

Joseph Powell



The distance
between us



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The Distance Between Us

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Clover: "Climbing Without You" and "The Palouse"



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SPRING

The bright ruddy-breasted robin
threw himself into the window
all morning, his own rival.
Each thwarted attack
was another call to regroup,
to try again to rout
such stiff silent resistance.

Little poet, gymnast of uneven bars,
linguist starting a new language,
no break-through is possible
without your smashing past
that image of yourself which cannot fly.

CLIMBING WITH YOU

for Dave Guterson

We are so indebted to our own natures,
the way they interact and interweave,
how can I sometimes be you, and you me?

We are surprised by tandem insights:
some justice is only vengeance codified;
we vote for those we distrust the least;

righteousness knows the killer's handshake.
We both see through a limbic lens,
loving fairness, long marriage, and the woven word.

Memory is that old photo or slide,
that gets color-tinted by our talking
or listening to each other, year after year.

But I have my own lonely black and whites
you know nothing about, that time
hasn't colorized, or blurred or fused:

Some griefs, some cruelties, intended or not,
that stand vigilant against what my vanity
might propose in the lullaby of its luxuries.

The way your silence mints its own coinage,
you must have yours. Yet, as we climb
to Kendall Katwalk, Goldmeyer, we notice

how the river washes the mountain's face,

the moon's hung like a star in puddle trees.

The raven's wing-labor sounds like old age coming on.

Each time, we climb toward some innerness,
some heated spring we warm to.

Then lounge in its brief repletion.

But we must always hike back down
to ourselves, the empty car, that tunnel of light we follow
mile after mile, towards home, in opposite directions.

REDTAIL HAWK

Its shrill cry pierces the day like a needle.

The rabbit runs, the mouse holds still--
that cry is of both air and earth,
and pulls a tensile thread taut

between two hemispheres, two breaths.

It hovers there, a moment caught.

It's like the tension when a word
will snare us into argument.

We feel the swerving glide and beak
that's poised to rip each syllable—
or snarl us in unravelment. Do we

sit still, or run, or do we bite back?

SOCK WARS

With a pile of rolled up sock ammo
we would shut off the lights
and hide behind bed bunkers.

It was a war, not of harm, but blind accuracy.

Most were close misses, but a sock hitting
a shoulder was a touch across the dark,
like a finger in the chest that said, *you're mine*.

This was our way of sizing up an unknown
often against us. We learned to duck at the smallest sounds—
the swing of the lampshade's string,
a blanket slipping across a bedsheet,
a slipper nudged along linoleum.

We learned that decoys might work once.

We threw when a shadow we were used to
moved. What we took, we tried to give back.

It was good training—to feel small changes in the dark,
cast soft stones, laugh the face-hit away.

When the ammo was spent or out of reach,
the armistice began. We picked up and traded socks
for the next battle, then drifted toward sleep,
brothers again, breathing beside each other in the dark.

BONE HILL

“Hey, Nate, do you want to go to Bone Hill?”

“Where’s Bone Hill?”

“It’s over there. It has dead cow bones,
skulls with their eyes poked out,
skin, and everything.”

“Are they alive? Can they get up?”

“No. Once when the sun came out
they looked up and now they’re bones on Bone Hill.”

“Oh. That’s sad, isn’t it?”

—Evan & Nate, 6 and 4

On the way up, my son and his cousin shoot animals
with imaginary guns: a crested crane, elephants, pterodactyls.

They pull spring flowers and butter their wrists.

How to correct the trigger-happy imagination?

Against a hundred doubts,

I have launched reindeer, spun tales of elves
and a fat man who gives for the sake of giving,
pinned wishes to stars, chicken bones, petals.

I’ve read stories in which the wolf
eats grandmother, who is then unzipped, alive.

Peter’s duck, Sonya, comes quaking back.

Dragon teeth sprout into men, Achilles’ horse talks.

Hercules captures the man-eating mares of Diomedes.

The ground of our lies is the softness

we most wish to claim as sanctuary.

Yet when the factual stomps into the room

to cut back a corner of the child’s heart

how will we face that accusing look?

I can't favor that muddy-bottomed sea
which swallows all our Jonahs and the whales,
so let reindeer fly until their hooves give out,
green men sit on toadstools, and saints keep
my son safe from all disasters.

When we arrive on that hilltop village of bones,
the sun comes out and looks through the bleached eyes
of skulls. The boys pick up femurs and pelvises,
and the cows step into their skins,
moo, and stamp their vanished hooves,
and chase each other over that flowering hill.

WAITING FOR THE MOVIE

We stand thumbing the empty spaces
in our lives, making small talk with strangers,
the neon pawn shop sign blinking on and off.

Up ahead, the marquee lights revolve
announcing witty repartee, soulful silences
on the Riviera of a long loving look.

To get tickets, we stand compliant as zeros:
an old man cleans his fingernails with a pocketknife,

a woman takes a compact from her purse
and reconstructs her lips and hair.

Outside the big show—swashbuckling on the high seas,
bejeweled swoons, Kilimanjaro vistas—
we stand quietly inside our plain clothes.

The grey of the sidewalk disperses
into aggregates, as hardened into small facts as we are.
As we wait for whatever door might open,
the permeable self reads—
a spent condom, a frappé spoon in the gutter,
a motorbike spluttering over a darkened hill—
the long story of its absence.

FAME

At dinner someone said she was proud to own
the wrench her grandfather used on Al Capone's car.
Someone had a curl of Cher's hair, Lucille Ball's butter dish.
Moliere's biographer swoons over buying what she thinks
is Flaubert's stuffed parrot. Each yearns to connect
to some heavenly body, some frail warmth in starshine.

Our lives have been spent close to the soil,
cutting ditches to irrigate pastures and fruit trees,
weeding carrots, onions, and flowers.

To us, fame was like those evenings we watched
northern lights strobe in slow motion,
a luminous, ghostly green in columns
and wrinkling sheets, far and distant and rare.
Dirt on our knees and shoes, sweatshirts
with holes a fist could pass through,
no one dreamt of stepping into that light.

Coyotes had mouths that wanted to be famous,
to colonize the night with their eerie echoes.
Lawyers in blue and brown suits at lunch-counters
knotted aspiration into ties
that made them sweat out summers.
So when my mother tells the story
over a heap of cracked walnuts,
T.V. images of FDR striding across her glasses,
we listen vaguely as to the wind
ticking the shrubbery against the windows.
At the Grand Coulee dam site,
with her brother, carrying clothes and food
for their father, she saw Franklin's
clenched smile, a cigarette burning,
his hand waving as he passed through the street
on his way to his Eighth Wonder of the World,
enough concrete to fill fifty-thousand boxcars,
and stymie a century of salmon,
his blue-black hat up at the brim,
nose-spectacles splashing back saucers of sunlight.

She hardly looked up from the nuts in her lap,
as if he were merely one of them,
or that brainy odd one that comes out whole.

THE DISHRAG

The woman who lived in the house
we bought worked in town
for many years, had lost a husband
who once tried to farm the rocks here.
They both died within three months,
and left the place littered with their past—
broken machinery, board piles, stacks of tires,
a barn full of Rhineland bottles and Styrofoam.
Each thing, still part of an unfinished story.
Inside the house, a dropped marble
rushed to a corner; a grease stain ran down one wall.
The rugs and colors held tight to their old décor.
Stripped of furnishings and curtains,
the house held its windows up to the light.
Only a blue rag stayed faithful to its nail,
that idea of future dirt.
Above the sink it still held the shape
of her hands when last wrung dry and hung there.
The fine ridges between her fingers,
the mark of a wedding band,
the strength at her fingertips.

Frayed from so many pots, plates, and silverware,
it was stiff and smelled of humus and age.
When I wet it to wipe from the countertops
that residue that awaits even the most polished thing,
her invisible grip on the house
relaxed, and her rag scrubbed
at that thin distance between us.

THE PALOUSE

In a crevice, between dirt mounds,
rusting harrows and combines,
disks and sprayers, show how long
the land's been worked,
that plowblades thin from year to year,
and uselessness follows close on use.

That white house with an arc
of evergreens in ever-space
is almost lost. Can the news find
the dirt-scuffed kitchen door
with a long-haired shepherd curled on the step?
Can this greenish spot
contain the eye's need for rarity?

Is literal isolation really so far
from inner? In New York, high-rise

rooms over-look ledges and ledges of windows
looking out at windows.

Each day the monotony of the new:
tattoo parlors, sex shops, the world's goods
and sounds colliding in every inch of space.
You walk through it all: blinking
back at neon lights no one reads, ignore shouts
muffled by walls. Music on every corner
exchanging notes with the recent past.

From your windows, the people on the street
look like waving lines of colored wheat,
and street on street advances as far as any eye can see
with no machinery to hold back time.
You are one light, one light on a sea of light.

HAND WRITING

My students come to class each morning in sweatpants
and crazy hair. Across the backs of hands
are phone numbers from the night before.
I'd like to think someone wants to lend them a book
so vivid and poignant they can't wash
until they've actually got it in their hands.
But some girl probably faked a free-drink crush
and he wears that number now as a missed chance.
Or she let him drunkenly draw his number,

thinking the future is always safer.

As they reach for their textbooks
I see what their fingers spell: *Fuck U*,
Love, on one thumb, *Hate*, on the other,
Sturm and Drang, on the crewcut learning German,
Or *Yab* and *Way*, on the dreadlocked Yogi.
Some hands are blotched in multi-colored inks
and their sketch-pad skin's part umbrella, part package
and odometer. Some tats crawl across young skin
as thorned hearts, roses, and hummingbirds—
their soul's illuminated manuscript.

How physically they yearn to be the blossom of their years,
rather than face in class the many reasons we hoisted
Columbus onto his genocidal pedestal,
or how Keynesian economics explains why they're here.
They want something to have faith in,
to reach their hands out and meet
that other self they'd like to be,
as if the books we're reading or have read
didn't spell out in longer, deeper texts
the same rueful and ink-stained distance
between our promise and who we've become.

AT LASZLO'S DESK: THE POEM IN PROGRESS

At first, it is a little sound
and only wants to live in the terrarium
of your brief attention
beside the lacquered pinecone,
the inkwell, the fish fossil,
sounds knuckling the window.

In spite of an itch in your eyebrow,
a sneeze, it wants to send down
a tendril that could hold
up Atlas and his world,
take Jesus down from his cross
and wash his wounds.

It can daub the eyes of the Jewish girl
called names, set the ancient sequoia
back on its stump, discover a lost cause,
let the fish swim free of its stone.
Inside your eye, it can be anything.

THE ELOQUENCE OF ACCIDENTS

The intricacies of happenstance
exceed our will to understand—
a seal's ball bounces askew
and the plumed horse kicks it.
The ball splats in the chili-dog

of a large man in the third row,
a brown smudge blooms on your white blouse.

With an ovenmitt I open oysters
from the stove's grill,
then pick up a hot butterknife
with my bare hand: it flies toward the countertop
knocks over the olive oil, which hits the balsamic vinegar,
which clips a wineglass that somersaults
and crashes to the tile floor, the stem end spinning
briefly on its cane of glass.

For a few seconds, the inanimate danced
and the convoluted paths of cause and effect
are the light verse of the universe.

We're most befuddled by
that crashing airplane wheel
falling through the night,
the bedroom, into the man
who took his pills to sleep.
We mix our God or devil in it
to straight-jacket chance,
and let good or sin win
though the underside of things
will not abide a rule
and seems to favor
the elastically plural.

THE BUCK

The buck walks onto my snowy lawn,
a three-point. He shakes his antlers in the sun
and nibbles the old leaves of apple trees.
He is both word and flesh.

I know this ragged buck in winter's early guise
prefers to be outside my calculating eye.
He stops and looks back into morning's window frame,
then stands inside his ink like that rusty smell
inside the apple leaf.

He imprints the snow and flicks his tail,
pushing forward a little balloon of breath,
dropping pellets like periods and ellipses in the snow.
He sniffs and eats the frost-edged leaves.

The cross-hairs of the eye watch him nibble
across the poem's orchard, like the mind's
registering the things it feeds on.
At the cracking of a branch, the scent of threat,
any sideways motion, the poem and buck
are poised to run then later reassess.

If I mounted his lovely head on the page—
his black muzzle in a half smile, ears alert,
glossy eyes awake—as emblem
of all those lovely nature poems,

more word than world, he might resent
my use of him, as I would if my face
were in an ad for aging cream.

If I let the cougar who has been here before
pounce and seize his neck, some order
is restored with claws and incisors.

Or he might embody my looking out today
and his looking in, how feeling's returned
in guises we can't predict.

Outside and inside my frosty window
I let him eat the leaves and twigs
in my apple trees, even to their peril,
until he wanders off into the thing
he was before he first appeared
and the word and flesh were one.

VOICE

Always the art wishes to be better
or the unshaved personality
even while the pursuit has its luggage
stickered and taped from its travels.

Mailer said the one mind the novelist
can't enter is a better novelist's,

though one priest can always try to be a better priest.
Prayer butters God's bread
which He may or may not eat.

The old poet said you work for a voice that's yours
then spend a lifetime trying to escape it.
The saint with early sins is the better saint.

Most of mine are visible the moment after.
Others can take years for that certain angle of light
or a finger saying, *There*:
the easy epiphany, simplicity masked as prophecy,
history without joy.
No one rises out of his own age
without puddle-drips and sloshy footprints
through the rooms of himself, his time.

Think of the fruit against the branch
and the scars the wind rubs in.
The quirks of character, little lies
we tell ourselves, or you,
to let an hour pass less judged
which is itself a judgment
on an invisible journey.

Think of style, the mind's habitual leanings,
the effort it takes to chip away the wayward contours,
the stone's blemishes, when all the time
it's the stone's story.

Sometimes the apple's just a little sweeter
because of what the tree and wind have done.