

Eight Poems

by Brent Newsom

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Smyrna

By a strip of highway spilled beside a swamp
that exhales sphinx moths and hums mosquito hymns:
their kids sack out on sofas while the men
make sweatless love to tired wives, then go
perspire in oil-smeared, orange hard hats
on caffeinated graveyard shifts. Days off,
they jaw across their truck beds lined with cans
in the gravel lot outside the donut shop.
Come winter, dawn and dusk, they tramp the bogs
with shotguns, taking life as it comes to them.
Pass through and you'll be met with friendly waves
and icy stares. At the edge of town, by the caution light,
a metal sign, green, lettered in white:
WELCOME—riddled with steel shot.

Esther Green Plans a Funeral

Lord knows, Claudia, I can't have it
at the church. Bill quit years ago,
once the girls were grown,
said it wasn't worth the trouble
of putting on slacks and his good white shirt
to be patronized by neckties and comb-overs.

He'd still have himself a Sabbath
of sorts—I'd come home to him sitting outside
in his faded flannel and jeans,
handsome even leaned back in a lawn chair
smoking his Winstons.
He'd ask how the sermon was,
follow me in to help with lunch.

It was one of those Sunday lunches
when I noticed red flecks
on the whisker-tips of his mustache.
He'd choked it back who knows how long.
Don't mince words, he told the doc,
so she said the spot was softball-sized,
the rest of his lung likely black
as a burnt marshmallow.
She showed us a malignant cell—
looked like those prickly sweetgum balls
that fall to the ground in winter.
Only softer, a pill of lint almost.
Next day, Bill went back to work,
which was not a big surprise.
He lasted weeks, which was.

Pfc. Mason Buxton Wets a Hook

All warfare is based on deception.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Whether you're wiping out a phantom weapons cache
or planting homemade bombs in cardboard boxes,
trash cans, saddlebags—Sun Tzu was right:
the lie lies dead at the heart of war. By it
we live and die. The art's in choosing lures.
(A shiner? Melon lizard? Chartreuse worm?)
That's part. But a naked lie won't nail a bass.
You hide the hook inside. Then drop the bait
between two cypress stumps, jig your rod
at five Mississip, crack open a cold one. Sip.
He bites, you set and reel—then watch the lake explode.

An American Love Affair

The whole idea of riding atop a series of contained explosions was abhorrent to many.

—Edwin Black, *Internal Combustion*

In fact, it seemed a marriage made in hell.
To ride astride ignited gas and spot
a hefty dowry for the right—why not
store a load of TNT in the tire well?
It was courting disaster, seemed vaguely like sin,
so thousands jilted the car. Was it some joke,
this notion of motion? They smelled the noxious smoke
that drifted from beneath its flawless skin.

But that exhaust became a tart's *parfum*:
enter Henry Ford, his Model T
a winsome mistress masses could afford,
a locomotive whore. America swooned—
enamored, moved, driven to ecstasy.
We paved. We drilled, refined. We spilled. We warred.

Pfc. Mason Buxton Embraces the Suck

Back home in the Louisiana night, my wife
squeezes the hand of some ponytailed nurse,
cursing my name with every push
while I wake again in the cradle
of fucking civilization, another day
the same, decked out in battle rattle,
lugging an idiot stick, extra mags
stuffed in my flak jacket, roam
the same brown streets and wait
for necktied Beltway clerks
to sort out this Sunni and Shiite shit—
and I can almost hear her grunts and groans
and the crunch of ice between her teeth,
almost see her lips wrenching with pain
as the doctor inserts the forceps into her
and tells her, *Again*, and, *One more*, and she screams—
and from a hundred feet I feel the blast
behind me and tuck beneath the rain
of dirt and rock, then sidle along a wall
and turkey peek around the corner,
see vics spread-eagled on the ground,
some dead, some dying eyes-wide-open
in the arms of women already wearing black,
and at the checkpoint, a pool of blood
and fur, a donkey ear (*Shock and
bee-haw*, we call it later), then I'm holding
a soldier whose arm hangs from his shoulder
by shreds of sinew and skin.
A month goes by, and I'm at Ft. Living Room.
I have a daughter and lie awake in bed,
sleepless at oh three hundred,
seeing behind my eyes the placid sun
hung like a medal in the bone-colored sky.

Horticulture

Mid-June, a gangly, wide-eyed eight-year-old
with pinkish, peach-fuzzed Dumbo ears
oversoaped the dishes his first night,
deliberately, gleeful as soapsuds spewed
from the Kenmore onto the kitchen tiles.
I went for the mop while, firm but calm,
the Director sent the boy to bed, which he also wet
deliberately.

I didn't go home that college summer
but part-timed as a nursery vendor
at a big-box lawn and garden center—
made “color” the first thing “guests” would see,
trimmed leaves gone brown with drought or disease—
and interned at the ranch for troubled boys,
hired-hand-slash-babysitter (*Role model*,
the Director said, *A presence*)
with a furnished, private room, rent-free.
Discipline was not in the intern's job description,
so Dumbo clipped my heels, yakking with candor
while I pulled squash and young cucumber
or set an iron fencepost, pretended to listen,
which should have been enough. A presence.

He felt so deeply I felt embarrassed
when he spoke of why his mother left him
with grandparents (now I can't recall—
the psych ward, drug habit, jail?)
and of why his grandma and grandpa left him
with us. *It made me hurt inside*,
he said, *but I know they're too old*
to keep a kid. He was wiser in that way,
and more mature, than I, unacquainted
with such frankness and such grief.

But on the ranch's hard red dirt, tenderness
was taboo. Ten feet up the climbing wall,

he screamed. The others jeered as he clung
too stiffly, then slipped. He wailed,
knowing only the rope I held
saved him from falling. He'd felt those lines
go slack before. His dusty sneakers strained
for solid ground, and when they touched
he clung to my waist, rivulets on his dirty cheeks,
snot quivering on his upper lip. He needed
more than I knew how to give.

I volunteered for extra hours at work,
preferred to pluck dead blades from sprays
of purple fountain grass, arrange displays
of garish zinnias, set pallets of young crepe myrtles
outside the gate. I lined up pots of hostas
straight as rails in a white pipe fence,
napped on patio chairs whenever I could.
Evenings, I unrolled a rubber hose,
gave everything another splash of water.
The caladiums leaned toward me, giant
green-veined ears eavesdropping on my prayers
for autumn.

By August he was gone;
but I still felt the weight of him, hanging
in mid-air by the rope that linked our bodies
like an umbilical cord, still heard his voice
grow shrill and dry before I let him down.

Agriculture

twenty-one weeks

The three-finger salute, the sonographer says,
as though you're giving me the bird
discreetly: your two femurs
brackets around your penis—
an underside view of you
transcribed from sound to image.
A boy. For a moment I feel
some mystical male bond already
shooting roots into the earth.

But someday you will hate me
as I hated my cash-strapped father
when he planted five acres of peas to sell
the summer I turned thirteen,
woke me each day before dawn
to pace the rows with a bushel basket.
One afternoon, customers watching,
I told him I quit. Red-faced and sweating,
he rose to his six-feet-one, roared, *Boy*,
you're not going anywhere. So I wasn't.

Now, from this doctor's office dimmed
to just your greenish onscreen glow,
I see my dad was a good one and loved
persistently, if too quietly,
perplexed at times by my zeal
and my silences. Boy, your hate
will be our harvest, the grain we glean
from the seed of some failing
I cannot yet name. May we gather it into sheaves
and grind it into flour. Let us bake whole
loaves, son, of bread we both can eat.

Saint Gerard

thirty-eight weeks

I help her on with the gown, a cotton curtain,
paisley print fringed with ties and metal snaps
but no arm holes or back, nothing we feel safe
calling a neckline. Her lips move as if in prayer.
I wrap the gown around her, press the rivets home,
then bow the ties behind. This looks like love.

A sudden cramping after we made love.
Her labor starting? No. Now she's certain.
It's not her time. She wants to go back home.
I drove us here. She starts to cry and I snap
at her: *It's too late to leave.* On the wall, a prayer
to Saint Gerard, patron of the pregnant, for safe

delivery. I mumble maxims: *better safe*
and so on. My fear for the child has trumped my love
for her. Lying down, she trembles like cornered prey.
Though we're alone, we draw the striped curtain.
A nurse enters. A latex glove snaps
against a wrist, and two lubed fingers home

in on her cervix, press toward the child's home
these past nine months. She grimaces. I'm safe,
seated beside the bed. I watch, and she snaps
her head away, to hide the face I love.
Something's descended, a heavy, opaque curtain
of silence hanging between us. I read the prayer

on the wall and recall, she asked me to pray
an hour ago, while we were still at home.
I said I would. Then a magician's curtain
closed, and *poof!*—just smoke and lights. A heist; a safe
emptied of compassion. An inside job. What's love
if not the patience to pray? Guilt's whip snaps

at my back. *Mea culpa*. How I wish I could snap
my fingers, be back on our saggy couch, and pray:
God of peace, make mine a patient love,
and free from fear. She turns. Her eyes plead, *Home*.
The nurse agrees. Mother and child are sound, safe.
I exhale, then help her dress, draw back the curtain.

At home, my penance of final touches: the nursery's curtains,
safety plugs, old frames prepared for new snapshots.
And this: to pray that I might learn, and relearn, love.