

Skin Music

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Co-winner of the 2014 Michael Waters Poetry Prize



Published by the University of Southern Indiana
Evansville, Indiana

Give me love or electrocution...lots

–Chris Whitley, “Altitude”

ICE: PRELUDES TO A MEMORY OF HEAVEN

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls...

Matthew 13:45

In the dream, bitter cold. Two men
sawing

at ice
until large chunks can be lifted,

carried to a flatbed truck, laid on straw.

Again
and again down the incline,

their breath white against the snow.

Then up again,
building

a kind of house.

It takes hours to do this. Their hands are bare.
Snow not deep,

but slick,
so they step carefully.

The dream-shot has me as bird or tree,
so I cannot see

the meat of their faces,

but they seem —
since this is my waking reference —

to be penniless.
The lake is a kingdom and so they harvest,

until the bed is full
and

they climb in,
drive away.

†

Second dream — same lake —

different men.

There's a pickup backed to the ice,
and they are tugging,

positioning the weight of an animal
at the lip

of the gate
until they can haul it

twenty feet out.

It hangs between them like something drowned,
or sleeping.

And then they drop it —

a doe hunted down or roadkill,
the dream won't say.

And then they are
gone.

The body steams a little in the cold.

The men park on a hill
overlooking the surface,

watch eagles
one by one

unlock themselves from the hammered sky,
flutter

in,
tear and feed.

†

I know the structure cannot hold

but as long as it does
it is sheened.

The straw soaked through—
a drowned man's hair.

The impossible gem melting down—

striations
that for awhile resemble knives,

bleeding pearls.

As for the deer, it is scraped
to bone.

Emptiness where the eyes were set.

Ribs still holding
their curve.

Skeleton — target of fur and blood
gone feathery at the edges,

until it is dragged away
in pieces,

or drops,
unhinged,

through water returned to water.

MY BUCEPHALUS,

my cloud shape, my incidental, somewhere
there is a child
standing in dirt,

shitting its ankles, but you are
running
again in that Canadian field, tight

along the fence rail,
so that your speed
matches mine

and it is not the speed of an old woman
swatting
flies from an open

cut, or the move (since I am well-fed)
from wound
to blossom

to wound and I am birthed again
in sunlight,
freed from my shadow.

Your pinto high-step whispers,
your proud
pounding

for no good reason. The bold tower
of losses
that on earth

conveys our misery just one more silo
of grain
in an Ontario field.

And still you run. Over the fence rail,
 around the curve,
 and back

again where you bed down
 and whinny,
 roll

on your back. I have seen you there,
 pointing
 belly at sky,

all that shining muscular roundness.
 I have seen
 the crisp,

rudimentary hooves.
 Where was I
 going that was so important

that I could not stop
 and place a hand
 on your broad,

flat skull, consider your huge
 eyes—
 not all broken glass,

pieces of cloud, but
 jeweled, encompassed,
 as if packed with stone.

Somewhere a man imagines
 his wife's
 cancer as small islands forever

leaving her body. While elsewhere
 bullets
 fragment, go

butt-headed, twin-pronged,
 rip
flesh. And still you run, so far

to the edge of the field,
 it is memory,
horizon,

and I am walking to the fence,
 my body
the consistency

of balsa and myth,
 the angle of my leaning
like a lure

to heaven. I wonder: When I finally
 see
the god face, will it be you, a horse?

EVERY CORAL BRANCH SUPPORTS THE MOON

(answer to a Zen koan / for my mother)

There was a river in her head that kept flowing
and so she

sang
at a piano built

from air,

hands
frail and spotted with match heads.

Strange singer she was,

mask
forcing pressure

into a failing heart
so the external lung that kept pumping

was nearly opera

in the room, grand, scaled—
La Scala—

and the chambers of her dying

its box
and voice.

But no sound came. Plank
on plank

she kept building,

reaching out,
leaning,

bridging some lumber in her head
with deeper wood.
I thought fear
would take her
like some Jesus bucket
tearing
at the bottom of a well
when the preacher
gripped her skull
and uttered last harsh words,
but it was she
who came to drink,
not some savior
in the shape
of a man's palm.
And so I too sucked breath
in hospital light,
brought her dripping
from the sea.
Gave her a *cup of winter*,
language
having clotted in a sheath of thought—
a particle
of ice—
it was all she could whisper,

dying,
to get a glass of cooling tea...

Reader,
it was morphine.

I let them wand her heart

to disconnect it,
and then we pumped the slurry in.

Nobody winced

because it was beautiful and smooth,
a fat,

controllable lightning,
cured

with honey.

How it serenely sleeved the wires of her brain,
the nerves,

the cheekbones I saw yellowed

with jaundice,
that Taj Mahal of heresy and belief

we call the self
come crashing down,

zone

by zone, reduced, relaxed,
surrendered

to one thin hand caressing a cold dead leg.

FRAGMENT: WINTER JOURNAL

...then seizure again, that
blue clot, level

of the larynx,
can't breathe, can't

speak, don't want to,
heron long gone

(where?), no longer
perfecting its one

slant move: *stillness*
stabbing at shadow,

its throat (no cry)
muscle of fin

and writhing, all
I dream

is blue weather,
blue snow

on a blue roof,
Rilke's zombie angels

fixed in this world
for now, sharp,

angular ice,
halfway down the river

the trees are dirty with them,
as bent as

fishhooks, sundown:
last red wash of emptiness,

last seizure, ice cracking,
then seizure again...

MINOTAUR

The first time I ever reeled from my family's stink I was in the basement of the Paramount Theater, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, taking a piss. My uncle, nineteen,

retarded—
that's what we called it then—was next
to me.

We had just seen a John Wayne film and were heading home.
I was working hard, nine years old, to drill the urinal but could only manage a pale yellow rope

that splayed
and went feathery
at the end.

Uncle, for his part, was all bull.
Something powerful and amber coming out of the pizzle he held with both hands.
Eyes glazed, mind elsewhere. At peace with it—

reek of armpit and
groin
like the air

around a farm.

I could smell in it the drench of decaying skin cell, money, failure, honeyed ear wax, the genetic rubs that contained my mother (but not my father).

And so I quailed, zippered up:

boy child, idiot
uncle. Minotaur,
blue baby...

Why



did they give him up?

Ward of the state at three or four, I can't recall, he took his ruined crown into the world, bone that would not unstitch, and howled himself to sleep.

Did not die at age six, as he was promised.

But lashed out. Survived.

Learned to steal.

I visited him once in that orphan bedlam. I was thirteen and could barely make him out from all the other smells,

the long rooms, high windows,
shades
pulled so tight

they smacked like canvas.

And then I caught that burning Jesus scent, devil in the whiskers of bristled scalp.

Bad breath hovering beneath coagulant cream.

He grinned hard and hugged me as if I were a friend, and we two perfect creatures in a world of flashy men, gorgeous women, and this moment, the touch

that would tag me his,
though I was already his



(how could I know that then?): my own stink coming back in rusted jackknife and cut-up bird, crawdad, creek mud,

wedge of sneaker hanging
over
the culvert

I sometimes crawled through the length of a childhood, the tunnel not holding,

until I re-entered this shining
world
all snot

and dripping phlegm, a scabbed child turning

†

blue: "hue of illness and nobility, the rarest color in nature."

Why did they give him up?

(it's easy now—
Nazis, Pearl
Harbor, there was
metal to save,
sugar
to ration, he
was the fourth child/
flesh issued
damaged
from the mother's
genius womb):

†

cell for cell our own body...

Now age seventy, they have him tethered down, they think he's
crazy, they have the feeding tube sutured in.

His eyes, my mother's eyes, flash
white
above palsied

vocal chords.

He blinks to remember: the ten or so cars we owned, where we
lived, who was oldest, who kept him in chocolate, how his pa died and his

ma went crazy, half her head shaved off because she fell down the stairs,
then forgot everything, even his name.

And those mean dogs that bit us
and

ran away.

Miami Drive, 2019 D Avenue.

The house on Bonita...man-child stumbling in the labyrinths of
our play.

That ring of silence I held my breath in when I was a kid so I
could be as dumb as him

just one more useless dodge
to
what they always

told me:

how when I was born they put
my
crooked body in his open arms

and he cooed my name.