

Fugue

by

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Chapter One: Stubborn Lazarus

It is here I will dance
my warrior dance, pounding
my feet into the dirt.
I will sit down and sing
this plain song,
long and low and sweet.
Syllables flying
from my tongue
like sparks
from a chip of flint.

- Debra Marquart, "Finding the Words"

The First Sound

My father strikes chords on his guitar,
a sound full of pine stories and pancakes,
full of lovers and violence. I leave

his song behind. A history of apple pies
and graveyard songs. Iced tea on front
porches. Rose trellis with constant leaf.

Bright bundles of bridle weed,
white puffs of accomplishment in a time
of fat slug and green expectation.

Cotton fields in bloom.
An abundance of dogwood trees.
Buttermilk and cornbread.

Back roads, watermelon, blood kin.
Bonfires, deep Gulf waters, months
of heavy bellied rain, gospel hymns.

I think about this Southern place –
home. And I think about Iowa –
foreign soil, anxious lover, snow.

The Child Leaves

Step out into the light of morning.
Bear your weight. Tread the way.

Impress upon the sullen street
the image of a summer soul
content beneath an August sky.

Leave the shadow and red dust
for a Northern climate, unfamiliar,

uncontained, built of cold wind,
rolling plains –
 its thick history
not yet written on your Southern skin.

Souvenir

We danced to a song of youth, eager
and curious, excited by the movement
of our bodies. We vacationed on the island

of Alabama, ended up staying most
of our lives. We folded hot towels
in cool dens, smoked cigarettes, baked

pies, went to church, hated our parents,
lusted for what we thought of as sex.
We ran ourselves sick with fear, fattened

up on Grandma's chicken soup, buried
our fathers, wondered about God.

History Lesson

All the expectations of harvest –
cotton, corn, pumpkins, string beans.
Every note revealing
a desire for songs to finish.

Fumbling in or stumbling out,
the plane takes off and lands,
baggage tags along, the bus arrives.
Meetings. Appointments. Funerals.

All the history rising up behind.
Everything that won't be denied.
The plain and honest reckoning –
don't hesitate, you are it.

The Song of Edgar Who is Dead

We dance around the room and sing
of Edgar who was quite a man,
could send ten bottles to the can
at any single gathering.

A drinker's truth was his to ring.
His skin was olive, creamy tan.
We dance around the room and sing
of Edgar who was quite a man.

One hundred tales we're glad to bring
of those he loved inside his van,
of bars we knew would always ban
his stand-up face and low-class swing.
We dance around the room and sing
of Edgar who was quite a man.

Dead Man in a Ditch

I can remember the day I found you
dead in a ditch, smiling through the years.

You had been there long enough for your mouth
to fill up with mud like a boy's pocket.

Candid as I seemed, I thought it weird
to be around a dead man in a ditch.

But workers work for working, sing their songs, eat lunch,
and dead men in ditches are bound to be found sometime.

I wondered what your eyes looked like under those lids.
I wanted you to see me because I could sure see you.

Dirge

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
- Ariel*

Men beside the coffin,
wreaths about their heads –
we toss wine into the ocean,
full reason and occasion.

The old pastor tells us
of captains sunk with their ships,
of human frailty, of susceptibility
to damage and defeat.

With a calm befitting death,
solace and silent mourning,
we sing a hymn of life and resurrection –
rise, rise, rise.

Rise to the occasion.

Early Morning Absence

One man playing a quiet song in a dim room.
No one around to hear his notes.
The sound sliding along blue walls.

*

You don't feel a symphony until
you place yourself into its movement,
a wave of pleasure and heavy heart.

*

No matter what words a poet uses – to put
music into language is an act of replacement,
a father's photo but no voice and no flesh.

Fire in the Barrel; on the remembrance of a father's suicide

Despite the lingering words of his father
(courage, the heart within the chest), a son will
still have no idea how the force of the shot will
shake him when the gun goes off, scatter shot,
and bathed in the praises of this father, will
shake and wonder at the dull throb within his
shoulder, humming fuzzy secrets to his young
and blushing skin.

Legacy

Stubborn Lazarus, he hates to stay
gone long, coming back each time
from a place of supposed peace
to preach of works and days.

His lips come fresh from the dirt, dry,
gnawed by anxious teeth. His flesh
hangs loose like deer hide drying.
His eyes fade, gray clouds in the wind.

He will not speak to me of what comes after.
He plays the prophet with his words of redemption,
revealing deeds of Christian men, women,
children wise beyond their little time.

He comes around with the same chiming pitch
penetrating my restless sleep –
“Amend your ways, for the time is nigh.”

Dream: I find it hard to convince my father he's not alive

He comes alive
and scrapes the dirt
from his mouth.
Wet April air,
a hint of sea spray.

Spiders and June
bugs make homes
of his shadowy eyes.

He claws his
body from
the ground.

He follows
the muddy path
to the cemetery's
dilapidated church,

throwing
his body
against the door.

He kneels
beneath a stained
glass image
of Christ.

He whispers
to the empty world.

Jim Wilson Takes His Leave

Stage left, he exits.
The velvet curtain descends.
The house lights push away the dark.

I let him go
to fill some other world
beneath clover and red carnation,

to play a silent part,
to be visited by his children
on hazy afternoons.

I wait,
but he gives no encore.
My nose fills with the smell of Sunday lilies,

lilac, soft tart of cornflower,
too sweet gardenias.
I taste the distance like

crabapples covered in allspice.

Visiting My Father's Grave

No answers. The gap between fathers
and sons, a space filled with silence
like this grave. Only this wind sweeping past.

The air base over the fence. The road running
along it as if the dead weren't really meant
to rest here. The vibration of planes overhead
shaking the ground as if they should always
be reminded how they've come to leave
so much motion behind, dormant underneath it all.

A peaceful place, even with the odd music
of planes and cars. I come out here with my six
string to rest above his grave. I stay for an hour,
strumming the tunes he'd sing. Proud Mary.
Down on the Corner. Bad Moon Rising.

The wind through the hedgerows. His voice
somewhere. My singing against it all. The world
moving on. I play him several more songs before I go.

Chapter Two: Too Quiet to Hear

Here is no help before reality.
Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new.
The imagination, here, could not evade,
In poems of plums, the strict austerity
Of one vast, subjugating, final tone.
- Wallace Stevens, "The Comedian as the letter C"

Customs

I figure myself
heat keen and tumble tough,
ignorant of Midwest custom.

I touch down,
fat with apprehension,
tight with anxious musings.

August fire, no Gulf wind
in the air, I sweat
a longing for the South.

Though lucky and novel drunk,
I figure difference, other,
the presence of foreign soil,

These Things Southern

I left a bunch of men buried in Alabama,
in red dirt and orange mud. I was raised
by a gathering of backwoods, "Glory Be,"
"Praise Jesus," cuddling mothers.

They named me sunshine, sweetness,
love, puddin', little one, heartache,
son, brother, strawberry, apple.
They named me sugar, honey, bear,
puppy, gift, Pine child, clover cat,
bumblebee, wave rider. I felt string
beans and watermelon, figs, butterflies,
dirt daubers, mud pies, blackberries.

The Mississippi river fills my blood.
I sweat Tombigbee waterway, Florida
shrimp festivals, Mobile Bay, hot sauce
in New Orleans. My brain's made
of blue jays and short tail squirrels,
pumpkins and squash, little boys
with pellet guns, little girls on pink bikes
with playing cards in the spokes.

I worshipped the Trinity, college athletes,
Paul Bear Bryant, Hank Aaron, Southern
Belles, Azalea Trail Maids. I prayed
to baseball cards and homemade ice cream,
uncle's with bad magic tricks, naughty
magazines behind wood shacks. I danced
the two-step with my four aunts. I swam
the Gulf of Mexico, ran Dauphin Island,
slept in hammocks on Orange Beach.

I was lake spawn, wood sprite,
cardinal neighbor, misfit, trouble maker,
nuisance, grave robber.

Mistake

Cold Iowa air.
Southern guitar.
I left a window open
one evening,
and the strings
went out of tune,
the finish,
once a perfect blue,
aged a dusty gray
overnight.

A Showing of Crows

Fat black birds. An outrageous confidence
in themselves. Walking in a park on a warm
December afternoon, their flight swift
and sharp as a snow-grounded temperament.

Against the disdain of everyone and the harsh
slap of frozen landscapes and their low
position in the hierarchy of birds, they sing
a song of rumpus and hullabaloo, play
in the trash, laugh when people slip on the ice.

Disaster

The party died
when my stereo
stopped playing.
Our conversation
grew strained.
No music to fill
the spaces. Everyone
quit talking.
Our minds dulled.
We came up
with no games.
Everyone went home.
I had to stay
and clean up,
it being
my apartment.

Iowa, the Thing Itself

displaced land of black soil
 an earth so far removed
from my Southern world
 all I know of Alabama
 all I know of cotton and kudzu
this Northern state of corn and
soy bean state of rolling plains
and black ice white-out blizzards
 full of accents built of long walks
and gray oak trees on a March day when
the snow hasn't melted but somewhere
in its own time a rabbit dreams of the glory
humans casually call Spring

Ignacio's Ear

He plays one note on his guitar,
calls it lonely.

He sees in his strings a muddy red
Alabama sky.

He smells in the wood body
pine trees cradling brick houses.

He hears in its empty belly
a wind full dog howl and rustled branches.

One note,
all his thoughts of home.

Slippery Slope

I write my father's history
on the back of my eyes, seared
with anxious scribbling.

He pulls himself from the grave
in my dreams, not content
to go without notice.

His mouth moves, full of dirt,
no words. His white eyes
look for me among the corn rows.

I want him to find me,
but I am misfit and soul weary,
a train sound, travel tired.

I slip on ice, ambushed
by freezing rain. Yesterday
is a lake, I tell myself.

Do not drown.

Ignacio Trying to Play a Cover Song

I cross the gap
with all the tact
I found among
the books left
for me to read.

I copied down
the things I could.
It should have been
enough, but no –

the love I sang
was rummaged
through and thin.

The song
amounted to
little more than
sea sound, wind
from a broken shell.

The meaning
loses something
in the effort.
The sorrow
on another lover
pines. The lyrics –
someone else's words –
grace the page
I printed out,
end with a foreign
flourish, and
then depart.

When Children Leave

I left my share
of heaven in Alabama.
The music I loved.
My grandmother's praise
of Jesus. Folk tunes
about salvation.

Bike rides
in a kingdom of pine.
Tire swings
from oak trees.

Picnics by lakes
gorged with catfish.
Running with kites
in the company of bees.

Travelers

I feel a rumble
before each train comes,
one going east
with a belly
full of coal,
another going west,
empty as the wind
across these plains.

They come
with a heavy
rhythm, consistent
like a worker's song
or chain gang holler.

The whistle's gospel
hot like a Southern choir.

When they've stopped
on the nighttime tracks,
a young man runs
along the side scrawling
Wild and Loose Skirt
in blues, whites, reds,
eager as a shaken
spray paint can:
the little pellet inside –
a secret waiting to get out.

A Smaller Issue Erupts

Her smoke alarm
goes off again.
Down the hall
she burns toast
every morning,
the smell of coal
and bad coffee
penetrating the walls.
She can't cook.
"Turn down the heat,"
I'd scream,
but it's only toast.

Misfit

I cross the corn fields, my veins
filled with red mud, the only sign
of life this late – the rippled caw

of an invisible crow. Everything
has been replaced. Nothing has been
replaced. My faith won't take root

in this Northern climate, needs heat
not snow, needs rain not freezing drizzle.
I sit down on the hard black earth,

the boundary line between the stalks
and the open prairie. I pray
something will come of my being here,

even if only a bud of dry hope
pushing past the ground's surface
to lick the blessing of day.

away from the thing

violet and star dust
finger dance and melting smiles
visions of smooth color
in smoky rooms by moonlit seas

heartache and bellowed laughter
cries of lovers in my soul
sounds of pure lamentation
in the memory of a perfect time

low pulsing rhythms of faith
movements of a grand belief
home, love, sweet cream, touches in the dark
calm acceptance, a melancholy dream

The Force of the Shot Will Shake Him

Each time a train shakes the walls
I think of a small plot of earth
in Alabama frantic to break free
and kiss the sky from which it fell.

*

My father lies deep in his bed.
I am his only son, alone
in the Iowa distance. I play
eccentric music beneath a cold sky.

*

My guitar shows its age, the neck
bending like a bow pulled back.
The strings grow dull with grit.
The blue finish scrapes away.

*

Letters from home tell of summer,
a perpetual life of sweet pine,
a full throated bird song praising
the everlasting presence of green.

*

I open the window onto a brown
world, the smell of turned soil
pungent in the frigid air. I close
my eyes and listen for my father's song.

Café Days

Enjoyable, especially with jazz
(Stan Getz, maybe). I listen
to bossa nova and Brazilian pop.

I come here for a drink most
afternoons. Everyone knows me.
I bathe in their regard.

I haunt this place like a ghost
or cat curled in on its own warm body,
waiting for someone to come along.

The Music Hall That Fell Apart

I woke up.
The trains had stopped
on their tracks.
Nothing moved.
The sky disappeared.
Only asbestos left.
The power failed.
I was late for work.
My car wouldn't start.
Had to walk.
The pavement fell away.
Had to float.
The buildings were gone.
I turned around to go back.
Nowhere to turn.
Too quiet to hear.

Chapter Three: Green Aria

I knew nothing; I could do nothing but see.
And as I watched, all the lights of heaven
faded to make a single thing, a fire
burning through the cool firs.
Then it wasn't possible any longer
to stare at heaven and not be destroyed.
- Louise Glück, "Trillium"

What Ignacio Heard

The fugue does not contain the theme
and breaks apart. Strings snap. Fingers
cramp. Bows bend past playing.
Misdirection sets the hall on fire.
The audience listens without moving.
They notice that the theme survives
the cataclysm and rises. Later, a single
guitarist, content to play alone,
sounds out the song in midnight
notes and dreams of it all morning.

Tumbling Toward One Note

Once Alabama, then Iowa.
Once Southern, then a Midwestern voice.

*

Unaccustomed to cold and corn fields,
the original idea of home grew intangible.

*

Down in the cellar of yesterday,
a boy trembles with a flashlight in hand.

*

The music hall falls apart. Guitar strings grow dull.
Blizzards and black ice, all of it cold.

*

My father would play for hours, forgetting everything
in search of the right note to finish a song.

Whispers

Yellow bristles, the remnants
of corn stalks ground
clumsily into the black earth,
wait for winter's sharp
arrival to coat the rolling
plains with wisp and white.

Abandoned barns, empty
as rusted wheel barrows,
covey into the land's low
dip and disappear. Each peak
rises up from the horizon
like a wave in a steady sea.

The year's cycle does little
to dissuade life. The green
aria of the sparrow burgeons
beneath the cold and waits
with wise patience to blossom
with the boon of Spring.

Steam of apple cider, warm
breath of doe and buck, fire
of hearth – a giant sleeps
and dreams until the break
of day cracks the brittle
sky, stretches and leaps.

Changing My Strings on New Year's Eve

I sit down and string my guitar,
loving the sound new strings bring,
the bronze twang of years spent
by a creek. I race this final evening
until the conclusion played, the guitar
falls back in its case, the sound left
hovering overhead, the strings
no longer boisterous like an expensive
soirée spent with a lover. Each year
should have a closing note, the strings
silent except for one. When played,
its precious sound would resemble
my own guitar's sound, though more
than my guitar, not that one is more
expensive. This closing sound would
shut life down, then the year flips over.

A Choice of Calling Voices

I dwell in the nocturne's drift
 and walk toward the plains
where *a cappella* wind
 lulls the bleating sheep

shards of sleet, lash of rain
 I stand on the line
between what I was
 and what I am to be

father behind me, father ahead
 mothers I left
now a question whose answer lies
 in going forward or heading back

Immigrant

When the tornado came
through, ripping trees
out of the soil and pulling
down walls, we sang.

The sound became
the kitchen table.
We looked across
it at each other,
eating melodies
like buttermilk biscuits
soaked in honey.

We didn't recall
being happier with
our own voices,
full, proud, the songs
free to dance
over the plains,
no canyons, mountains
or valleys to echo
back the call.

We knew we didn't
have to go back
to the way things were.

Sit Down, Guitarist, and Play

In everything he does
he keeps a sound in mind.
Invests in the movement
of the sun a scale of warm
notes, yellow in his green
mind. Invests in the thought
of his father intonations of Bach
and sighing cellos, or soft folk
praise, a creek sound. Invests
in the dream of place the rhythm
of Southern waves, Gulf breeze,
gulls dancing over white sand,
sea crest celebration. But he also
hears purpose, corn swaying
with the roll of plains, a straight
Midwestern theme – American
willfulness, a muscle song.

A sound toward which all motives
were directed, one fugue winding down.

Coming Through the Door

The landscape bedded down
in white, tomorrow
is a green promise.

The blizzard no longer
a guitar out of tune,
the wind pushes at my back
while the sun waits
for the perfect moment
to rush the scene.

When I arrive home,
I drink my coffee
like a boy smiling
at a pail full of seashells.

Fruit

I climb the tree
my father told me
not to climb.

The limbs threaten,
their sway between
creak and snap.

I see over
the corn fields
to farms further on.

I whistle
with the wind,
not shedding a tear.

I see more
and more soil,
everything coming up –

eager fingers
dancing beneath
the sky.

Stepping Over the Line

We fostered our confidence
through adolescent rituals –
stealing cigarettes, prank calls, tough talk.

We left our homes,
lived far away,
learned to miss our place of birth.

We waved goodbye to loved ones,
alive and dead alike,
hid scars beneath our clothes.

We crossed over state lines
into someone else's landscape
with its own history and particular longing.

We came as strangers, became kin,
laid roots in foreign fields,
held lovers, were alive.

We put one world behind us
and one horizon ahead –
the sound and plain evidence of Spring.