

The background of the cover is a photograph of a group of people dancing at a social gathering. The image is heavily pixelated and has a warm, golden-brown color cast. In the center, a person wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants is dancing. Other people are visible around them, some with their arms raised, suggesting a lively atmosphere. The entire cover is framed by a decorative, hand-drawn border in a similar golden-brown color.

Scars Publications

Tales Told to Friends

Paul Bellerive
2019 chapbook

Acknowledgements

Poems in this collection have appeared in the following:

Notes on the Road to Now, by Paul Bellerive, Anaphora
Literary Press, 2013

*Searching Through Yesterday; Stumbling Toward
Tomorrow*, by Paul Bellerive, Northwoods
Press, 2004

Poet as Sociopath, Scars Publications, 2013

Need to know basis, Scars Publications, 2014

Sunlight in the Sanctuary, Scars Publications, 2015

The Chamber, Scars Publications, 2016

Whispers from the Past, by Paul Bellerive, Anaphora
Literary Press, 2015

Natural Light, Scars Publications, 2018

Still Life, Scars Publications, 2018

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Dedication

For Janet Kuypers and the staff of Scars Publications
whose support I acknowledge and appreciate

Stories by the Fire

We seldom use the fireplace,
but tonight invisible scents
of burning oak and apple wood
waft through the rooms of our old house.

A semi-circle of close friends,
each one comfortably seated,
cupping a strong drink in clasped hands
feels cheeks warm in the glow of flame.

A familiar voice cracks the silence,
“It has been years...” he reminds us all,
“years since we gathered together,
telling tales, true or false, to friends.”

Once Upon a Time ...

Moonlight, Memories and Myths

Cast in the light of a cliché moon
shadows of a crumbling mansion
dance on the darkening sands;
the disquieting sounds of day –
s shrieks of children, barks of dogs,
low rumbling of distant traffic –
all silenced ...all phantoms;
the only sounds the ceaseless surf,
and a muffled mournful plea of horn
somewhere lost on the muttering sea.

Moonlight flickers across the rippling bay,
the last traces of day reflecting at the western horizon
beyond the darkness that has dropped like a shroud
around the windows of your gray-shingled deck.
A trace of your after-swimming smell
lingers like memories in the still of the room,
conjures visions of another rising moon
half hidden in a September sea
providing backlight,
outlining your fantastic shadow
shrugging the white robe
from your summer-dark shoulders.

We were young and stumbling toward love
when we discovered
in the respiration of the sibilant sea
a common ancestry, an ancient womb,
a hiding place where we both could sense
subtle messages from our shared past,
vague but undeniable intimations
that there was a world where we belonged.

Our world was so much kinder then,
smaller, almost invisible
when we could see only each other,
when day-to-day drudgery was hasty prelude
to those mystifying, magical moments
when we crested the darkening dunes,
our hot bodies washed by whispering winds,
our footsteps the only signs of invaders;
the two of us all that each of us needed.

Such fantasies, however, cannot outlive the world.

Shakespeare in the Park

Wilting in the white-hot womb of August
Breathless as the calm before tornadoes,
He hurries to the park past drooping trees
Sucked lifeless by unnatural heat,
Heat that has sneaked in unobtrusively
After a long-ago day fraught with showers,
Heat that is a suffocating blanket
Pulled over sweating bodies as they sleep.
When he arrives, she is there, alone,
Sorting out the colorful beads and yarn
To await the chat-chattering children
Who will flock around her like blank ducklings;
She is there, alone, a stunning white smile
Cooling and heating him at the same time,
Making his legs tremble, his lip quiver,
His words, like cowardly frauds, desert him.

Others come too soon, sit beneath the tree
To heckle, to chide his dim distraction,
To mock his foolish obsession with her,
The unattainable, untouchable
Dream, a fantasy so wild and remote
That his winning hit in the World Series,
His last-second basket in the playoffs
Seem more plausible in comparison.
Afternoon too hot to move, talk, or think,
Air as dead as air inside a coffin
Saturates everything and everyone
Struck dumb by the white-hot blow of bellows
Unseen yet palpable on sweating skin;
“We have to close,” she says, “It’s just too hot,”
And before his mind can concoct a plan,
He and she stand close on the savage street.
What to say? What to say to this vision
Older even than his eldest brother?

“Will you walk me,” she asks, “at least part way?”
And even though he nods to answer her
His whirling brain cannot find the language
To shatter the barrier between them,
To help her see their brilliant tomorrows
When the gap between them will be nothing.
At the shimmering corner near her house
(A corner he has studied, memorized)
She stops and takes his hand in both of hers,
Touches him as if to touch were nothing
And sings like an actress on the stage,
“Oh, parting is such sweet sorrow,” she breathes,
And sensing the quizzical look he looks,
“Shakespeare,” she says, “How you will love Shakespeare!”

The hill toward home is as steep as ever,
But his burning feet float above the tar,
His burning mind repeating, repeating,
Oh parting is such sweet sorrow, she said,
She said, she said, she said, he rejoices
Touching the spot on his hand that she touched,
Feeling the touch and the words in his soul,
Cresting the hill he has hardly noticed

Banks of black, bullying clouds suddenly
Boil and steam from ephemeral cauldrons
Over the green-growing-black mountainsides
Cowering on the horizon, waiting,
Anticipating the awesome fury
Building and building in the hellish heat,
Darkening the white, hazy sky, building
Until it cannot contain its own strength.

Sudden winds batter his sweat-shined face;
Slow drops as big as marbles sprinkle him;
Lightning bolts carve the black clouds, sizzle,
And the street itself shivers with thunder;
Walking fast, and faster, and then running
He is pummeled by the shattering storm,
Pummeled, spattered, chased by wind and water
He seeks shelter on the library porch.

Hail beats frantically on the slate roof,
Night-like darkness descends encasing him
In the dank, stony stillness of the porch
Like an Achaean in his beehive tomb,
But he sees her face, feels her hands on his,
Repeats and repeats her magical words,
And vows that one day, one day very soon,
He will enter this place and find Shakespeare.

Summer School

Sunlight striking through second-growth trees
cast spears of gold on the chipping paint
of my bedroom wall; school vacation!
Wafting scent of early-summer lilac,
of the burgeoning weed-filled lawn,
of the swampy stream just yards away,
scents spreading in a barely-noticed elixir
as I threw back a wrinkled sheet, dressed,
heard my mother call, "Your breakfast!"
while hurrying away glove in hand.

Through damp leaves waters of Attarnic Pond winked,
whispered that soon we would be swimming
despite constant pleas and admonitions,
swimming from our weedy, dark shore
to a silver beach in a narrow clearing
where shrill, happy shouts ascended
into the pristine skies, meandered
across the pond's depths to my willing ears,
called to me, dared me to ignore prohibitions,
to strip down and strike out for the far shore.

Paint peeling, shutters askew, porch crumbling,
a ramshackle house, a shed really,
quickened my pace as I passed hurriedly
schooled by ubiquitous myths and rumors
to give wide berth to the degenerate brothers
who lurked among moldering heaps of trash,
who drooled tobacco juice on stained t-shirts,
who cast toothless, menacing leers
at boys scurrying past the grotesque hovel,
who did, it was whispered, unspeakable things.

Further on attractions of another kind:
a wood-shingled Victorian, wrap-around porch,
front yard maple shading broad, pitched roof.
Somewhere inside Candace LaMontaigne,
an older girl, a high school girl,
who on a red leaf autumn afternoon,
seated on a sappy plank between two pines,
removed her shirt, unhooked her bra
to show my older brother, Pete, and me
what awaited if we were only nice.

Finally the field, the newly-fenced field
seen from my vantage point atop the hill,
a wonder, a green-brown magical spot,
despite an outfield choking with weeds,
made dangerous by random holes and moguls
that might send a sprinting fielder sprawling,
or, worse yet, tear or break turning ankles;
but, such blemishes were almost invisible
to boys who had often played on vacant lots
beneath power lines deflecting fly balls.

The best chose-up, hand over hand on bat,
names called, sides made, rules stated,
sweating happily beneath a broiling sun
turning our damp, dirty faces red-brown
we played on and on, played fiercely,
emulating (we believed) Mickey and Ted,
clumsily imitating Willie's great basket catch,
trying to play as we had seen our heroes play
on snowy screens of black-and-white televisions
on Saturday afternoon breaks from play.

No parents, no coaches, no umpires,
we were the center of a carefree world.
Disputes arose and were quickly adjudicated,
settled with words, with shouts, at times with fists;
hurt feelings, chipped teeth, purple bruises
soon forgotten, soon absorbed into the fabric
of the game, the freedom and the joy of play,
the sense that we were in control, in charge,
free to be right or wrong, to muddle through
a game far more than its simple parts.

There was no time save the transiting sun.
Inning after inning passed uncounted,
games ended, new games began,
some wandered away, others appeared,
drawn to the game like bears to honey.

Dusk came
suddenly, silently, from center field to mound,
“I can’t see it!” “I can’t see the ball.”
A few more tired, halfhearted plays,
a weary surrender to darkness and waves good-bye.

Sunburned and stiff-legged on the walk home,
considering the day’s could-haves and should-haves,
I walked swiftly despite the weariness
past the now unfamiliar shapes of landmarks:
Candace LaMontaigne’s house dark, strangely sinister,
the side-show shack of the infamous brothers
as threatening as Hitchcock’s Bates Motel,
home also of bizarre, unspeakable acts.
Only hints of the pond enclosed by dark trees,
and mother’s voice, “Your supper! You’re too late.”

That Summer Long Ago

Forty miles was a journey then,
when almost anything seemed possible,
when lilac mornings whispered promises
of damp encounters with the sirens of my dreams
Then, we could stick out a thumb and ride,
press our sweaty faces into the resistant air
beyond the windows, the steady swoosh of sound
whisking us to Araby.

And always we would walk the final miles,
ushered by salt-smell over sun-bleached road
past clustered, peeling summer rentals
too far from water for painting or repair;
by instinct we knew the way to walk,
winding through a maze of carnival streets,
between the unpretentious, water-color cabins,
caricatures, or a child's finger-painted dream ...

The street empties us onto an overflowing boardwalk;
caught in pleasant, promising tides we drift
past cave-mouths of arcades and narrow tributaries
glittering with flashing, brightly-colored lures.
Almost- visible summer smells – suntan oil, fried dough,
salt-saturated wood, scent after scent,
blending into a subtle but pervasive essence
assures us we are miles and miles from home.

And far too many sounds to sort (except in retrospect):
clatter of pin-balls, pop-pop-pop of gallery guns,
cries of wounded bears, chimes of giggles
bits of a cacophony of voices and murmur of the sea.
All a backdrop, all subliminal accompaniment
to the masterpiece of modern art that reveals itself
in three dimensions as we explore within it
contemplating and appreciating each sensuous stroke.

Pinks and yellows highlight tan bodies, curves and angles,
soft swirls, hard planes, sky blue-sea green mix;
shadows lend depth and texture to the painting,
all in motion, intertwined like the colors in a kaleidoscope.
Afternoon. Light and heat sap the boardwalk color,
illuminate shadowy places stealing mystery,
driving us whitely to Joyce's scrotum-tightening sea
where we sizzle like wet fingers on a hot iron.
We cast about for the sirens that lured us here,
sweet dream shapes melting into blurs of color,
leaving in my mind imperfect parodies brought later to life
by a certain smell or a dusty seascape in a friend's garage.
Senses restored by cold, I float in the broader canvas;
swimmers bob in white waves; toasted bodies shiver;
water laps slim legs swaying with the tide;
a pink bikini shimmers, wet, sleek with self-assurance.

A suggestion of flesh and fantasy, hers and mine
(although I couldn't know that at the time),
my dream waiting to be real, waiting for artist's brush
to move, to make the colors come together as they should,
but far too soon she is gone, moving through the foam,
receding, disappearing among blankets and beach chairs
as if the artist had painted over her, replaced flesh with sand
and an abstract castle melting into the sea.

A Chilling Laugh

Green Mansion forest hung heavy with rain,
moss-covered branches bending and weeping
into mysterious green-black waters
where implacable, unblinking eyes glided,
silently watching, silently searching,
silently reminding of our dark past.

Your body beautiful in dappled light
stretched comfortably on the spongy banks
as if you too were a natural part
of that primeval, magical setting
where we hid from disapproving parents
who knew we were too young and too willful.

The pines around the pasture on Post Road
bent in violent pre-thunderstorm winds
sweeping billowing, black clouds through the sky
like great brooms swishing away vast debris,
sending the threat scudding over treetops
only to gather and gain strength elsewhere;

and across the tracks, across the divide
that maintained the terrible status quo,
in purple twilight the peals of laughter,
the sharp barking of invisible dogs,
the smoky scent of front-porch barbecue
drifted over to our side as we walked,

as we eyed with keen curiosity
the wooden ice cream cone atop the roof
of Buster Benjamin's Ice Cream Parlor,
a place forever forbidden to us
by dint of our white skin, by tradition,
by misunderstanding and ignorance.

* * *

Those tracks were a formidable barrier
keeping us penned in like obstinate hogs
too willful to know what was best for us,
too rambunctious to be loosed on our own
among creatures so different in nature –

but we were headstrong then, and young ...
The bells would jingle as we entered there,
sounding a shrill notice to the owner
that customers had finally arrived,
and when our eyes adjusted to the dark,
we could see Ben waiting near the ice cream,
staring through dimness to the closing door.

The ruhr, ruhr, ruhr of the air conditioner
seemed after a while like bayou music,
like the sounds we heard in summer twilight
making their way up from mossy swampland,
from forest into prickly cotton fields
sweltering beneath savage summer sun.

“Howdy, Miss,” Ben would smile in greeting you,
finding you to be a small miracle,
a young white woman, blue-eyed and tanned,
brown legs a stark contrast to your white shorts,
seated on the foam-padded cylinder,
your elbows comfortable on the counter.

“Ah still don unerstan,” Ben mused mildly
“how a slim wisp of a lady like you
kin eat them tubs-a-ahce cream day ta day
an never look as if ya et at all,”
as the huge sundae appeared before you,
and Ben’s proud smile exposed perfect, white teeth.

Laughs exchanged, sundaes eaten, small bill settled,
we emerged into phosphorescent light
stumbling blindly for a moment or two
back to the appointed side of the tracks,
back to what everyone said was our world,
back to the place we both loved and hated.

* * *

Owl cries; clasped beneath low-hanging branches
still breathless from impassioned love-making,
as you slipped back into your blue jersey,
we inhaled along with the humid air
hints of smoke, of wood burning out-of-doors,
of unseen flame lapping at the black sky.

Back on Post Road we saw in the distance
a glow unlike any Dixie sunset
casting red light on dark, lowering clouds
scurrying madly to the horizon,
scudding away from the conflagration
crackling on the other side of the tracks.

Near the blaze the roar was paralyzing –
like the roar of a vicious tornado
that sucks all the oxygen from the earth
and seems to digest everything near it
in a cacophony of whirling sound
that tears and batters the world to pieces.

The heat, even from where we stood shaking,
forced our hands to become shields, to protect
our searing faces and watering eyes
as the burning roof opened like a cave
swallowing the iconic ice cream cone
that had called to us so insistently.

“Ya’all won’t be gettin’ no more ice cream,”
a voice snarled in the darkness behind us;
“No more ice cream dished up by dirty coons
who ain’t got no bidniss seein’ white folk,”
Mr. Lane, a pedagogue of hatred,
laughed into the sizzling, starless night.

Yesterday's Children

Diamonds dotted her ears,
Danced with silver around her neck,
Darted playfully from two bracelets
As she raised a Cosmo
And drained it as if challenging
The loud soldiers slugging Tequila
At a nearby salt-speckled table;
Her subtly seductive body suggested
By one of those "little black dresses"
Had already garnered a hundred bold stares,
Had lifted dozens of glasses in leering salute
From tables crammed with off-duty kids.

"What are you looking for?" I asked her
Noticing that she was paying more attention
Than was her custom, and that her right foot
Tapping, tapping, tapping, indicated thought,
Indicated that she was considering
Before she tried the words that might explain.

She shrugged
Still unsure or perhaps unwilling
To say why we had come
On a sudden whim, an insistent whim
Diverting us from our original path,
Sending us seventy twisting miles
To this infamous old honky tonk.

"Were you like them?" she finally asked,
Lifting another Cosmo, another Cosmo
That had appeared magically on our table,
And it was my turn to shrug,
"Maybe," I wondered, "Maybe not?"

* * *

The November-cool air sooted by ubiquitous coal dust
Brought the summer-suffering Georgia pines back to life;
Brought also instant sleepiness,
Instant head-nodding narcolepsy
Minutes after entering the steamy barracks,
Remnants of the Great War
And still good enough for us,

For those lucky or unlucky enough to be
On a journey to a new conflict
On muddy trails half a world away.

Two open floors, thirty-two metal bunks,
Sixty-four foot lockers, as many wall lockers,
Privacy purchased only by closing eyes,
Rolled socks, polished boots and brass,
Waxed linoleum floor, center aisle
Unused, displayed, unwalked upon
By all but the alcoholic Drill Sergeant
Rumored to have hoisted a Jeep's rear end
Six inches off the baked Georgia clay;
Sixty-four boys metamorphosing into soldiers.

Our drinking spots were minimalist creations.
A suburb-like, post-World War II ranch,
Dirty white clapboards and peeling green shutters,
Inside, fifteen deeply-scarred wooden tables
Surrounded by rickety, flea-market chairs,
Faint odor of beer and spattered urine
And a perpetually frowning, red-faced bartender
Who drew sloppily pitchers of watery brew
And a preposterous concoction called pink champagne –
Sweet, sticky headache and pastel puke.

That culprit pink champagne incapacitated Shenkel,
The mumbling Drill Sergeant's darling,
The skinny trainee with a sleeve of Sergeant's stripes
Whom we dragged back to barracks,
Deposited on his own perfectly-made bunk
Stripped naked and painted with Magic Marker
Obscene messages for the astonished D.I.
Who would find his unconscious protégé
Supine, living graffiti, unable to rise or cover.

The PX Annex was our other pseudo barroom:
Six picnic tables surrounded by a stockade fence
Attached to a tiny Exchange carrying essentials -
Soap, shaving gear, stationary and stamps-
And a counter behind which a dour PFC
Filled with 3.2 beer plastic pitchers
That we carried outside on trays
To the dull, gray-painted tables,
Spattered with pine needles beneath towering trees
Standing like camouflaged sentinels against a dark sky.
Somewhere there is a photograph –
Five of us linked, arms over shoulders,
Five cropped heads, five lean bodies,
Five pairs of dark eyes trying to fool the camera,
Five forced and crooked grins –
Buckey, Stein, Sheridan, Grimes, and I
Dwarfed by the wall of pines,
Not drunk enough to be carefree,
Trying to look like those pictures of our fathers
Taking time out from winning the big war.

Womanless in those days
The post was a city of males,
No dancing bracelets, no necklaces,
No shadowy flow of neck into slim shoulder.
A high-pitched voice, rare and exotic,
Spurred malicious rumor-mongering
Or worse; a certain femininity
A dangerous thing, an invitation
To a blanket party, to a hate crime
With bars of hard soap in green socks.

A cool Thanksgiving morning training holiday,
Cathedral woods where the truck dropped us
Deeper than the woods of my New Hampshire home;
A disturbance of time – home, the woods, and home again –
Bucolic melancholy palpable and pleasant,
Longing sharp enough to be physical pain.
I wandered more lonely than Wordsworth's cloud,
Walked trails in search of non-existent trash,
And found in solitude something profound
That I sometimes recall today but cannot articulate.

There was in the quiet hum of evening
An ironic yet simple innocence;
Sheridan dreamed of his fallen father,
Dreamed of following those ghostly footsteps
Into the eternal parade of unknown warriors;
Metcalf celebrated the classlessness,
Happy that where we came from,
What we may have had before
Was fodder for jokes as we stumbled
Panting and sweating through the obstacle course.

Monroe, sculpted like an ebony block of marble,
Burned with simmering, ancient anger
And dedication to avenge the myriad wrongs
Suffered silently, ignominiously,
On smoldering streets of the savage South,
And Zimmer, bamboozled, broke, battered, bullied,
Recently cast adrift by divorce,
By love turned to hurt, by a mean streak
He never thought existed; he waited
For the night to soothe him into oblivion.

And what of me? Back then a true believer
Filled with fantastic novels and films
Of the big war, regaled
By stories told by father and his friends
Gathered around a tub of icy beer,
Moved to tears by solemn words and martial tunes
And by ill-defined notions
Spawned equally on television and in barbershop
Of what it meant to be brave and noble,
To be other than what I thought I was.

I ached for you when there were minutes free,
When we would huddle in pre-dawn dark
Awaiting the call to the day's training,
Or when we would sit, quiet and tired,
In the dimness of the evening barracks.
There was neither time nor freedom
For bar-hopping, for quaffing Tequila,
For sending drinks to a lovely woman's table;
There was time to train and time to think,
Time to prepare for our beckoning war,

But more powerful than all the rest was separateness,
Not merely the isolation of the army post
But isolation from what had been our world,
A foreign place where lives went on without us,
Where others never drank pink champagne.
Those at home worked, went to classes,
Went to bed with girls who didn't wait;
Some absorbed a strange hatred for us,
And, real or imagined, spit at the mention of our names,
And worst of all, overlived us into non-existence.

Like all soldiers in all wars, perhaps,
But the sting of being disposable ghosts
Was real then, and just as lasting
As the sting of combat.
Like them? In a way, I suppose,
But dissimilar as well.
For us there were never heroes,
Never the ease and confidence to toast a pretty girl,
Never a nod or a "thanks" as we slipped
Meekly and anonymously back into a colder world.

Questioning the Answers

Lessons Learned

The shadow of a hawk
glides across a blanket of snow,
travels silkily south-to-north
from the tame backyard
to the black ribbon of river
meandering between naked witch trees.

His appearance is always unexpected –
a missive from another time,
a reminder of the lethargy
that has settled over us,
the mindless crush of routine,
sad end of our American dream.

Perhaps his graceful defiance of gravity
seeming to us spontaneous, free
is no less circumscribed and bounded
than our staid, fenced-in lives,
no more elastic than the bars
of our self-created, comfortable cells?

“We have,” she often chastises,
“chosen this road so heavily travelled.”
But I fear she is misreading
the crafty, wry poet who understood
that such choices are but illusions,
both roads, in fact, “worn about the same.”

* * *

Crouched beneath tiny desks, stifled giggles,
Nervous sounds never to become laughter,
Determined to be brave, brave
Like our returned soldier-fathers
Back in the world they had saved;
“You are safe,” her tremulous voice told us,
Safe from the malignant mushroom cloud,
Our Godzilla, mad and broken free.

That threat our existential back-story;
Rock-and-roll a sub-conscious score,
Accompaniment to horrific tragedy
Broadcast over high-school loudspeakers
Into sunny, sibilant classrooms
Suddenly silent and oh-so-somber,
Stilled by the shocking realization
That tomorrow is but a supplicant’s prayer.

Amidst it all the promise persisted,
A gentle guideline, formula for success,
A proven path, straight and simple,
A dream passed on from history’s sages,
A steely truth forged in collective memory:
“Thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.”
Believe in the righteous propaganda
Of preachers and professors of status quo.

Lesson learned, but little did we know;
Little did we read of genocides,
Of men and women made into property,
Of segregated restrooms and buses,
Of black bodies dangling from tree limbs,
Of corrupt pols and tycoons, their souls sold
To the highest bidders whose swastikas
Lay hidden in folds of nationalist cloth.

* * *

Earth has absorbed the white blanket;
bare limbs are blossoming to life;
meandering winds whisper warmly
hinting of summer days, summer nights
lit by streaking meteors and orange moons.
Weeks. Weeks and still no hawk.

Rodents have abandoned the fallow fields;
the ribbon of river sluggish, slow,
choking on unregulated commerce;
abandoned, we are relics of the past,
refuse of a time when skies were clear.
“Perhaps he too has given up,” she says.

“Free,” I mutter to the smoggy sky;
bound to no one, to nothing.
He is thesis, we are antithesis;
no synthesis, however, is possible.
The dream! The dream is nightmare,
and we, like Stephen Daedalus, cannot wake from it.

The Loft, Bobby, and Sad, Wise Eyes

Loft with ceiling so low I cannot stand,
a hand-printed poster decrying war
nailed to the studs years ago by a boy
whose roiled soul was too kind and gentle
to be the soldier his father had been,
to defend what he never understood.
Rough board floor, joists forming upside-down Vs,
tops of pine trees visible from louvers
the only connection to the outside,
to the wider world three stories below.

It is the only place I can afford,
the room and board slightly less than the pay
I receive for cleaning the gross restrooms
where dank plumes of steam rise from rank toilets
installed in the days of Mayor Wainright
when sidewalk light came from kerosene lamps.
When I enter, the tourists shrink aside,
give me a wide berth as if I might be
one of the urine-stained, homeless wrecks
who beckons to them as they hurry past.

* * *

It was not always so.

The boy who first lived in the loft and I
met at recess at Smith Elementary –
a punch, a chipped tooth, and we were friends
for all the years, friends, classmates, and teammates;
teenage summers when we could find no work
we waded through brush and climbed the steel fence,
swung carefully over the barbed wire
landed, straightened, and walked like conquerors
past the timid, picknicking families
to the dense heart of the Animal Park.

Wonders from around the world greeted us:
Siberian tigers huge and silent
patrolling a steep, rocky hillside range;
a fierce grizzly from Kodiak Island
standing like a giant on great hind legs,
pythons as large as imagination
wrapped in immense coils around bare branches,
and most wonderful of all the wonders
Colossus, a shy mountain gorilla,
a Professor, an Ethicist supreme.

Five or six hundred pounds, a silverback
motionless beside a hanging tire,
an awesome presence protected from us
by twelve-foot-high glass walls and a glass ceiling,
and most entrancing of all, his wide eyes,
at once sad, intelligent, gentle, wise,
eyes that spoke of mountains shrouded in mist,
of words like freedom made suddenly clear,
of right and wrong, the sanctity of life,
of crimes for which we are never charged.

I left the lessons in those eyes behind,
but Bobby was a far better student.
“Coward! Coward! My own son a traitor!”
Bobby heard the words over and over,
heard them when he grew hair to his shoulders,
when he declared himself a pacifist,
heard them when he refused to be drafted,
heard them when his red-faced, enraged father
could endure the sight of him no longer,
and he retreated to the attic loft.

Resting, awaiting approaching darkness
dug in on a Central Highlands mountain,
eating ham and lima beans from a can,
staring at the letter's return address,
familiar but unreal, like a strange dream,
Bobby committed suicide last week,
the absurd letters in his mother's hand,
no note, nothing, dead in the attic loft,
But I was sure you would want to know.
Another casualty of a bad war.

* * *

Home, in a place that is no longer home,
always alone, ignored and forgotten
by all who want to avoid reminders
of a time too divisive, too bitter,
too difficult to grasp, to understand;
feeling abandoned, walking littered streets,
seeing nothing in the eyes around me,
huddled beneath overhangs in the snow
shivering with cold, with fear, with outrage;
the sad, sage, kind eyes staring through the haze.

So many years ago, so many years,
tears for Bobby only recently shed,
tears only recently able to flow
only now able to show some feeling,
to admit the wisdom in those sad eyes;
the poster still hangs, still decries all wars,
the loft is calm, quiet, a bit forlorn
now that Bobby's mom is in the home
I visit each week, deliver the rent,
invent stories that keep Bobby alive.

At Danny Hannigan's Old Times Tavern

He fixed me in my unsteady chair,
His restless, black eyes boring through darkness,
Boring through dense, unhealthy air,
Thick with blue cigar smoke and smoldering curses
Crisscrossing above the overheated bar.

“I got my head broke in this goddamn place,”
He said, “thirty-three or so years ago...
These two linebackers, drunk as fuckin’ skunks,
Hauled my ass into the parkin’ lot
An’ bust a two-by-four across my nose.”

He raised a frothless mug of beer
To thick lips and smiled whitely,
“Here’s to them,” he said and drained the glass,
Pounding the vessel on the scarred tabletop,
“Here’s to them two dead motha-fuckas.”

To them indeed, to all of them,
To fantasies and frauds who loomed large
To an eighteen-year-old seeking confirmation,
Seeking the merest hint of direction
Amidst the chaos of common rites of passage.

“Thirty-three years,” he sighed to the dark,
“And too goddamn old for any more wars...”
“Ever think,” he hissed into the empty mug,
“That there ain’t any more to it than this,
No more than beer, and spit, and smoke in your eyes?”

* * *

Warm southern air filtered in with darkness,
Sneaking, with insects, through the insubstantial screens,
Lulling the damp bay with night's narcotic
Dispensed on soft, on oh-so-gentle breezes,
And the roar, dissembled, became a murmur
Emanating from shadowed corners of the barracks
Where the disparate, ever-watchful tribes
Sat near, drawing comfort from familiar forms.

Smokey Robinson, rapid-fire Spanish,
Raspy whines in praise of drug-free Oklahomans,
The languages of the different tribes
Mixing, becoming an incoherent hodge-podge,
An anthem signaling the rise of the moon
Above the shadow fingers of the Georgia pines
Fencing in the fort, fencing in the tribes
Hearing different languages for the first time.

Our rest was broken by volleys of curses,
Shouting, banging, demanding that we scurry out,
Herding us like skittish cattle to latrines,
To a ragged formation in coal-scented air,
To breakfast spooned like slop on plastic trays
Carried nervously to tense tables, inhaled
As quickly as we could move it to mouth
Beneath the unblinking stares of snarling sergeants.

It was all new – the barracks, the brawling,
The brothers chanting an unfamiliar lyric
With knifeblade meanings lurking in the sounds,
Something vital there more than the sum of parts,
High notes that danced just above my hearing,
Beyond my experience and understanding
Circumscribed by a New Hampshire childhood
Suburb-white and inattentive to wider worlds.

Those first few weeks were made of loneliness
That gnawed like a ravenous, impatient rat
At my intangible anatomy
Every minute my mind was free to wander;
The books and poems can never get that right,
Will never quite capture the metamorphosis
Of savage longing into physical pain
For which there is no diagnosis, no treatment.

Isolation bred malignant mistrust:
Slights, real and imagined, lurked beneath every word,
Lurked in bold glances and averted eyes,
In boisterous groups oozing exclusivity,
And in unexplainable silences
When I turned a corner or entered the bay;
Barracks mates were transformed to enemies,
The unspoken irony as real as shadows.

That humid blend of constant resentment,
Of fear, and of loneliness amidst so many
Wore out my bravado and my courage
That had seemed so boundless in the safety of home,
In the company of accepting friends
So willing to overlook common shortcomings,
So willing to turn blind eyes and deaf ears
To intimations that I was less than I seemed.

And in the new, debilitating maelstrom
At dusk on the stairs of a deserted barracks,
He reached black fingers to his breast pocket
And tapping a tune on the pack, made offering
So unexpected that I took it up
Although I didn't smoke, took the proffered Kool
And tried to ease the smoke into my lungs
Without revealing my shock or virginity.

* * *

He waved the harried waitress to us
Ordering more drinks in case
Closing time snuck up unexpectedly;
“It ain’t all bad,” he said,
“Not near as bad as then, not near as bad.”

Perhaps, I thought, perhaps not near as bad,
But I had not been there to see his head crack,
Had not been there to dissuade the bastards
Or to call for help from the oblivious drunks
Who crawled in nightly to forget about everything else.

Perhaps I could have helped, perhaps not,
Even that was a long, long time ago,
A time grudgingly fading into nightmare memory,
A time best left behind and buried
With relics of our undistinguished past.

“Have one,” I offered sliding the pack
Across the wet table toward drumming fingers;
“Hazardous to your health,” I cautioned him
Chuckling at the drunks in the dark recesses
And at the tribes still chattering in the dusky barracks.

Cold Winds and Sable Coats

“There will be ice on the moon tonight,” he mumbles
to his dog who watches him fumble at the wood pile.
“Frost will rise from this frozen ground like a geyser,
and settle like snow on that oh-so-far-away rock.”
The dog, uncaring of cold, nuzzles the first row,
sniffs low at the dry slabs at the base of the pile,
searches for the mice and chipmunks that had been there
just before the night sky turned so clear and rained frost.
His hand crippled once by steel blades and stiff with cold
slips across old bark slick with hoarfrost,
grasps again, but now too late as the wood tumbles,
bounces and rolls dead inches from the dog’s sharp nose.
“Take care,” he says and laughs a startling laugh
that bores into the blue-black night as a funnel,
white mist drawing a triangle in the darkness;
“Take care,” he says and bends to find the truant slab,
but stops instead to pat the foraging dog.
“Time enough,” he says to the wide chocolate eyes,
“time enough to feed and stoke that stubborn stove
and heat that silent house.” Time enough, he knows
to settle in the rocker with a bit of food to share,
time enough to climb up to the familiar room
where the voices coming from the radio
remind him of the voices that once filled the house.

“Too hard... too hard,” he hears her say from Phoenix
where they had moved in ... ‘86? Yes, in ‘86.
He visited once, flew in at night and stayed some time,
but the constant sunshine was too much to bear,
too much ease and too much sameness
for an old man who has to watch the weather change,
who knows he is alive when harsh wind takes him by surprise;
more there than even love or loneliness can conquer.
Too hard? He wonders what that means. Too hard?
For what? For living life until you die?

Too hard? No harder now than then. No harder
than when every field was dry, when choke cherries
withered and died of thirst; when all of them (her too)
squeezed all they could from the earth and from each other;
so when he was too old and the simple tasks too hard,
then it would be time to go, and time enough for that.
“Take care,” he says, “and say hello to Robert.”
“But why ...?” she argues crossly as she used to do
when he would refuse to listen to her pleas
and carry her off to bed and another story;
“I love you,” he says as he recalls *Miss Suzy*,
smiles at the storybook battle for the house
and the vanquishing of the evil red squirrels;
“I love you,” he says again to his daughter in the sun.

“Mousing day,” he says as the dog circles him
stretching turns until her circuit is a quarter mile,
but coming always back to check, to see him there,
shuffling to the orchard where the naked trees
huddle beneath a weak sun shedding light but little heat.
“Not many left,” he says of the surviving rows
that once spread from road to road, from Edna’s Hill
to Tracy’s Cuff, where houses now outnumber trees,
“But still enough,” he laughs and drives the steel rod down
into the hard earth above the hibernating roots,
“Still enough,” he repeats stumbling a bit from his effort
as the dog moves in to guard against what might be there.
The first holes open, he spreads the poison carefully,
enough he knows to do what must be done, enough
to see the leaves and smell the blossoms in late May.
“That’s one,” he says as he guides the dog away
and carries on to the next trees in the row;
leaning there upon the rod he senses coming snow,
senses laden clouds gathering over the sea,
“Get ‘em done by night,” he tells the wagging tail,
“Just enough,” he nods and takes up the rod again.
“Always just enough,” he says, assured, and laughs
as a sudden freezing wind from deep in Canada
shakes him breathless and ruffles the dog’s sable coat.

A Myth, Perhaps

Dark boulders on the shore loomed like giants
when I was a child and could imagine
the heroes and the monsters of ancient days
returned to separate land from hungry seas,
to ring us in, to hold and protect us
on our mystical, mountainous island.
The tablets stained with time and weather
beckoned from the depths of their dank cave;
placed there for safe keeping before there was time,
before the Titans died and descended
into the immeasurable depths of ocean
forever murmuring all around us.

My crippled grandfather knew the stories:
Before there was land there was Oceanus
he who dwelled beneath a soundless sea,
he who ruled over all the watery world;
and there was also Molitania,
the volatile queen of the underworld
cast below before time, before Oceanus.
After eons, mad with lust and loneliness,
Oceanus ventured beneath the waters,
forced his way into the hot underworld,
coupled wildly with Molitania,
and their volcanic climax formed our land.

Today the tourists laugh too loudly;
they hurry whitely from the wind-swept airport
to the palm-studded hotels on white beaches
shaded now by glimmering towers
reaching brashly into the vast heavens
where cottony clouds are scurrying
and disappearing at the rim of the world.
Merchants call from simmering grass hootches
dangling polished stones and gross, false idols,
idols never spoken of in the tablets,
idols created by cruel cynicism,
by those who have no sense of where they are.

In black waters of stagnant inland swamps
snow-white ibis and great blue heron wade
staring longingly toward crystal sea pools
where schools of fish flowed in rippling waves,
where blue-green ocean waters rolled gently,
where great brown pelicans dove from on high
like lightning bolts striking on the sea;
but now only shadows in dusky glades,
teeming with rank growth spun out of control,
steaming in twilight humidity
rife with predator insects and fat leeches
searching blindly for any drop of blood.

Indolent, angry and not knowing why
young men growing old in body and in mind
gather in airless, suffocating bars
simmering in stultifying, dank heat.
Trapped in anonymity, in shadows,
suffering from the unspeakable loss
of the silver sands and murmuring waves
loss of what they thought to be their birthright,
they sip stomach-rotting bar whiskey
silently enduring their sad exile,
alone together never admitting to
the cache of cracked and sullied shells at home.

* * *

She sat among rocks behind the beach club
where dancers wriggled beneath flaming bars,
where a steel band played on a moonlit deck
flickering in the swaying light of tiki
lamps purchased from online purveyors.
Beneath a red, satiny evening dress
her lithe, powerful body suggested
a stalking panther padding silently
and effortlessly through thick jungle growth.
The gold bracelets dancing around her wrists
caught and returned the light sending tiny beacons
from the darkness of the rocks out to sea.

The Talebearer Speaks in Whispers

I

On a bare rock under the volcano
he stared blankly and drunkenly skyward,
stared into the vast Mexican twilight
stealing over endless stretches of sand
that even after years unnerved him.

He slurred slightly, “When I’m in the desert,
and those jumping cactus thorns attack me,
I see the enraged Congressman’s red face,
his fat finger pointing to where I sat,
the room thick with mindless patriotism;

‘Communist,’ he hissed at me, ‘Commie,’
and the automatons nodded gravely,
acknowledged the import of the moment
and the valuable service to country
my impending exile represented.”

How old, I wondered, how old could he be,
sent away when I was a child of six;
sent away with a wife and new-born son
for crimes without victims, for impure thoughts
that strayed from Big Brother orthodoxy?

Despite encroaching darkness he glowed,
his form surrounded by a silver aura
that may have been only the sun’s retreat
behind the stark mountains in the far north,
the mountains near his homeland’s border.

“The talebearer speaks in whispers,” he said,
his thin form like a modern oracle,
his words wrapped in mystery and puzzle;
the message there for those who can find it
in the din of mindless conformity.

II

The far off cry of a lone coyote
seemed to shake him, to rattle his inner self;
“The whispers,” he said, “return on night winds,
they exist somewhere in the great darkness
then scatter to find a lost connection.”

He pulled a flask from a baggy pocket
of his earth-stained once-white linen trousers
tied tightly with rope around his slim waist;
he drank in a series of quick, small gulps
and extended the leather flask to me.

“Never drink Mescal by yourself,” he said.
“That way you have at least a gambler’s chance
that someone other than you eats the worm.”
He nodded sadly at my refusal
and tucked the thing back into his pocket.

“All the words, the messages and the signs
that never made a connection are here;
they chatter out there in the universe,
seeking to plant seeds in receptive spots.
There is no such thing as gone forever.”

Too perfect, I worried, this worn cliché:
The coyote, the vast, empty desert,
on the rock the battered, ancient seer
glowing yellow now in the rising moon
framing him, a bad painting on black velour.

“You can find here the talebearer’s whispers,”
he said hoisting again the leather flask.
“All the damned lies and the evil gossip,”
he laughed and drank deeply this time, croaked,
“but the truths, too, mixed up with all the rest.”

Found and Lost

I

Evening's soft fingers caress the hills
With the care of a tremulous lover
Savoring the flesh beneath his fingers;
Light flees the dusky fields in the valley
Leaving the shrunken remnants of summer
Desolate in November's somber air;
The pink horizon flirting in the west
Mocks my stiff back, my trembling muscles
Strained since eerie dawn by endless chores,
By cutting, stacking, and hauling...hauling.

It was not always so, not yesterday,
Not when the setting sun caught me rising
And preparing for a lush night to come
When faint sounds of the whispering city
Reached up to me from the squirming sidewalks
Where hordes hurried to and fro to nowhere,
Where whores and hustlers flocked to the faint scent
Of an unguarded dollar, of fresh meat
Newly arrived from innocent burgers
With dreams and too-easily-broken hearts.

But surely broken hearts bleed here as well:
Across the south field was a stillborn child,
And down the way a father with a knife;
One summer the soil turned to sand,
The sun blistered everything beneath it,
And Beth Cade put two shots in Tom Cade's chest;
No, there's not a world of difference here,
Maybe at most a difference in numbers,
Maybe a different way of walking,
But not the purity I imagined.

II

Her sparse words vanish with the setting sun
Leaving barren spaces in the kitchen
Where white china plates wait at the table;
Boots sit on the brown rug near the threshold,
Empty boots much like those sad symbols
Left to mourn the deaths of combat soldiers...
Her body still lithe; her silk hair mink-brown,
Her jeans and cotton shirt strangely stylish,
She lets no stars shine in her blue-gray eyes;
No words undo the evening's silence.

She said yes years ago, before she knew
This drafty house, these fields demanding blood,
These nights so still we hear our hearts beating;
She was a creature of white, laughing lights,
Of brilliant day-at-night cityscapes
That kept at bay cold questions in the dark;
In moments when passion held her captive
She seemed even in the grip of sex
To hurry from the blackness of closed eyes
Back to the well-lit world of artifice.

The thin sound of the radio drifts in
Like the barely audible sounds of ghosts
Revisiting the rooms of former lives;
Those alien sounds seem far, far away
From that world that is a memory now,
From a place no more than a fairytale;
The loss is far more to her than to me;
It has sucked something out of her being
And made that untouchable part of her
As fallow and sere as November leaves.

III

In the still, before dawn seems possible,
When even the frogs have ceased their complaints,
The quiet settles over me like dust
Raining down invisibly with my fears;
There is no getting away, no hiding
From the insistent envoys of the past
Who move through walls and minds with frightful ease;
There is no such thing as new, no such thing,
No such thing as outliving the voyeurs
Who saw us nervous and naked – and knew.

Not that there is so much to leave behind:
A war, perhaps, when I was still a boy,
Still a child who might blow with a fresh wind
In the direction of least resistance;
Failures, for sure, unfulfilled promises,
A tendency to leave rather than stay,
To seek new roles before the play was done,
And certainly a nagging suspicion
That duplicity and fraud were lurking
Within the script of an aging salesman.

She cannot count my sins so carelessly;
She is far less willing to credit fate,
To allow for myriad weaknesses
That plague me like slow, terminal cancer.
She hides sullenly beneath thick covers
Like a cornered badger, waiting, wary,
Willing to strike at whatever dogs her.
She has learned to be fretful, to expect
Bad rains and snows, bad news, a bad future
Guaranteed, in part, by the man I am.

IV

The apple trees are golden in the sun
Glimmering, shimmering lollipop shapes
Like rows of ceremonial soldiers
Who will never inhale the stink of war,
But the apples hanging here are rotting,
Rotting with the transient, shivering leaves
That will flutter away in the next wind;
Picking or leaving them is no matter,
Feed for men, feed for the hungry soil
Comes to the same if you consider it.

She will leave soon, in the next day or so
She will come to me when the sun is down,
When I am slumbering in my armchair
And feeling the emptiness of the room;
“I am going into town tomorrow,”
She will say softly, hoping I am deaf,
Hoping she will not have to repeat it;
She is going into town tomorrow,
My mind will say to me insistently,
She is going into town tomorrow.

A child from the city once said to me,
“The trees are scary; the trees are witches.”
And after that dark night in the orchard,
Neither tree nor witch was the same again;
Scraggly-limbed demons disrupted our rest
Making us start at unexpected sounds
Stalking through the house after midnight,
Savage sounds that are barely audible
Beneath her harsh, indifferent breathing
As she feigns sleep on her side of the bed.

V

The house is no more empty now than then,
No more sterile than in the chilly days
When her scuffing steps were the only sounds
On the ancient pine of the kitchen floor;
Strange how the peacefulness of this country
Could not nurture her, could not nourish her,
Could not keep her from withering away;
Her eyes, her firm breasts, her willowy legs
Lied to me daily but could not conceal
The shriveled inside immune to the sun.

She would stiffen when I reached out to her,
Involuntarily tensing herself
Until her body was no longer hers
And no more mine than a fallen tree trunk;
She once was so eager, so relentless,
Ready to make love in a restaurant
Or in the shade of an empty alley;
But the fertile soil diminished her;
The quiet filtered something raw in her,
Stifled her anticipation, her desire.

Perhaps it was I who took it away
With all that talk of soil and of seed,
With my hard hands calloused by gardening,
My impatient prodding, harsh and selfish;
Too late now to wonder, too late to try;
She is basking somewhere in city lights,
Healing her wounds with constant commotion;
The oaks and ash are chattering tonight
Freeing their brittle leaves to ride the wind
And find receptive spots for burial.

The Naturalist

I

Terrors tore through the darkness
assaulting her as she huddled
with eyes closed beneath the blanket
so thin the light of twinkling stars
sometimes penetrated the tattered threads.

Her mother's screams shot through the house
mixed with her father's grunting
like a beast unable to speak,
a brute enraged and rampaging,
a mad creature stalking terrified prey.

She crawled, snake-like, under the bed,
splinters from the ragged wooden floor
stabbing like needles into flesh,
puncturing tender hands and knees
until despite fear she had to cry out;

the beating then just as brutal
the terrible boots, the screaming
as she was dragged viciously
back across the splintered floorboards,
dragged, pummeled, battered into stillness.

All a blur even after years,
the remnants of a vile nightmare
nearly vanished upon waking,
but returning in bits and pieces
just enough to remind her of what was:

banging like a hammer on wood,
gruff, angry voices, outdoor smells,
two loud bangs not quite firecrackers,
a mountainous man over dad
as mom ran carrying her to the street.

II

Silence. Silence. Safe in silence,
a strong, self-created cocoon,
an impenetrable bubble,
a refuge no one understood,
a bubble small enough to be her world.

The teasing, constant bullying,
the loud noises other children
made gleefully behind her back
were momentary shooting stars
slicing through her safe skies like meteors.

Her only converse was with books
in the neglected library
so unused that emboldened mice
would stroll between the dusty stacks
and root beneath vacant reading tables.

On a thundering afternoon
billowing black clouds gathering
over rolling hills in the west
visible through soiled windows,
as she stared at the zig-zagging lightning

she spotted the ancient book.

Atop the shelf, standing alone,
ragged, multi-colored cover,
myriad variants of green,
a kaleidoscopic melding
exploring all possibilities and shades.

Hands gritty from layers of dust,
chin smudged by soiled fingers
she stared at the faded title,
a title in deep, green letters:
Green Mansions by William Henry Hudson.

III

In the distance green-black mountains
reaching like lost gods to the sky,
living things, a comfort to her,
a dream, her true destination,
refuge, her green mansions reality.

Lush, lush, luxuriant, she thought,
if only there were better words
to name the wonders she beheld,
soft images so magical
she *felt* more than saw the awesome jungle.

Fronds like delicate spider webs
tickled the damp skin of her cheeks;
humidity caressed her face;
the fecund scent of rampant life
stilled her, held her captive and bewitched.

She owned only what she carried,
enough for life, enough for death,
equal parts, an intricate whole,
all she would need at journey's end,
all she would need in her new mountain home.

Weeks, weeks, weeks warm and wonderful
when on a morning white with mist
she sensed just beyond her vision
a presence, a secret watcher,
a sentry, perhaps, sprung from earth itself;

her cocoon lifted with the mist,
her vision fixed on a creature,
on the enormous silverback,
on his gracious, accepting eyes,
on his aura whispering welcome home.

Rain Clouds

A weak sun ascends into stubborn clouds,
blushing red, touched by Byzantium's flames;
dawn breaks more foreboding than darkest night;
sibilant wind scuds over fallow fields
sweeping ephemeral clouds of black dust
to shroud ghosts of derelict equipment.

The phantom owl appeared again last night
backlit by an orange moon he waited,
waited for the scurrying night feeders,
the denizens of once-flourishing fields
gone now, migrated dust-bowl-refugees;
the hunter,too, will soon flee this carnage.

The two dogs, as dear to us as children,
still sprint wildly to the southeast pasture
where, before, they herded and protected
the meandering, malleable sheep,
sheep that stared patiently at dying fields
until they were sold to greener pastures.

So still. So still save for the ceaseless wind
stealthily sneaking past shuttered windows,
around and beneath slowly-rotting doors,
invading and dusting the empty rooms,
whispering lies like a base talebearer
sowing rank seeds of infidelities.

* * *

Daddy was a sullen, dangerous drunk;
my sister, Sally, turned fear into song
sung not so sweetly on the dark stage,
burying Daddy with her wistful words
whispered to suddenly silent rednecks
cuddling beers and grinding boots in sawdust.

“Things is changin’,” Daddy said, sin trickling
down stubbled chin from a dying fifth;
“Even Jazz Boulin pick up an’ move north,”
he spat snot and hate on the kitchen floor;
“Left whatever was lef’ in the shit hole ...”
A vandalized flatbed all that there was.

Fires, droughts, floods – the wrath of God!
My grandmother would have had it that way,
but Daddy could never see anything
beyond the package store on the corner
where beaten men begged for butts and nickels,
where God was enough to buy a bottle.

In darkness Daddy sometimes saw demons;
drunkenly he would mutter “Beelzebub,”
dredging up from collective memory
the unfulfilled Faustian agreements
that had sentenced him to his living hell
shared by his tormented wife and children.

* * *

After graduation and wastrel years,
after facing my own skulking demons,
I went home to prove my dead Daddy wrong,
to prove to white-collar mega-farmers
a great grandson of stubborn share-croppers
might still scratch self respect from freedman’s soil.

Wilting, thirsting, drying, ever more brown;
the last of green around the shrinking pond,
a necklace of memories mocking me,
conjuring Daddy’s I-told-you-so ghost
spitting drunkenly on the kitchen floor
while Sally and I tried to save spoiled meat.

Coyote families thin and scraggly,
desperate, creep tentatively like shades
to the edge of fields where sheep once grazed.

Nothing! Nothing more frightening than dogs
who maintained then gave up their long night watch
and now pace restlessly by the screen door.

I cringe to claim how hard we have tried,
to think I am one of those bitter men
still whining about being forgotten
as if sore, blistered hands and aching limbs
entitle you to ease or happiness,
or to be first in line to receive alms.

* * *

Back then I believed I could be Ahab,
believed that I was struck of the same steel -
raging mad and hostage to demon fate.
Gone. It is over; the dogs grow old;
they will not miss the cold nights in the field.
It is of no matter now – all is gone.

Rent flesh repairs itself, regenerates;
the fractured spirit, though, needs more mending.
So too the spirit of our sterile land –
the fertile fields and sustaining waters –
the spirit of the devastated farm
requires love and nurturing to mend.

Many profess that dollars can be grown,
that spirit is contrary to profit,
that we must take all that can be taken;
I wonder from where these false lessons come?
What dark philosophies or commandments
prove that matter is more real than spirit?

Today I close the door on Daddy's ghost;
the dogs wait impatiently on the porch.
Is there a way to say good-bye gently?
Is there any truth in new beginnings?
Clouds build over the western horizon,
friendly clouds that may hold within them rain.

Tales Told to Friends

Paul Bellerive

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