

Some Flags (Who Are We by Ourselves)

The closer we got to the water the less anxious we found ourselves. The farther we got from the mob scene the more caked on blood felt or seemed. I want to make something of pain here not strictly confessional but about circulation in general and of an innocent nature. When we were boys going barefoot around Rehoboth my brother and I experienced what we called “hot face moments.” Remembering against our will a past humiliation, and with the heat of blood rising, one of us would say to the other, “It’s happening again” and as if naming it could cool us down from such sudden fire, share his memory.

ourselves. Together. Who beats whom in the span of talk times of parceled hours. What is coy or pointed about beating ceremoniously or beating wings of levity. Is anyone else’s dream allowed or only this one repeatedly. Can we double dip if conversations running over beg crosstalk anyway. Is it okay not to make eye contact if we promise not to make a habit of it. Can we go around the room one time to say for beginners’ sake what walls symbolize with lucid dreamers flying to unseen quarters. May men’s numbers like mounting fury fill blue fields of vision with budding branches instead of infamous cudgels with buds of bitter spikes. May we see together a flock of wild geese flying over as a self-actualizing incursion into a hazy blue color. Come on now. Who the fuck features in his dream journal a wall dipping in and out of view with the rolling topography of a yellow landscape if it distracts from all we’ve come to see, the first star of night, sand hills, a blue-gray sea shining in the distance.¹

A recurring dream sends the dreamer running who once saw himself from afar sitting on a low stone wall laid out in disrepair along the perimeter of an old military graveyard. A man leaps the wall where the dreamer sits and singly and in pairs and threes do more men follow with cudgels raised to beat the crap out of the first man their quarry. To better understand themselves, such men dramatize the questions that haunt the codependent: Who speaks from the form of a circle. Who pictures what’s asked of them rhetorically. Who are we by

¹ Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), who said flags embody history, not sentiment, would admire this flag, like a flag of the highest order, for its absence of question marks.

Mother Courage

Rain stops and Mom's boyfriend Carl goes out the door into the night to stomp through puddles and not act like a grownup.

A barrage starts up one hazy morning
with rat-tat-tats & single shots fired
& breathless men looking out
through slits in what cover they've managed.
'Tracers focus the mind, what mind wanders
under shrapnel's apocalyptic hailing.

It has been dark for two hours when the rain starts again and stops and starts. Mom goes out under cover of an overlarge umbrella to find Carl, her Maglite pushing what could be a stable, ever-expanding cone of light through a downpour if its source were mounted on the bumper of slow transport and not sweeping circles across street signs, sides of houses, treetops, slick roads, clouds, sudden movements, her own voice calling.

I wrote to show sieges on hospitals as despicable acts of groupthink. Men find themselves in the throes of renal failure without knowing what happened, when Ms. Haberfield insists, "Please no more war scenes. If you must write about an experience outside your own, write about your parents' courtship. When your access to facts runs dry, write how running dry feels to you. Avoid guns and bombing campaigns altogether. The limitations of your knowledge are your subject for the time being."

It was light out when the rain stopped. Mom rolled in sopping wet with Carl to eat eggs over-peppered and English muffins and drink coffee. Carl's and Mom's corrupt silence sometimes. War correspondence is expensive, no one reads it. "Will you do couples' counseling with me?" "If our conflict is par for the course of love, can you say you love me now?"

We pack men's wounds for rescuers,
lug men out on stretchers
doubling as operating tables.
Despite our amputees,
we don't judge anyone
pushing their way to the front
as sirens wail & wind
from whirring propellers
mashes hair to heads,
scant vegetation to gray earth.

It's the first day of the Tet Offensive, the week I am born. My mother and not my father is decorated for explaining casualties under enemy fire. One makes him her and her him and him her again in the memory of someone not so easy to forget as hard to remember. A medal, solid bronze, sits on a mantel in a little yellow ranch house on Doria Avenue in Lomita.

Lignum In Luce

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. —Psalm 137.2

The long is not excessive or the short deficient. The duck's neck may be short but lengthening it would give it pain hard to imagine. The swan's neck may be long but cutting it short would grieve it beyond cutters' comprehension. —The Zhuangzi²

Lignum means wood in Latin though I remember my one classical brother calling it the movement of natural light across the surface of any piece of wood, living, raw, finished, over the course of a day spent making a word bank, a lexicon for what you see there, what happens to your senses.

*Light in trees,
on handles*

Crows roost on roofs of processing plants in plain view of orchards until the day nonchalant proprietors pause to fire propane cannons at them. Crows reassemble on a highway overpass at dusk to share body warmth and compare notes on pops and booms. Wood of walnut trees turns in the hands of some chefs in San Francisco as knife handles with blades of Damascus steel.

*Light
on
posts*

Nowhere on the farm are skulls set upon sticks, as I was told some would be, but remain in use in the heads of sentient beings coexisting—skunk, mink, tule elk, crow.... The person who told me to expect skulls on sticks slurs his speech, which may explain our misunderstanding. This gives me an idea. A history of slurred speech is one worth telling.

*Light
on shreds
of bark*

Does the blue wheelbarrow go unused anymore or is it in constant use by its owners who are workaholics? We admire their work horses—whose wheelbarrow remains wedged in a mulch mountain—but can't pat their noses, one after another in a long line of stoics, without their bolting.

Mood stable like horses happy
with home lives are stabled
who don't want to run wild no more
but wear their beautiful manes
on gray days, and on bright ones
canter in the circle of the setting sun.

*Light
on
horns*

Concerning cows, I say to my nephew once and for all, their horns are neither made of wood nor are they spirit receptors curling out of their heads first to un-trammel gazes and next to sharpen them. Such occult thinking, Cow Dreaming, distorts public perception of animal husbandry,

² Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BCE), Chinese Taoist philosopher, was a contemporary of Aristotle and Mencius, and came of age during the lifetime of Plato.

cows use horns as sense organs horns give
cows sense of surroundings and metabolism
cows without horns can't feel anything
hornless cow doesn't know who cow is as
entity ranch hands take horns off cows so
cows won't notice cows in close proximity
cows with horns require wide berth enter
personal space of cow with horns and see
how cow likes it cow, strong-willed being

*Moonlit
branches*

In the roost, the crowd makes the place, not the place, where crow sleep. They lock claws to perches by way of a trick tendon so as not to awaken midfall, then lean on wing, feathered breast, letting half the brain go dormant while the other half watches, and they switch places at midnight like one Bernardo saying "Who's there?" to one Francisco speaking from the dark, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." Sometimes two hemispheres sink as one misshapen orb into nonexistence for a while.

the beauty of crows perched on lines,
their bodies themselves
and not our words for them

the beauty of the men,
their bodies

Where to itch an itch in an out-of-the-way place, high on the back and off to the side a little, needs a lover's hand. Hard beak. Crows give freely of their napes in acts of preening reminiscent of our adoration. I say to my wife awake beside me, "The rain is louder on rooftops than on leaves, can you hear it?" "You're hearing things," she says, and we look. Birds perched in darkness on the branches outside our window recall rules for lexicon-making from wood: try not to epitomize life as childhood trauma. Psychotherapy depoliticizes. Analysands not getting stuck in the past make for good citizens.

*Light rolling
over rooftops*

About the sound of rain differentiated by surfaces, she says, "You're imagining it." I push the window open to silence, chill air, a noctilucent cloud beside a gibbous moon waxing. We binge-watch *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* until morning time and shower together. The street cleaners circling as rain falls on an old Victorian, with its universal color scheme, blue, green, pink, yellow, and its gabled roof topped with a finial for a lightning rod. A wood lexicon moves to the sounds of rain on leaves of maidenhair, leaves of southern magnolia, leaves of ornamental cherry, leaves of windmill palm (with its inflorescence up top and its dying fronds hung like ancient hair), leaves of mayten reminiscent of the weeping willow of my youth, unclimbable, leaves of New Zealand Christmas tree, leaves of Brazilian pepper, leaves of cherry plum, leaves of American sweet gum...

The weeping willow gives me
my first run-in with a stinkbug
and my first broken arm
when trying to wiggle out of it
I fall through the branches.

*Light
across
fences*

Fences rise to the occasions of neighbor NIMBYisms. The neighborhood watch puts potted geraniums in roundabouts and giant Ficus beside signs designating “Slow Streets” for children.³ Commuters wait at bus stops like spiders wait, like all species with waiting in common, when a crow drops to the ground and doddering there leaps with wings spread onto the roof of a Honda to drop again to the asphalt and dodder again, before spreading its wings again, and flapping away in a line parallel to the earth at first then rising with any of us reading it like Hermes reading crane flight as letters of whose memory?

*Light
on
eucalyptus*

Caws emanate from narrow throats and chests. Not as playing dead but a dramatic cleansing, the crow presses its wings over anthills like smatterings of leaves to let ants into its feathers to preen for it at Land’s End.

*Light
on
an
open
face*

The door to the salon where I go for pedicures stands in the shadow of a mayten. A waxing menu offers full leg, upper leg, lower leg, bikini, Brazilian, arms, eyebrows, lips, chin, torso, neck, shoulder. The arm I broke when I was a boy gives me the street cred of an experienced body. Holding its darkly tipped tail as it passes by the salon window, a coyote trots by to the brush of a file giving shape to my toenail, its pointy snout and pointy ears so tawny and large as to look out of proportion with a head wanting you to respect it. I go in search of it but find only its skull with its front-facing eye sockets and roomy braincase picked clean of everything. The wind in the trees, Zhuangzi’s heaven listening to rotting stumps someday. What lives there with carpenter ants, beetles, gorging termites if not usual suspects? Sunlight reshapes the city block into the open face of a stump. Radial lines invite us to rub it with our finger.

³ An ecotone a transition zone between two distinct ecological communities, marsh edge, forest-meadow, suburban fringe, shadow-dark, coming live-slow diminishment, that can support higher biodiversity and species density than either adjacent habitat if organisms exploit resources from both sides.