

Poetry of Ben Volman - Page Two



older/younger

It was during the "all-nighters"
excursions into hours of cryptic punctuated nonsense
striking at corrasable bond
typing, rubbing out, typing
my old Singer manual
etching every line
into my plain white
4:30 a.m. skin,
late, always late with the damn papers
and what the hell did they want me to surrender now?
and I'd look deep into the mirror
that hung by the desk
in that cold, windowless room
questioning aloud, speaking to the coming years:

"Do you resent me, old man"
Am I ##### you up?"
while the early morning eyes stared back
as if the butterfly pinned its own wings

and I want to reach into that darkness and shout:
Hold on, friend!
You are not accused,
you are not feared,
your courage amazes.

Out of this weathered, tough exterior

you force me, gently, to admit
I am still living in the shadow of your brighter light,
that fierce, uncompromised
hunger for miracles.

Encounter, St. Michael's College

"There are no ordinary people.
You have never talked to a mere mortal." C.S. Lewis

After the library closes,
I scurry through shrill January gusts
toward St. Marys Street between the young oak trees
frozen in life, their thin pale limbs
still holding tight to arthritic leaves
stiff as clotted blood,
and tonight, the coat hangers of old arguments
clatter away, the sparring, jostling companions
still familiar after two decades
when we leaned into the bruising wind
every night at this hour.

No one shouts down their dead,
or silences the dialogue of heavenly bodies.
Earth doesn't bind me
but it leaves me weak;
weightless as a star;
capable as an insect;
scarred by circling planets of other minds
emitting through the cosmic archipelago of memory
the shattered voices of those who can't grow old
but ache to be so young.

World View

I see the world
through a round,
gold-rimmed monocle:
my wedding ring,

which I still feel, daily,
though I am long married,
and sometimes I take it off
just to let it drop and hear
that pure note: testing the silent weight
of fields piled high with wedding bands,
earrings, acres of blind, gold-rimmed glasses,
dropped by loved ones
pushed through the gates of hell,
and my own small circle among them:
the uncle for whom I am named,
an invisible grandmother
whose picture never survived,
her serious, elderly husband,
whose eyes I share.
His son, my father,
taught me nothing of display.
His ring wore out over the forge,
clenched against the blowtorch,
and not once in forty years
has he mentioned his brother's wedding.
or their little boy, my cousin,
who died
in Auschwitz.
All this weighs
heavily as Swiss gold.
I can't peer too long this way,
and even if I looked far enough and wide,
how should I make myself ready?
Even to marry sorrow
one must have her ring.

The Origin of Doubt

"There's a painting by Caravaggio done late in his life of David...the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man."
M. Ondaatje

The English Patient

I can't quite close the gate
on death and other minor cosmic
misinformation attested as fact: the ether,
atoms with photons circling like planets,
the earth
anchoring the sun
and galaxies rotating obediently
as if to the divine kings.

It recalls my history of factual
disobedience: but one evening
a beloved mentor, wise soul
(clutched by a bad back,
apologizing when he sat
to lecture directly from the Greek text)
betrayed us, the faithful, confessed
at length his unconquered fear
of crouching death,
shook me with this cut
at gravity's umbilical cord

but decades of loud certainty
have never silenced his measured words:
and the wall-papered paradise of those early years
when miracles easily stopped the everyday pain
is now a long, worn hallway
and the veil between teacher and student
fragile
as Michelangelo's touch from the finger of God
Adam receives only the slightest brush
or Leonardo's Judas, gripping the table
but already thrown
from the true master's orbit.

Don Valley & Richmond Heading West

"Prepare to meet
thy God"

bump
the highway cuts off
the old brick church
at the brow
so they put up a sign
to meet your eyes:
and haven't changed it
in years.

Why not
prepare to be kissed by God?
prepare to enjoy your God?
prepare for cosmic love?
or
Don't prepare let God surprise you.

Old Amos, shaking his fist
over the northern border
to Shiloh didn't pull threats out of a can:
he threw that wild, high yell
in a last act of mercy
while armies were dressing in steel
before dipping the sword into his people's blood
crying, "It's coming!"
"You proud idiots behind your 12 foot walls,
"It's coming.
Every damn thing ye fear most
and it'll be thunder in yer hair
and fire in yer shoes,
plowing up yer cities like garbage
flung before a storm."

So,
d'ya wanna talk about mercy
or is there someone waiting
behind that sign
with a ##### grenade
for just the right car
to come over that rise
and blow?

Dancer

"Seventy years man and boy
and never have I danced for joy."
Imitated from the Japanese
W.B. Yeats

My little boy
has never walked across the street.
He dances everywhere:
from the schoolyard to his class,
from the dinner plate to his room
and always with a joy
I have never known.
I am a master of doubt
while he goes dancing through tears
splashing laughter through my drought,
spinning in a wild ecstasy of rhythm,
flashing his heels to keep time
with his heart.

I've spent 20 years walking to heaven
with a slow, penitent pace
while he dances through the gates
without a second thought
for my qualifying ifs, ands or buts.
He is loved, no matter what.
I'm a fine example
of all who have studied long
before they leapt.
But all I can do is follow
with a lighter,
if uneasy,
step.

The wound

My fingertips
hone in with practiced certainty

on the grooved crease in my skull
where a car trunk crushed the cerebral bone
so that my little boy learned early
not to bang too ##### daddy's head.
An intimate companion
since the first minutes Rob met me
at the bus station in downtown Chicago.
My bus was hours late, but I was still able
to carry at least three of my seven (yes, seven) bags
for a year of graduate work
through a pitch black parking lot,
and when he opened the trunk and saw his golf clubs
closed the lid just as I leaned in
"Is that blood?"
he asked my sprawling figure
almost invisible on the pavement,
and because I couldn't see, tasted it,
laughing, because I'd spent hours wondering
"What else could go wrong?"

The surgeon, a woman
with remarkably strong fingers
castigated me gently:
"Quite a nasty wound here, Mr. Volman"
as she fitted the stitches, and then in after-thought,
"Welcome to Chicago."

This was the first night of our friendship.
For months, we argued, wrestling
in prayer and writing, marking for posterity
the trajectory of expectations.
I fell in love with Monet's haystacks,
and never quite got the girl
while wandering through Marshall Fields
or puttering round Highwood, IL
home, according to Guinness,
of the most drinking spots per person on earth
still, neither palliatives nor distance dull the pain;
there is a spot on the globe
where I have my little boy point with a finger

and sometime, every year, near Rosh HaShanah
I call Rob, in a suburb south of Boston
to ask about his kids,
share the scars of our middle years,
a friend's passing, the naming of a child,
acknowledge that life wears away life,
and even our lapses of memory
join us to places that were starting points
for an education
marked by rash impulse and choices
definitive as a surgeon
hovering over the wound
and considering
a point of incision.

Turning Point

I have lived too long without boundaries
For this heart in need of a measured pace
Untaught in the steeled quietude of grace,
A storm driven over every mountain into lees.

The gifts I played with slept
In earth that nurtured whatever seed had blown
From any wind, perhaps an occasional flower was sown
But a gardener would call the place unkempt.

The flood of shapeless years now spans
The several muddied rivers of my strength
Until I rise from depths where I have sought at length
The chiseled light of diamonds, the focus of a lens.

☞[Your email to Ben is welcomed](#)☞