

ACE BOGCESS

Whispers (10)

When he skips
onyx stones
over a pool of brittle glass,
when he sees two sets
of eyes watching him wound himself
without intervening,
to whom should he turn for advice?
He dwells on twin
preoccupations, embarrassed
to reveal the subtle substance
of his thoughts.
To resolve the matter
as if confident,
as if educated in the art
of resolutions,
he would disappear into the fields,
open only to affections of a breeze.

Meditation (6)

I asked the sun what it
knew of remorse,
& the sun replied: *Nothing*.

I begged the moon
to enlighten me regarding guilt.
The moon spoke only silence.

I swallowed the stars one by one,
seeking answers to assorted questions.
The stars burned on inside.

**Together,
Nearly Nowhere**

Red sky bleeds
into somber fog,
then darkness.

I am one word
short of another lie.
Our journeys

take us beyond
mere expectation,
twilight's union

feathering nervous
skin. Further,
past new shadows

of the next hill,
the next sullen
cloud, we find

ourselves, twin
curses coming home
to die.

Prayers for the Philosopher's First Child

— for Chanya April Elkins

I.

Be ye not deceived by philosophers,
their lifeless gray wit in cynical rapture,
denial's easy spa. Move & be moved
like a river- conscious, dynamic,
free & incorruptible. Hope is
the madness of clouds: peaceful breath
collecting shapes, letting go.

II.

Be—as in to be or not to be—
strongest in the blackest heart of doubt,
that cursed blessed most wonderful
melancholy, the blue moodiness
of intellectuals & artists. Believe in self,
purpose, long resigned sighs like love &
laughter: sirens without rocks.

III.

Be willing to stare down the abyss,
smile to earn its respect. Then,
should eyes fail, words reinvent themselves
as silence, grasp hold of your father
like a diver's last gasp before darkness,
first before new light, so that he might
teach you safety & learn rest.

The Naming Ceremony

*"I would have preferred a great
animist rite of passage, but we are
about 60 or 70 years too late for that!"*

– James R. Elkins

Bring a body darkly to the light.
The child's father christens the feast,
his offering to villagers pausing
from work in the rainy-season fields
of Thailand. Passion fruit grows
on a trellis of vines like Kentucky grapes.
There's jackfruit, passionate after
its own manner, & mushrooms collected
from the jungle by an eighty-year-old
grandmother. Nothing here but
playful optimism, the whole world
one protracted thing-in-itself.
Father & mother offer the infant
for recognition. Lawa elders & ancestors
must know her, admit her into
the company of kinship so she may be
blessed by a name—second name,
meaning more than introductions.
It's her torch in thickest shade
of underbrush & many wide forests
of her life. Next, a Lawa translation:
Daniel's courage from King James.
Too young now, the daughter will learn
of this in time. Then, no longer afraid,
she will harvest the sacred crop
family has sown for her this day,
giving her at last her second strength.

The Rain Soaked Trail

The raining season kept to the clock this year.
A new father tells me he misses the sun
waiting at the nearest horizon on the outskirts of May.
Thai afternoons give forests their definition,
that mythical gray text one often only reads about
in books. Such clear boundaries.

Jim writes the family soon must travel to Nong Kheo:
village of his wife, & so the daughter's
community as well. There the child brings honor
to her ancestors as she receives her Lawa
tribal name. No girl grows up without a Lawa name!
She'd be a month without numbers for days,
missing what makes her, that which brings a story
to her life.

Jim's a man who values stories, wearing them like
torrential rains--stories he bears up like gifts
of fruit, pork, & also those he accepts from village elders
around the cooking fire by night. America

is neither beginning nor end, but a road
of middles & muddles, transition between scenes.
There are no heroes yet. He looks for them elsewhere
at the base of smaller mountains.

“There is a Real Sense in Which I Have Disappeared”

– James R. Elkins

In the hour a man's made famous to his daughter,
he disregards his self-conception, paints himself in
bright, limitless colors of an infant's palette.

What does she see? You wonder: Does the world
seem emptiness to someone so small, & you
her protection? You wear a clown's face,

wield laughter like text from a scholar's journal.
Beneath a treillage of star motifs, ivy-like, climbing
the ChiangMai heavens, you cannot sleep

so daydream, imagine her passionate, striking:
first crocus in the spring of your year.
Does wind rest while its children drift?

See, you've found the place where knowledge
unlearns itself, books close like dusty afternoons,
hope keeps you awake instead of questions.

Tucking her blanket, you breathe & say good night,
then wait beside her crib awhile longer,
as invisible as a philosopher without words.

Flow With the Beautiful

– *Libra*, December 17, 1999

Marged says, We see rivers, truly,
I imagine, soon before we die. She looks
for a gray place where life drowns, drifts,

begins its move from nostalgia toward
history. She pictures dim reflection of her
eyes: tender, finger-like waves carry her

toward the bluer counsel of Neruda's sea.
So death, too, wears a comely face: simple,
inviting, serene. We see rivers, yes:

a different wake off ripples & driftwood—
from broken vessels, cracked ships
(the river's such a transient thing,

as is she, am I, are we in the ebb & flow
of becoming). Seconds define what death
tears away with flood. There's a second river,

its finite plane unbridged. It sings of life
to the morning. Contented siren, its songs
reflect new light in warming notes.

Nation Ill-Prepared for Nuclear Attacks

– *The Herald-Dispatch*, July 9, 1999

Being there, being afraid,
we must learn to die all over again,
like in the 50s, Red-scared &
cold with so much war that was & wasn't.
I missed that somehow, came of age
with 80s aggression & 90s ambivalence,
got hand-me-downs from parents that knew best
how to hide beneath a desk & cry.
When we reflect, we say paranoia,
but at least it was hand to hand & face to face,
two hesitant gladiators circling an arena
big enough to keep both separate
for years. Now it's more like
over-the-shoulder glances, heavy breathing,
fear of dark alleys or shadows under
the bed at night. No warnings.
Someone comes to murder us as we sleep.
Must we walk backward, cry out to see
a stranger's face, bump our heads
on walls we lacked the foresight to anticipate?
When every glass of sauvignon blanc
becomes a toast to nothingness,
our best crystal no longer tilts toward repose,
serenity. I'd rather drink in peace &
let the years remake themselves,
let God reclaim fire & the last embers
of hatred it rekindles in a trembling heart.
I lack the patience to be terrified.

Things Will Calm Down If You Let Them

– *Libra*, August 13, 1999

How I keep missing shooting stars.
On clear nights, I fall asleep, open my eyes
to greet wishes streaking across the blank,

black canvas window yields,
except with morning I wake & can't
remember if I saw them or I dreamt.

‡ ‡

Other nights I stand sock-footed in the street,
shivering into August—it spits at me
with rain (gray heavens cede nothing,

no promises, & silence). I try to make
my own meteors: tail lights from
tractor trailers descending highway

at the valley's edge. They burn
like cigarette butts flicked across
the galaxy, also without promises.

‡ ‡

It's clear tonight, & embers will collapse
through the hollow like bottle rockets.
I have no use for calm. Yet as I say it,

Perseus laughs droplets of blood from
the gorgon's head. Rest, he tells me,
come breathe deeply, sleep, & turn to stone.

Law School

Prof. McLaughlin often told me
I would have a chair at the law school
named in my honor:
not a Chair, endowed for a seat
on the faculty or for scholarship;
a physical chair—umber—
tinged & sallow-banded
like striations on the peeled side
of a mountain—the seat where
I spent afternoons
watching lawyers-in-waiting
shuffle down a hall toward the library,
heavy packs of dread on their backs.
I kept my place in the lounge,
listened for arguments featuring
misquotes from the *Bible* & Sun Tzu.
I inhaled rich perfume,
ghost scents of cigar smoke.
I laughed, waited, let the conversations
come to me.
Journal in hand, I took notes
on the note-takers,
joining their loneliness
when I could. To keep safe,
I had the chair in which I wrote &
dreamt with well-lit eyes:
how I picture Wallace Stevens
in law school, safe & happy
searching women
through to the World Soul,
or in the proper
study of Mankind
engaging his imagination
on a frolic of his own.

**Letters to Lola Haskins
on Japanese Fiction**

1.

*Snow Country, Thousand Cranes,
The Sound of the Mountain . . .*

2.

Back to the snow.

3.

Abe, Dazai, Mishima, Endo.
A Japanese Kafka.
A communal consciousness.
A Japanese introspective.
A Japanese *Searching for Bobby Fischer*.

4.

Always something higher.
Kawabata could make a novel
from one haiku without losing
its tone, nostalgia, moment.

5.

The scene
at the ruined mountain temple
is so dreadfully stirring
it could never be
captured in film.

Letters to A.E. Stringer on Poets

1.

I love to hear the new voices, however rough.

2.

There are a lot of names that could belong to random housewives or dabblers in the art of donations. Yours was the name I recognized.

3.

I concede the possibility this all becomes routine. I concede the possibility, but hope . . .

4.

I recommend we put aside the abysmal news-watching functions of our current lives.

5.

Curious for your thoughts.

6.

Etc.

Northern Alliance Rebels Seize Key City

Lexington Herald-Leader, Nov. 10, 2001

One report: battle was fierce & bloody,
horses charging sidewalks, AK-47s
launching their spittle in killing words
toward walls of flesh & stone,

slicing to marrow like so many swords
in a scene from *Lawrence of Arabia*
with Turkish garrison torn to Briton's
cries—"No prisoners, no prisoners!"

Another describes how soldiers,
warned in advance, surrendered arms,
switched sides, fled to caves
like mountain beasts.

Not an inch of dust on a rusted tank's hull sank
from weight of a warming drop, rose on skipping
wind of a rifle's fire. Men danced in streets
to celebrate war's holy simplicity.

Whichever truth, an ocean away we wait in fear
like the bearded husbands of Mazar-e Sharif,
as though any moment brings the righteous wound,
sentient slug that shatters us: kingdoms made from glass.