprices of
the breaking waves.

or do they begin their blow
underwater, and feel
the pressure at
the surface change?
whatever. in
their panic, and
in their pain,
and under the
inexplicable
horizontal
force of the ship,
there are breaths
they can't arrange.

From Alaska: A Conference on the Poetry of Place

On the closing of the last light bulb factory in the United States of A.

If the crimes we most commit land far away
in robbery and murder our consumption funds,
if our tastes and dependencies, here,
trigger hands, there,
to clutch guns, knives, or nets, police batons—harpoons—
thousands of miles away,
just as the love of pepper, once—
the taste that launched a quarter-million ships —
slit its way, throat by throat, up the coasts of the orient,
what is the poetry of here and only here,
but the newest mashup of Corinthians
for a newer Crusade into somewhere else?

From my porch in rainforest, Alaska,
rainwater complicates over the clogged and rotted eave gutter
and pounds on the mossy concrete below.
There's a simple *pi pi pi pi* of rainfall on the steps,
a baseline patters out on popcorn kelp in the tidal zone,
off salt-fluted hemlock leaning out to sea.
Only a mind could organize so much water,
and *dum dum titty dum*, suddenly,
it enlucinate me Mozart and the 18th century.

And I'm drifting east, high over unnamed Deer Mountain, Blue Lake,
the long ridge down to Harriet Hunt, unnamed Carroll Inlet,
Portage Cove, and the random fires of summer fishing camps,
Behm Canal, and the dark continent.

Lights cluster, mussel-like, to the shores
of the the black Atlantic: Boston, Philadelphia, New York.
The silence and utter darkness of ocean, then
the first lights of Europe,
the scattered smoky fires of the agricultural poor,
now, Paris, Avignon, Vienna. From high windows
into the great parlors of the western world, we see Lords,
in pink and robins-egg-blue powdered wigs,
lean forward at the waist, and then,
with ladies gowned like giant-jellyfish, dance,

gloriously lit
by oil extracted from harpooned,
drowned, and boiled humpbacked whales.

I look down at my clothes, my Patagonia fleece from Sri Lanka,
my Indonesian pants. Today, I ate
an orange from Chile, apples from New Zealand, Belgian cheese.
My American clam shovel leans against my wall.

Up and down Tongass Narrows, reflections
of crimelights, yellow incandescent windows of houses,
winks of video and tv streak out through the rain
and waver with the water.
I see the tired eyes of Chinese and Mexican
parents drowning in the sea.

Pieter Breughel the Elder's *The Parable of the Blind*

Listen! The blind are leading the blind.

Hear the wary linkage of six men, their breath
and fearful muttering, how their syllables
shorten and tonally ascend
with each stumble and jolt. Hear how their tentative
shuffle hisses music contrapuntal to the toads
that screech to populate the village ditch
where sewage makes wet kissing sounds
against the rustling reeds. The clicks
of their staves through pebbles and grass
are that of thumbnails picking dirty teeth.
Their alms bowls jangle and thock against
their beaded rosaries and belts.

But where are those capricious landmarks

of the human voice, of the villagers who see? Somewhere,
a woman shouts insults into the vast
cavern of her drunk son's ear. There must
be birds, too, twittering indifferently, high in the trees.
Now hear the slip of gravel, the grunt, and then,
the prodigious splash.

Now, hear the things you wouldn't have heard:

The scrape of broomstraw as monks in the steepled church
sweep pheasant bones from between the pews,
and angels playing telephone,
repeating whispers, mouth to ear,
over the great arc of paradise, to laugh
at each new garbled truth emerging on the other side.
Hear aldermen belching, softly, ale gas,
counting money in their troubled sleep.

Be, for a moment, blind.

You lead. A hand rides your shoulder,
its grip tightens and slackens
as you pitch over ground swells. Leaning
forward, you choose your way carefully, always
balancing against stumbling over roots and divots,
your hand on guard for low-hanging branches.
Suddenly, you feel the first horror of air where ground
should be, and twisting your body mid-step,
as if you might scramble back across the trespassed air,
you fall backward toward the water.

This is the parable of the blind:

No precipice exists from which men can fall forever,
except within the human heart, where fear dissolves
the underpinning earth. What would it take,
in darkness and in panic, to shout out to the others
as you fall, "Stop! Fall back. The ditch is here. Hold still!"

It's too late. The men tumble, now, on top of you,
cursing & thrashing. But let's say you, unlike
your fellows, don't keep falling after landing
in the ditch, but find your feet, the bottom, the surface
of the water, air. Can you now shout, "Fools!
Stand up! The ditch is only three feet deep! Stand up!"
Or do you stand up, wipe your mouth, and wade away,
and leave the rest to drown?