

MEDIATIONS ON THE LAKE

by

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A THESIS

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I.

Poem

I am trying to say *flesh* without pieces of it sticking in my mouth—

Immolation

On the slope of the hill,
the man, surrounded by ten thousand blossoms—

Or, perhaps

they were invaded by his rough shape,
brown frock spoiling the unbroken waves of violet.

He may have said a prayer;
they may have listened;

the god of exhalations may have sighed
across them all.

A kestrel flew clutching a vole,

and the field swallowed the man
as the sea swallows a man that swallows stones in a field.

Overventilate and See It Snuffed Out

They say little reasons for airing the fire—
It eats what we eat.

—David Welch

I have tried to limit my hunger, eat only what I need.

I've rid myself of meat and sweets,
starch being left up to the people who launder my clothes.

With green leafy stuff I starve. Still I know how
to ease an ache.

I know what weight in chard will staunch it.

* * *

Experts in flame retardant suits pretend
to know it,
but the end of a fire determines itself.

* * *

So my woman is not my woman
anymore.

When she had her fill,
she left.

She said,

You are too hungry for me.

I'd thought her as mine as my body, as subject
to the ways that I ate.

She buttoned her blouse and she went.

* * *

I opened the door to the icebox its full width,
the space in the opening making it
seem more vacant, so empty as to offset
my head.

* * *

I thought of a boy I was, bent over a picnic table,
pulling the glass back

until the sun made a tiny spot that would burn
off the foreleg
of a grasshopper I'd pinned:

first one foreleg, then
the next; then one rear
leg, and again; two legs
remained and then
I lost all the limbs
in a thin band of smoke.

I watched him fail to kick as I trained
the light in his eye.

I was promised that to tell
the story would help.

* * *

As a man I feel sick,
with the burning of acid in my throat,
just as in long emptinesses,
when the stomach begins to eat itself.

I say,
I am too hungry for me,
and,
*take me to the abattoir because I want
to see it die—*

No one comes, so instead
I stuff my mouth with twigs, some birch bark, the sticks
of matches already spent.

I need a light—
I have a faggot in my mouth.
Surely *this* will beckon those fires of hell.

Something that swallows me at last.

Three Ways to Bathe the Feet

—with the memory of eating fat cherries
by a stream that runs through hills
sitting on the shoulders of a desert,
our bare feet in the water
feeling not numb but squeezed
by cold, as if the current were a tourniquet
cinched with a dowel.
We feel more like living.

—with the alarm of feeling too deep a puddle
break the plane between itself and the foot,
penetrating the seams in the shoe leather
to fill a sock like a sponge—cotton expanding,
a loss of heat, a gain in weight.
We hate to feel it, dressed in memories
of seeing the first to have fallen in
clothed and shod, the first to have learned
how best to sink.

—with the dream of a footbath to coax
and sooth the complaints that run from ankle to toe;
with salts to drain infection, oils to soften the pads;
with warmth for aches to fade into drowsiness,
for the feet to forget the billions of steps,
and all their intimacies with hardness,
the nearly endless shifting of weights;
water to soak them, to make a bath
of days, and give up all residue of earth.

The Ocean

In the first order of absence
there drifts the scent of your scarf
and the near-weightlessness of your hair
as when you would shelve your cheek
on my shoulder.
Some kind of current teases
my nose and chest,
some bas-relief of what was.
Given the break—
the loss of heeled boots on pavement,
a common purple skirt,
two candles, conversations
carried to the detriment of morning,
a committed passenger, and wine to dowse
the blue laws—what use
is a simple inventory
incapable of replicating the body that is missing,
the mouth that does not speak,
the laughter—where is your laughter?

This sea is humorless. Classical.
The schools of fish keep on in their uniform way.
Caught in it, the mannequin man
floats away from his display mate,
emptied across the distance from whom he thought she was,
doubtful of the brine and the sea god
in all his foamy efficacy.

Apotheosis

She, the goddess of minor whims,
was not ready for him to die.

She filled a wicker bowl
with jicama root and juniper,

burned it, sifted the ashes
over the open ground,

sang his name and waited,
so the earth would give him up again.

No one knows if the violets wilted in shame,
or whether the breezes agreed,

but a kestrel fell, its talons unloaded,
and the ground gave back the man to the air—

Of all stars, his formed the smallest constellation,
a weak salve to stave off the singeing of her love.

Drylands

“Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their
minds wake in the day to find that all was vanity...”
—T.E. Lawrence

No dust flower must bloom
in that wide kingdom
to coax me out to meet
you alongside the alkali edge

where flat rocks bear crude graff
hearts, where the air draws off
all water, and nose bleeds
keep it feeling like hardship;

You could have been a mission,
we could have anointed the desert
with the spilling of votives
over its hardened flats,

but the wavering horizon shows
the movements of other riders.

Woodsmoke

The rise is almost imperceptible as you walk from the center square deeper into the valley which cradles the wood and plaster town and its flat roofs and painted churches. You cannot feel it or see it but the ground does rise and the two ridges that flank the town draw ever closer, until the ridges seem two sides of the same wall, and the many roads of the town merge behind you into just one, lined with low houses. Then there are no houses, only trees sloping up away from you and a narrow stream that cuts into the earth alongside the road and the cold, yes, the cold air that tells you, walking, that you have risen. There are shadows cast by the mountains over the track, and the air rolls down from the peaks to stream over your shoulders, and you remember the thinness of your jacket for autumn in a place like this. When you pass a small terrace bar occupied by a few pensioners drinking from brown bottles of beer, they will only pause a moment to glance at you. The asphalt will stop and the road will turn to hard packed dirt on which your feet leave barely a print; this is how you will know that you have almost reached the cliffs they call rocks, and the sources of the springs coming straight from the rock faces, and the squat cabins you can't see but can smell warming themselves and the people who rest within them with wood stoves—those people you will not meet for the exchange of pleasantries, those you may pass while you look for the source of a spring, while they begin to make their ways into town for some eggs, some sugar, some twine.

II.

Five Superimpositions

i. Valjevo 1915

Sometime in August,
the rain we needed,
the binge,
pummeled the roofs,
pooled in the roads,
and all the sentries perked up,
admiring valley walls fleeced
in what-would-be verdure,
tasting the plums
sure to thrive
in the pledge of some
tomorrow afternoon harvest,
apple carts and all,
bursting off the horizons
of the hilltops in estrus—
until then barren
and sown with the strange
seed of men on watch,
guarding against typhus
and an army that may
or may not come back.

The rain we needed came
when we didn't need it,
couldn't use it—
when the army
was left to seed,
pairing farm women
with the wrong soldiers,
each man with an ox
and a borrowed ploughshare,
while in the distance white cities
stained with urine and vomit
seemed eager for as much lye
as the ground could take,
and we confused precautions
with cowardice—
without a decorative sword
no man is an officer.

The rain we'd needed
fed whole valleys of mud,
fields swollen with bracken,
and the feeling of weight
in the air and the chest—
so much swimming done
in crossing the square,
in bargaining for an egg,
in marching down roads,
the routes to kingdoms
unburdened by such freedoms
as only the dead know and bring—
cisterns bulging with brown water.

ii. Robert S. McNamara 1965

Strange. To sit and wait, here,
on a low wall, to look across the lawn
and describe with a grid
what lives, what remains of the dead—

The District's cruel beauty defies
in funereal stone. Proportions
survive, magnetic tape survives,
but something in knowing has unwound.

While we skated here I ran through
data, costs, and gashed at the ice;
all memorials are as temporary
as my figures smoothed with water.

If I were to say that I loved you then,
who would build up a wall for the others?

iii. Romanian Folk Dance No. 3: Pe loc (1915)

To keep time
I've set a drip on the faucet,
just something to measure the intervals
between meals
in ones and twos
and to stop these radiators
from drying me out.
The sounds of the drops
striking the sink basin
collect in the air—
rain on Victoriei
that first night we went dancing.
I drank too much and you scolded me
for not saving you from the boy
who danced with you.
I'll turn on the television now.
Despite cop shows
I don't think it's possible
to study a single person
in a single room—
solitary motivations tell us little.
A crowd says more.
Show me an irregular line of shoulders
hurrying through the rain
into a cellar full
of disco lights and neon drinks
and I can tell you something about people.

Call it ethnography
if you must,
but collect those melodies
and the passage of hands
from your hips to your ass,
and those grazings of lips.
Make a dog-eared catalogue
of the bulky excitements
of your partners.
Let them rove.
Maybe then you'll know
something about want and need.
I'll be busy trying to figure out how
to get through all this honey
you bought and left—
the scent of linden blossoms
carries me too close
to the bees and their bee-work
and I can only eat so much
yoghurt, or drink so much tea,
this song too short
for the time I wait.

iv. L'Avventura (1960)

I search this rock as if it had pockets,
looking for crevices and the absence
that fills them up—it's said a city lies
buried beneath. A vase, a relic, surfaces
as some proof of what hides below
obdurate lava, only to drop and shatter
when mishandled. Everything here complains
of disappearances—everyone sets to scour
the softer layers from the island's face.
Colorless skies and funnel clouds warn
all away, but we still search without talking.
I bore slow—like barnacles on a whelk.

Search parties struggle to remember,
while the land wraps itself around them.
I see the island in my sleep, I hear its grinding,
feel its thirst despite the waves. *Lisca Bianca*
means White Bone. And it's barren as the sun
as I cross from one shore to another, calling
names, calling out both yours and others.
Thirty minutes pass or a day—it doesn't matter.
I used to remember faces like pocks burned
into my skin. Now you look less a face
in memory with every second, more
a grey smear against a grey shoreline.

Maybe this is all we have—a windy pantomime,
black & white swimsuits, seashells, memory games.
Perhaps there was a boat. Perhaps it took you away.

v. Trogir 1242

The Tatars sacked to Dalmatia,
thickened the coast with an army,
settled on their heels along the beach,
while they sent a single native
to herald the news of their sea of blades
across the bridge to the island town
that hid King Belá's court—
the town's sentries gave no answer.

When in the morning the invaders had vanished
and left their threats to echo over the channel
I searched the beach for some forgotten flint,
a spearhead, horsehair that smelled
of a fragrant smoke—

On the rocks
instead I found the herald, dead, bent
over himself like a pheasant wing
and clutching papers scrawled
with figures I could not understand.

III.

Seasonal Dress

In the West they are shooting
wolves again, threading them
to the ground with bullets,
then picking them up again,
admiring them for their coats.

It is Fashion Week in New York again,
spring coming six months early
under runway tents where loose hems
of dresses just brush the steps again
and the models rush to fit.

Manhattan photographers shoot.
Montana hunters shoot. Little
escapes the shots, and everyone is excited
for their new collections.

Collecting water, a jar on a hill in the rain becomes a cistern.
Collecting coins through the day, a pocket becomes a bank.
The earth collects the dead, and so becomes a grave,
and so everyone is excited for how quickly it ends.
The jeers turn shrill. Arousal is never enough.

The Limits of Medicine

for David Welch

There are blocks
in New York (and I mean
the boroughs) where
initiation rituals break
on the faces
of those meek who inherit
the rent:

but I pass
church doors without
knowing how to light
a devotion;
if one tribe begat
another tribe
which begat me:

doesn't the Sun
on the East side
of Prospect Park
preside the same
as on the West?
Gods doze
the same, and still:

they busted that boy
from his ear to his jaw,
his cheek split
like a plum skin,
beaten in the service
of acclimating another
body to hood life:

so the deacons prayed—
for the broken, also
for the one who swung
the wooden bat
and left all grace streaming
out in blood
to stain the sidewalk:

sixteen months later,
I found myself eating curry
and reconstructing a face
with the surgeons
over dinner conversation.
Had our chicken gristle
been blessed?

And how *did* they puzzle
together four hundred
bone fragments
to rebuild his cheek?
God knows.
If only I could believe
in anything fixed.

A Jew, a Catholic,
and a Lutheran walk
into a bar,
get to arguing over who feels
the most guilt—
they leave drunk,
unchanged.

Being a Pivot

I have been circling
around who we were in that moment
when your face seemed formed of soot,
when my hands knew only how to clench
and unclench, when our tongues failed
to flex for even a syllable of a lie,
and you waited for me to send you away.

I have been circling—
not like a wolf, describing the limits
of his appetite in arcs around a hind;
not like a buzzard, waiting in broad wheels
for the coming end—I have been circling
the couple we were, without any hunger
in the turns.

It helps to picture a boy compelled
by fear and threats to join the local gang.
When outsiders come to the neighborhood,
he joins the pack that corrals them,
his face cast in Technicolor and nausea.
That the victims remind him of himself,
with watery eyes and soft, malleable lips,
only serves to sear his anger.

I do not pick up this rock, he thinks.
I am not the one to draw blood. He circles
them, for they are the weak ones,
and they have brought him on themselves.

Photos of Cherry Blossoms

when they grew tired
of carving the ground into plots
and stuffing the earth
with bodies
contorted around their youth

the great men all said together
enough
and signaled the lowering
of all those guns

they created a fund
and with it built radiant new oubliettes
to grant the generals as lifelong pensions
out of gratitude for haranguing
the men before every skirmish
and every grand assault

they issued size-medium wooden chests
to every remaining citizen
with orders to box up any and all
residue of hate
for storage and safekeeping

so long as there were no sweeping fires
or confusion over borders or the names of battles
they sat down at all manner of desks
to write their memoirs on the terrible costs
to commemorate the fertile dirt of cemeteries

imagine a film canister full of knights that are clumsy with their swords
and which depend on miracles of entropy to deliver them from disembowelment
or a film where the soldiers can hardly shoot a mountain
and not in the service of a tale about the loss of innocence
where they gradually become canny killers without affect
but instead where they end as mismatched with their rifles as they began
without photos of cherry blossoms to fantasize over as their feet start rotting
and never recognizing their squad mates dancing in the bullet spray

when I was young we would play “guns”
and I was the best of us all
second only to my best friend
at saying *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch!*
I gotchya! Yer dead!

Birdsong

My thought was interrupted by the sound
of a falcon – exploding through the gold leaves

of a tree just past peak –
as it caught the finch that shrieked in its talons.

Like a yarn, or a knotted line at clever hands,
or the insides of that small bird,

what I thought unraveled there
and gold leaves fell over it.

The difference between the finch and myself
is that if I were taken now, shrieking,

I will have never known anything of flight,
being so stuck on my late night dances.

If there were less of me every moment?
Like a gourd left in the open field?

Hektor Pawns His Helmet

By the gauge of the brass
it should be worth at least escape from death,
but the clerk doesn't have that to offer.

The business is mostly in gold—
chains, watches, tight stacks of coins,
dull beneath the helmet on the counter.
Not much traffic here in replicas,
the clerk says,

and they shake on it.

The clerk rests the helmet on a stand in the back
next to the breast plate of a former angel.

The breaker of horses takes twenty dollars
and stops in front of a wall of acoustic guitars.

He can't afford to take up music,
but he can stare at the sound holes
and imagine a song without grief—
he needs milk and barley,
something to make an offering.

The Crocus Thief

In October I watched you
steal a crocus—
setting the sun behind
his lavender arms
and ivory waist,
you let him bathe in light
while a black camera bloomed in your hand—
a chorus of dead leaves
dried themselves around his bed,
and you snapped him out of time—

But happy thief, have you been back
to the spot,
to see him where his purple has paled,
his head hangs slack,
and his stamen kink in on themselves?
You froze him
at the climax of his joy,
and while you lie with his likeness
all that has died back—

In its place, beneath the earth,
chills a corm
waiting out the snow
to rouse his shoot again,
and give him reason to extend himself
in the light of early mornings
and to suck the ground—

But this winter will be long—
the woodpeckers share trees,
the onionskins are thick,
halos spring round every moon,
and I cut open a persimmon
only to find seeds shaped like knives—
the wind will carve us
and ice will pierce us through—

In these dry months
I'll wonder, what have you stolen?
A frozen image
won't satisfy my desire
for the thing in mind,
portrayed light
cannot thaw the ground,
and you've even sacked me
as your stooge—

Should I wait for spring
to rut again?
Or will you yet return
what was never yours?

Where We Relied Too Much On Optics

Lens turned on lens,
I took a photo of the photographer
but failed to fulfill our hope
of recursion—in the print, my weak outline
described in the circle of her glass only fell into the dark
stuff of emulsion, my figure indefinite
where a perfect image would have shown
her reflected in my lens, then me
again, and her again, and again so—
but we made no *mise*
en abyme, just a portrait of a woman
clutching her camera to her eye
so that it obscures her features
and, reproduced just once, confuses
what might have been a smile.

IV.

If I See You

lashed over your invisible stockade,
body figured or disfigured into the shape of an *n*,
the letter of denial that leans its weight
upon your back as you lay down
one of your bantam crutches and rest on the other
to raise up the cup of your palm;

buckled in the bowl of the council square,
inspiring the constellations of lovers
to bend their paths around you, like light
around a black hole, like matching poles
of magnets, the hunger school children run from
as they race to feed the pigeons;

brushed as by a broom, your headscarf
a pennant waving to the meters of the songs
conducted by the policeman's baton and boot;

wind-swept, a water-swept tatter,
caught in the storm drain grate like a paper
party hat dropped and waiting to be washed away:

you may hold out your hand, but I want to climb
inside your mouth and lie beneath your tongue,
dissolving in the spittle between words
I cannot understand, shielded from eyes I can.

At the dig site we dig
with brushes, taking off one layer
of dust at a time, one layer
of clay, over days, months,
to unveil a dropped jaw, a spread rib,
vertebrae frozen in a wave.

When the sky is overcast
I cannot work, not with a brush,
not with the snakes, and without sun
I cannot write. The bones
stay in their shallow pit, waiting,
still saying nothing of why.

Instead of work I want
a small coffee outside, by the stream,
and talk of the novelty of summer
nights spent walking through empty
city plazas, or days dulled
with rain over fish market stalls.

I want a companion to smoke her skinny cigarettes and sigh
in the heat for the plainness of her cup and the scarcity of ice.

This way it grows easy to ignore
the dig, the dirt, and the open mouth
of the specimen, where he rests,
waiting on discovery, like a witness,
to tell how he fell there,
to be uncovered by bristle-strokes.

Yet I worry away

the point of my pencil
on the logbook I keep, trying
to draw an abstract form of the difference
between whether this ancient
felt the bite of a spear or a snake,

since both wounds lead us

to the same plot of earth, fertile
with the soft stuff of what we wish
to reveal, of this man who knew everything
about dyeing
flax with the red pulp of crushed berries.

The light wastes and yet I am supposed to want to know all
that can be known about these bones.

* * *

Last night our local man set a fire

and drew out snake meat for smoking;
stretched over wood frames to dry,
the skins caught the light
like glass, not scales
dyed in patterns of the underbrush.

He stoked his stories

with our fear, telling what
becomes of the leg with the bite
left open, what becomes of the heart
while the venom runs
riot through the veins. That night,

the whole camp might have dreamt their deaths by septicemia,
withered limbs reaching back in
to find their lost lives;
I saw only agates in the detritus,
quick moves in shades of brown.

I dreamt I gripped my leg and looked up at an open sky,
waiting for a shroud to fall, one layer at a time.

I woke early, chewed coca leaves by a stand of avocado tress,
and wondered about the man I had found.

In the Parlance of Our Times

“I do both—I do murals and I bomb.” – cope2

Black trees grow on a bus,
leafless, sprouting from the roof,
black hands imploring the sky.

A half-built wall dripping names—

and in the piece tagged beneath the trestle:
a blue-robed genie palms the earth,
three cans of enamel play dead.

(and?)

I killed the house with a cleaver,
dividing the hearts in two—

but no,
make no sense.
Fragments of ceramic tile separate.
Pieces of brick powder
and waft away.
So too will names.

Just as if a shadow was simply an absence—
you arrived too late to the neighborhood and without meaning,
the streets already bedazzled with paint.

The Lake

In the nothing nothing
comes from, a hand
does not mark a map
with a felt tip,
a mocking bird lilts
no misdirection,
no walls hold

back against nothing—
not shy or partial to us,
whole,
a dark lake
you would sail
across were it
not boundless.

If you must,
make something
of nothing—
with your finger
chart its dominions
on the surface
of the lake.

Swimmers bare
and bear themselves,
comb the water,
together,
in search of plain
ways of being
at a margin.

Weak Stride, Heavy Turnover

When I used to run,
I had a coach I was sure
who'd learned it from wolves;
he loped, told dirty jokes,
taught us to count telephone poles
between every breath.

Once he said of a man
you can tell he wipes
till the paper comes clean
and then I knew something
new about myself.

We'd run through the old
county fairgrounds in the offseason—
past the Indian trading post, the 4H barns,
the gun show pavilion—

and I'd count the booths
where they'd airbrush anything
on a t-shirt for \$25:

the shirts never fit, they stretched
too easily in the wash,
but they'd come blazoned with eagles,
bobcats, wolves beneath full moons—

Wait—

Somewhere someone is dreaming
of making a space walk, leaving
her helmet behind, finding too late
that she lacks something to breathe.

Maybe today I'll run the abandoned
clay track by the tennis club, scuff up
that surface of terracotta Crayola crumbs.

I'll tell myself one of the old jokes,
the one about the alien who confuses a gas pump
for a well-endowed native. I know
the punch line, but I'll still be gasping for air.

*From here, from out here, the Earth looks clean
as Christmas, and from here, I can see a great wall.*

The Prelude After

for T. Hsu

When your hair has grown back,
when you have eaten all the ice,
when you have wept for three,
when you've slept,
when you have quit idling with razors,
when your hand has fought the temptation
 to set fire to the house,
when you have made your altar in every room,
when you have let the trash pile and lean,
and when you have given up
 on the dullness of stone fruit—

Walk out with the door still yawning open,
take any black car to any airport,
park anywhere and ignore anyone who would stop you
 from boarding any plane to Italy—
sleep aboard or hum requiem.

But when you arrive, do nothing
other than find the old quarter of town,
 whatever town,
sit in the piazza, and wait for dusk.
Death remains death and the people will not care
but they will soon walk for you.

La Passeggiata

for T. Hsu

Watch them—
new loves and new shoes displayed
in the kind light of dusk that bends
over Il Duomo di Milano
and makes everyone a little more beautiful,
a little more rakish—
They walk slowly, sweetly, as if
the light will last,
as if the gelati will last,
as if their loves will lengthen twilight
without any threat of nightfall—

Look at this boy almost dangling
from his parents' hands,
how he tries to balance his dessert,
his feet, and his need
to keep his mother and father close—
Near as he comes to falling
they are poised to catch him—

He thinks nothing of their hands,
thinks nothing of the evenings
when he will do the catching—
He cannot think at all
of when he will make la passeggiata
with someone he does not yet know,
but will burn to be seen with
in the weak light—

Look—
these measured steps are the same
as taken by other fathers,
different mothers,
and the stones push back
against their new soles just the same
as they have always pushed,
without irony or disdain,
ready to accept fallen gelati,
or tears, or fallen children still unaware
of the costs of easy passage—

NOTES

Source texts for “Five Superimpositions” include: i. Jonathan Reed, *The War in Eastern Europe*; ii. Errol Morris, *The Fog of War*; iii. Béla Bartók, *Romanian Folk Dances* (Sz. 56, BB 68); iv. Michaelangelo Antonioni, *L'Avventura*; v. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

“The Prelude After” includes a line from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem, “Mr. Cogito and the Imagination.”