

**BRUCE LAXALT**

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*selected poems*

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Bruce Laxalt, *Songs of Mourning and Worship*  
(Black Rock Press | Rainshadow Editions, 2005)



### **Songs of Mourning and Worship**

The smoke and burnt souls of juniper pines and fawns  
Are in the eastern valley with us tonight,  
Drifting like incense on the soft Sierra breeze,  
Slowly dispersing to earth and heaven.  
Fire to the west in a high mountain valley.

We stare in wonder as the death mist settles around us  
Blurring the molten sun and western canyons but ten miles away,  
The low drone of the fire bombers bound for the roiling black plume  
In worshipful harmony with the shrill screams of the sirens  
And the mournful howling of the dogs.

### A Quick and Unexpected Trip Away

I'll always remember you that way.  
Drowsy and warm with sleep  
On an early summer morning,  
Though in truth I never saw it,  
And the years have blurred your name.  
You sip your coffee at the dinette table,  
No morning paper, just the morning sun  
Flowing past the cheap open curtains onto your bathrobe,  
Your light brown hair and sleepy face.

Kitchen table in the morning sun—  
Spices and toaster before you, a single place mat  
Arranged to see the world outside at dawn—  
And your own reflection at night? (An impertinent question.)  
A tiny kitchen, well-scrubbed and neatly arranged.  
Snapshots of what must have been you—were they? and him?  
(I found out later, I should tell you.)  
Peer out, smiles fastened with tape, from the fridge  
To the branches of young green trees, sunlit, through the window.

I met you first that way.  
You were still there, and yet so very much not there.  
Not there anymore, and so very much there.  
Your sublime and peaceful awakening, your plans for a summer day  
Demarked only by police tape, your upturned chair and phone,  
Your bathrobe thrown aside,  
The hurried detritus of the medics' bandages on your kitchen floor,  
A small and delicate pool of drying blood beneath your breakfast table.

I met you again, later that morning,  
In the silence and cold white light of the morgue.  
You were as still as a moonlit night,  
Your long hair gone dark and heavy with water and antiseptic.  
Someone—was it you?—had tried to close your eyes.  
Not quite. You gazed in cloudy fascination beneath half-closed lids.

Two hours distant from the sun through the branches,  
A time in which, the fragile link of your seconds shattered,  
You had traveled far,  
To a place you did not know.

## Body Language

—for *Pamela*

Years long, the studied veneer,  
Straightforward warmth, commanding voice;  
I have shed that skin.  
Now shorn of obsolete and smothering scales,  
I walk aloof, and whisper to you.

An act of will each hour, each day,  
The uncrossed arms, self-confident chest;  
I am shy now.  
My arms now fold in solitary glee,  
My breast protected, to share with you.

The steadfast stance and practiced stride,  
A steeled unflinching gaze into the world's eyes;  
I now take quiet steps, and slower too.  
My eyes, caught unawares when at your side,  
Lift slowly to meet with yours.

My body speaks,  
With an old and honest voice.  
And I, a startled listener, can only watch:  
Years long a circus-trained beast,  
It bends the bars and flees its cage,  
To run to where you are.

## Back Channel Debts

I, in predictable wrinkled suit and loosened tie  
Summoned out of some meeting with a quiet call,  
You, unexpectedly slab-bound and already workaday bloody,  
Your naked body snow pale in the cold morgue lights,  
We met yet again, unlikely pals across the chasm.  
This time, however, no coded call for the meet,  
No booth in the back of a neighborhood bar.

Now, instead, your proud prison pectorals, turned inside-up,  
Were already draped with thick precision  
    over your suddenly un-cocky face,  
Dead weight on your new-washed blond hair and opaque  
    un-twinkling blue eyes.  
Now, your glistening sternum and fragile ribs,  
The purple of a tiny hole beneath one,  
Awaited the next indignity of the pathologist's knife.  
Now, and worst, your last-night's macho secret  
    —the silent shame of your gas-bloated innards—  
Swelled with newfound freedom from what was  
    but twelve hours ago  
The taut, now-severed, muscles of your skinny gut.

As if in doubt what it was that killed you,  
They had you now, and set out to see what made you tick.  
And, as always, I was one of them,  
But this time could do nothing for you.

How long had it been—ten months?—  
Since you'd flattened out each single day of the paltry two years  
    I'd sent you up for,  
And showed up at my office door, tail-free, yard-buff,  
A cocky grin just masking your edge,  
To hit me up (fair trade for the tips from slam)  
For the cush-job cover I'd promised you on sentencing day.  
We'd wise-cracked back then across the courtroom  
(To the annoyance of the bailiff and your public defender who,  
Unaware, as most were, of our back-channel bargain,  
Objected that their worlds should touch)  
And joked again across my desk,  
    now under the dead eyes  
    of the cops passing in the hall,

About the joys of marriage, and the bitch who'd snitched you off  
On the charge whose price and discount we'd so quietly agreed.

So now, you'd bought it, and nothing left for me to do  
But to clean up your trash and wipe our slate.  
First up, your sobbing hysterical now-ex-wife,  
The one who, drunked-up and pissed-off in a weak-woman's way,  
Dropped a dime to your P.O., met him at the door,  
Walked him to your .45 under the mattress,  
Nailed you for ex-felon-in-possession,  
And, incidentally, brought you to me.  
Self-styled widow now, she screamed with a widow's blood vengeance,  
Until a subpoena suddenly muffled the years-long din,  
And reportedly forced a hasty trip out east.  
Word had, she left her new kid with Welfare.

And yes, of course, the skinny punk you'd dissed at the party  
(the latest object of her screeching steel-eyed wrath)  
Who'd waited in the shadows of the apartment parking lot  
with his puny .22 rifle,  
Hatred puffing from his nostrils in the chilly air,  
As you stepped, laughing too loudly as usual,  
From the light and the noise and the heat and the smoke,  
home early with a sick gut,  
Into the silent crystal glare of the pole-mounted fluorescents,  
And then pierced your heart from a coward's lair.

What to do with him? You tell me. You'd been packing once again—  
They found a .38 in your waistband, you stupid bastard.  
You'd stuck it up the kid's nose at the party—  
The jury would have given him a medal for wasting  
your sorry ass.  
What to do then, but size him up with chilly care,  
Take a bit longer view and bet on the come.  
Bit my lip, talked your ass down, rolled over and gifted him a plea:  
manslaughter, probation,  
ten years hanging.  
Then sat back and waited for him to violate.  
Quiet call to his P.O. (he owed me one),  
Took him six months.  
Young punk on the yard. Fresh meat.

At which point you and I, our debts finally settled,  
And separated once again  
Only by the illusion of dimensions,  
Could sit down together one last time out of the glare  
    of censorious eyes,  
This time in any uptown bar that suited our fancy,  
For a quiet drink and a few last laughs.

### **Diagnosis Day**

Your arms are full with dead flowers and straw,  
Your face a brave smile below windowless eyes.  
And I who had promised in blind confident voice,  
And gave you roses to seal the pact,  
Stand silent, shamed, and bereft of words.

My hands are full of quick-settling sand,  
No gift to give but my dwindling hours.  
Our eyes meet warily on an unbargained-for shore.  
In yours, I see the days after. You in mine the days before.  
And then, in each other's, the day itself,  
On which our futures will meet and part.

## Paralysis

Acting is as acting does,  
The thought not carried out is nil.  
Unless, of course, it is the thought itself  
That is an act. And then what have we?  
A bravura performance?  
Or the pine collapsing unheard,  
Alone in the forest depths,  
With a stately bow to no one.

I think on this issue of late,  
As thoughts no longer serve  
To stir my limbs, but ramble  
Instead before an audience of one.  
The houselights are low, the theater  
Empty, and I orate at length on a  
Noiseless stage devoid of props,  
The vacant seats and starry sky my audience.

### **The Thrill of the Hunt, The Moment of the Kill**

Credentialed, thrice gowned,  
Oft published, renowned,  
And now for the pre-trial price of six hundred an hour,  
I've purchased the privilege of hearing your deposition indictment  
Of my apparently inept and callous client,  
Hurled with arrogant elan from the towers of academe  
    like an erudite bolt:  
Fifty years of corporate design engineering for apparent naught,  
Except to kill a careless but earnest working man  
With a defective machine that even your graduate students  
Could criticize with academic ease.

Respectfully always, almost shyly at first,  
I query with deference on your magnificent C.V.  
In awe, a bit, I must appear to you,  
Another student, perhaps. Understandably nervous  
    in the presence of the master.  
Explain that term to me, Sir. I don't quite . . .  
I didn't understand that concept, Professor, until today.

And then, slowly, we begin the dance into the forest.  
Spins of logic, gentle repartee, far indeed from the expected  
    harsh melee,  
As you teach your unexpected and delightful new pupil  
    the principles of the science.  
No, the art of the science in your practiced hands,  
Oblivious in the heady glow of your seduction  
To the quiet fact that you are not leading this dance:  
Well, didn't you write about that in 1985, Sir?

Do you still agree with your article that said . . .  
Of course I do, you say with a benevolent smile.  
And that article makes the point we were discussing.  
And then, a shiver, I can see it pass through you.  
Too late it begins to dawn that I am too facile by half  
    with the arcane terms.  
Too late the faint thought that I quote your articles,  
Am familiar, somehow, with those of your less egotistical peers,  
Too late the vague but rising feeling, nothing more than that yet,  
That, even at your side, I've been stalking you  
On your majestic and graceful walk through the woods.

And then, the millisecond when the three dimensions  
    fall away like shattered ice,  
And you know we are alone as you have never been.  
And you look through my eyes, to see that I am  
    seeing through yours,  
And that you are where I've wanted you to be,  
Cemented in the stone of the Sworn record to simple truths  
    you cannot square  
With the mercenary condemnation of my client  
We haven't even begun yet to discuss,  
And that no one knows it yet but we two.  
You are indeed the proudest of champions, Professor.  
And only you and I know that you are slain.

Appearances and etiquette are important, we both agree,  
And we do the final processional hand in hand:  
I listen respectfully to your scholarly assault on my dangerous  
    and defective design,  
Given now with a haunted hunted look in your eyes.  
I am not so petty as to probe or haggle or contradict.  
There will be time for that in trial, we both know well.  
And you are thinking that even Rommel fell prey  
    to his vainly published ego,  
And, imperilled to the edge of ruin,  
Could not cast it away in time to save his army.

The chairs pushed back, the briefcases closed,  
The sworn record's tension dispelled like mist.  
So thank you, Professor. It's been an honor and a pleasure.  
We'll see each other again, I trust, at time of trial?  
Or, my eyes say to you above my smile and handshake,  
Should you have a later quiet word with the inattentive vandal  
Who retained you as his champion, and then sat deaf-eared  
    while you fell in battle.  
These cases can and should be resolved, you know.  
And all can walk away head-high, the victory claimed.

Or, Professor, instead, shall you stand exposed,  
The whore denounced,  
The con man revealed,  
Alone in the medieval marketplace of the courtroom,  
With rank coin the measure of your academic virtue.

### **A Late Afternoon Breach in Their Ranks**

Six in the dock, murder-one on the marquee,  
Late-summer show time at the county courthouse.  
Six of the defense bar's court-appointed finest their champions  
Deployed at counsel table before them like stalwarts,  
They, the scruffy as-yet innocents, sit shoulder-to-shoulder behind,  
Their squinting eyes suspicious with wonder at the oaken pomp,  
The twitchy glare of the deputy like an electric fence around them.

Middle-age white-trash drug deal gone bad,  
But now the hair's been trimmed, slick-plastered back  
From the pasty foreheads of six faces rode hard.  
The cheap suits new, ill-fitting, sinews and callouses  
    emerging from the cuffs,  
Sprout wrinkled necks and darting eyes from their collars.  
Though if truth be told, scant difference at first glance  
    between first and second phalanx,  
Except the suits at counsel table are tailored,  
And not all the eyes are alcoholic.

A clever opening gambit, the collective century's street wisdom:  
First to rise for the admittedly-mangy but unjustly accused,  
The five-year rookie, earnest dew still on his face,  
The fiery innocence in his eyes fixed dead-on in accusation  
Of the three-piece-suited sophistry of the prosecutor's opening.  
A fine young man, the matronly jurors nod sagely among themselves.  
Surely he would not deceive us, nor defend a guilty man—  
Though, if truth be told again, several eyes cannot but wander  
    to the nether row.

And later, unexpected luck:  
The D.A.'s second witness, temporarily saved by subpoena  
    from deportation south,  
Just i.d.'d the wrong blond-white-guy as the one with the gun.  
Quiet chuckles at counsel table, muted catcalls and toothless grins  
    from behind.

Three-thirty recess while the judge grabs a smoke,  
The illusion of ranks dissolves with the bang of the gavel.  
The lawyers mill, trade jokes, crude quips  
    about the now-wounded prosecutor

now bent pompously over his notes as if in secret study,  
Check their watches for the approaching cocktail hour,  
And roll their eyes in mock-exasperation to their civil litigation cohorts  
in the gallery  
Stopped by for a few minutes comic diversion and feigned  
nostalgia.

The clients, momentarily off-stage, now ankle-manacled  
to their chairs,  
Have scooted closer for a quiet and hurried confab.  
Except one, skinny guy, second from the right, whose lawyer,  
Older guy there, now joking with rest,  
Just dropped the jury a hint he might jump ship.  
He looks quickly out of the corner of his eye  
At the manically whispering backs of his former friends,  
Then stares instead at the ceiling,  
Feeling suddenly, in the hot and rancorous din  
of the late-afternoon courtroom,  
As cold and alone as he's ever been.

### Widow's Weeds

Home late again from the office, I fear—caught up again  
In medical reports, or dog-eared childhood books,  
Or other tomes on mortal man. Still, there is another hour  
Of sunlight left us below the eastern Sierra foothills,  
Before the shadows from the tallest peaks engulf.

Your car, its engine already cooled, sits in the driveway  
Locked. No waiting dogs in the courtyard for me tonight,  
I hear faint barks from far away. The house late-summer quiet  
And warm, your grocery sacks on the counter, my briefcase is  
Suddenly out of place on the front-hall floor.

Coat and tie discarded to a dining-room chair,  
I walk in silence to the back-yard deck.  
There far off across our grass and pines are you,  
The dogs chasing each other in the distance,  
As you bend, weed, water, and tend your garden flowers.

Already a widow, I've left you such,  
Strong and alone on a solitary summer evening.  
I stand unnoticed on the deck and watch,  
And hesitate to hail from afar, to disturb,  
To announce my already dwindling presence.

### **The Establishment Man**

Yes, I am, indeed, a lawyer still,  
Near twenty five years, and yes, still  
Stolidly keeping the barbarian trumpets at bay  
From the fragile walls of Jericho.  
My rounds are watchful, so others may have the peace of sleep,  
My path a crumbling step away from gravity's sweet call,  
But staked out nightly like a child's garden path  
And my dogged struggle for law and order.

At first, clear eyes on the path of right,  
Young enforcer, stern voice for the ancient rules.  
A simple task, and simple truths:  
For peace disturbed or stolen,  
Repayment in the coin of time.  
From righteous law, sweet order will surely follow,  
Like dawn the cruel chaos of night.

Later on, the civil courts—less simple now.  
White shirts and starch, greying hair and tired eyes,  
I rise respectfully amid oak walls,  
The companies' bulwark against the plaintiff vandals.  
Decorous tones and the sweet light of reason  
Coaxing, gathering the frightened horses  
To the center of the jury box,  
To the fleeting haven of peace and order.

And now, near fifty, and late at night,  
Childlike, I putter and fret over the meal's remains,  
Wash and scrub, and scrub again the glasses and plates.  
Table, and table again.  
There is indeed both law and order here,  
Dirt and shameful grime wiped clean, or neatly concealed,  
Searching always for the last hidden shards and tiny crystals  
Of hurled fury and smashed decanters,  
Careful always that the dumb stare of dawn  
Shall see nothing amiss or out of place.

My plaintiff friends across the courtroom aisle  
Make joyful chaos with their craft,  
Throw the world with glee against the jury-box wall  
And wait with sheepish grins to see the morning's designs.  
My career has been otherwise.  
I do my dishes,  
And determinedly set about my task  
Of tidying up.

## Diagnosis

You were a stranger, old friend, where once  
    you walked among us.  
Even the cats avoided your sleepy gaze, steered clear  
Of the cooling August evening hearth  
Where you lay, head upon your paws,  
your newly private and distant eyes half-shut,  
Fixed vague and dead-level at the distant couch.  
Not there among us, yet there among us still.  
And what about the simple visit to the vet—  
Bad news and all—  
Could have caused this breach between us?

I am a stranger here, where but days ago I walked  
    your hand in mine.  
The cat sees no difference, nor the dogs, it seems.  
They cluster eager for a romp,  
And fill our ears with joyous feints toward  
    the iron gate.  
But your eyes are newly private,  
And distant in unguarded moments.  
I catch you gazing at me as I read my book,  
Only to look away and at the wall,  
Your eyes fixed suddenly on a solitary road,  
And the path diverging between us.

## Work in Progress

There you sit, lost among the trophies on the office shelves,  
In the dusty detritus of a quarter century's thrusts and parries,  
More of interest to clients now than me.  
There in the back, you are a shy one—a 5x7 photo, peeking out.  
Ignored, it seems, by the nightly cleaning staff,  
Untended, the dust grown highest and unkempt around you.  
Slowly lost, over the years, in the cluttered and momentary  
    exhibitionism  
Of last month's trials and verdicts.

"What's that?" an occasional more curious visitor will exclaim.  
"Many years ago," I reply, "a work in progress."  
"A beauty," they'll say. And indeed it is.  
Red orb suspended in the black of space, a delicate planet.  
The rivers, in deeper tint, wend their elegant way through the  
    highlands,  
This way and that, in graceful contretemps,  
To the planet's edge and beyond, to the velvet black of void.  
"That's the back of a child's eyeball," I add. "In hemorrhage."

A work in progress, indeed it is, sweet child.  
As were you, at three.  
Eager eyes and sun-tinged hair, a soap-sudded grin  
    from the porcelain tub,  
The only photo we could find to show the jury  
Of the work of art you were, and would have become.

The neighbors heard your nightly screams, muffled  
    by the apartment wall.  
They never called in.  
Your case worker broke down on the stand.  
    Did you know you'd been on the schedule  
    for a next-week's visit?  
Your bartender mother's boyfriend, his own sweet scared eyes open wide  
In silent supplication to the jury box, begged for merciful belief:

“She fell in the tub.”  
I and the jury thought not.  
The doctors said you might as well have hit concrete  
    in a three-story fall,  
And showed the jury the photo of your bleeding retina—  
Sad beauty—staring blindly out of the glossy color print,  
Caught unawares in the private act of dying.

### **Requiem for My Father**

So what have we learned together, my father,  
These fifty years of strife,  
That the centuries had not taught our fathers and their sons?  
That the sap creeps higher as the winter wanes?  
That the elms burst forth before all,  
And suddenly at that?  
Or maybe that the storm-tossed mountain sunset  
Ignites the highest clouds last,  
And even then but for an instant.

And of dusk what do we know?  
The fading greens, emerging blues  
All seen before, and many times, by our long-dead kin  
As the hearth fires were coaxed once more  
From slumbering daytime ember  
To evening light and solace.  
I, for one, have learned no truths  
Except that the grays of dusk are fleeting,  
And that night, once fallen, permits no sight.

### **Making Do**

Intentionality, it appears, is not a road unto itself,  
Except, perhaps, in my nighttime dreams,  
When, my body bidden with but a quirk of thought,  
I plod the beach, or climb a stair.

But "I" has become a fragmentary concept  
Of late, the distance between mind and flesh  
Inexorably widening in uninvited and unwelcome  
Zen. No bliss here, alas, nor master either.

Instead, an angry self-taught course on the light years  
Between brain and deadened legs, and the delicate electric  
Chains between them. And a box seat  
For the glorious spectacle of their dissolution.

Thy will be done, I was taught as a child. But no,  
It is not. For I am now that will, and it is far from spent.  
Though its messages are sent, and sent again, again,  
To no one still able to hear its calls.

## The Long Slow Art of Mentoring

—June, 1979

Word was, you were becoming a cowboy,  
quick to flash now during a buy,  
Crook's face smashed to the concrete wall of the casino john,  
Rubbed a couple feet south to assist his complexion,  
And a quick fist to the face  
As you ducked his head into the squad car.  
At it a bit too long.

*Hip-cool and de-tached,  
Watching with a smirk, leaning back,  
At the corner of my DA young pup's desk,  
While your seargent with the tie and the outside badge  
Takes the kid through the drill,  
"This evidence will  
Get a warrant."*

Friday night, late June, I watched as you xeroxed the bills.  
Twenty K and a wink, casual plans for an easy go-down.  
"White punks with a pound, in over their collective two-bit heads.  
Stick around, kid. We'll catch a drink downtown and tell tall tales."  
Didn't go down somehow.  
You came back beat, and checked the cash back into the safe  
at two.  
"Nother night, nother day."

*Three o'clock call, Monday a.m.  
Dispatch rushed—"They're trippin' with him.  
Body-mike's fritzed, the tail's lost sight.  
We got names on the crooks, where they're staying,  
Get on down.  
Get a judge out of bed,  
The narcs freakin' he's dead.  
Get a warrant."*

Doctor's word was, we didn't have long:  
Deep blood in the dirt at the riverfront buy scene.  
Got the warrant typed by five with a roused snitch  
on a twist,  
Signed at first light on the hood of the judge's car.

Nothing in the tossed motel room  
But a high-school i.d. card on the floor of the shower stall.  
Five-foot-three and a lover-boy smile.

*Lights cross the river, this is it.*  
*Bust code—zip—what is this shit.*  
*Rushes from the trees—this puke's not alone.*  
*Quick blades against the moon, whirls and thumps*  
*to your chest.*  
*"Do you feel the pain?" the kid says in your ear.*  
*"I'm a cop," you hiss. "Like we care.*  
*Get a warrant."*

Three p.m., Eric from Burglary found your boot heel in a pile of rocks,  
Two miles up a canyon from the black and bloody Z-car in the manzanita.  
We got the crooks that night, your xeroxed bills in their stuffed pockets,  
Except one, who made it home to Oklahoma.  
Too rookie to handle your murder, they assigned me the warrant work,  
And let me bring him back for you.

### **Winter Storm**

Tonight when the winter rain  
Came at last to our high desert valley,  
I would have ranged far on foot  
At seventeen,

The pungent pull of the dripping Juniper pines,  
The silky mist of the clouds settled low  
Beneath the Sierra peaks,  
Too strong for a young man's will.

But instead, a mere step out to the western porch,  
A deep whiff, a long look, and the streets are explored,  
The river watched, the stirrings felt  
In an aged glance.

### **Autumn Fire**

Precious less is much.  
The scent of sudden rain in the newly-fallen dusk  
Unburdened by the trappings of light,  
Borne silkily through the window on silent evening air  
To kiss the smoke of the first fall fire.  
Round warmth and reed-like cold  
In dissonant duet.

Precious little time is long  
When longer still than promised once.  
The flames still flicker late at night.  
Refusing the call to dim to coals.  
The smoke still rises in shrinking wisps,  
The light still dances on the walls,  
Inevitable darkness held briefly at bay.