

The Conductor

On my father's shoulders
higher than helmets higher than wind-whipped flags
I orchestrate bombs bursting into bouquets,
sparklers parachuting over troops of bobbing tubas.
Below me, mother prays for my precarious soul.
Rib-tickling hands chute me into my uncle's Mail Pouch breath.
NUTS! we chant at dummies burning in trash cans.
I sing about Yanks, thousands sing, we march past Ball Stores,
YMCA, shedtown where Negroes stare from shacks,
jazz men pipe us into streets that smell like rubber sheets.
Ol' Charlie grins (he lives here?). I wave hard,
his black face autumn in neon. *JUMP!* he shouts,
his arms the usual sack of leaves.
Grandmother jerks my ankle, shushing me
into straight-backed hymns of praise,
on this day of all days, amazing grace,
her body wobbling like a collection plate.
At Main and Elm soldiers rise in stone, pigeons scatter,
a black-draped woman wails and I don't understand her falling.
I'm whisked away where frisky girls pinch my cheeks,
men bounce me in blankets.
Back in my father's grip I hug his head like Lash LaRue movies
or God on Sunday mornings. O whatever this war is that's over,
I hope it's not for good.

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Bacon's Rebellion

She jumped into the luminous day-bus
like a wasp darting from a flailing hand,
each split-second costing time its life.

I don't know how much the past plays
in the world's demand for speed, but
without it you could not run a stoplight.

I once walked through Bacon's Castle
in Surry, Virginia, a garrison for giddy-
headed troops entrenched in rebellion

and a stone's throw from Nat Turner's
rampage against everything white.
Through diamond-pane casement

windows I saw slave quarters alive
and dying for centuries which no
freshly-painted clapboard could hide.

I was a paying tourist on a cheap trip
into another world, star-trek wanderer
going backward for the heck-of-it,

until a woman next to me observed
that blacks and whites were united
in Bacon's army. *To kill Indians*, I said,

knowing that complexity is the politics
of the human heart. Yes, she said,
but there was love between races,

children were born, it started here.
I wondered, doubting that union was
ever free on a map of slave states.

Well, it is today, she said, striding
toward the bus, returning the past

to guest visitation and those of us

who would try, even if a moment
is not history, to imagine ourselves
black, staring at landscaped gardens

and fields we owned with our souls,
wondering if the heat would ever stop,
if we would outlive the driver's horn,

if maggots still crawled in the ash-cake.

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**Under “The Dead of Antietam”:
photographs by Alexander Gardner (1862)**

On the walls of our bed-and-breakfast hang
stark images that lift us into yesterday’s dead.

We intended otherwise: naked play, late sleep,
a guided tour of the battlefield, aided by Podcast,

a weekend away from the timeless chores of living.
But history has its own way of waking up, if only

to turn with a groan. Do you know how hard it is
to outlive antiques? I see the boy, that’s all he is,

his gaping mouth praying its rebel yell, the body
ignored by its soul. I see, though I close hard

against my eyes, the vacant stare of mutilated
bones crisscrossed in a long gully of failure.

I hear—how do I hear?—the crenulated wave
of wounded black grass stacked against cannons,

and your hand on my chest falls away in defeat.
If we came to see maps and hills and fences

that peace has reclaimed, we have been shown
that sometimes nothing can be salvaged.

And we, my love, like light slanting across
these frames, born in thunder too far back

to be heard, wonder if what has been lit
burns eternally. Until now, I have never

doubted the routines of earth, the perfect
fall and rise through all that waste. Tonight,

as the moon eases past this window toward
its usual burned-out campfire, I will fear

the ghostly shadows, I will fear that before
dawn the sun could get lost in the dark.

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One Hand Clapping

on my father's 100th birthday, 2005

He is old. Older than anyone else I know.
On a good day, when the snow melts
from sidewalks and cracks are visible
reminding him not to step where bad luck
could flame his gout, he is eighty.
On days when bone spurs gouge his knees
and he can't remember his 1932 Durant,
he is Bloody Sunday's child, born on a day
the world was going to hell. 1905
was a banner year for revolutions
and mind-boggling mistakes—a massacre
in Russia and Cleveland committing
seven errors in one inning. Ordinary citizens
had a voice—democracies were new—
and they could tumble czars and managers
like tissues in a sandstorm. But aging
was short-term, no chance, when air-born
fibers sunk into bones and lungs like hugs
at a family reunion. Today, I ask my father
how he feels about getting so old. I expect
something like “better than the alternative.”
But he smiles, survivor, leans past his pills,
and shows me. Not many centenarians
can clap with one hand and pluck goldfish
from a bowl cast by René Lalique.

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The Street of Heavens

*Tell me how you die and I will tell you
who you are.*

Octavio Paz

I stand in line. The woman ahead of me,
blowzy-haired and angry, is told that grace
is the act of restraint and road-kill is not a sport.
She can choose to wait or test the judgment
at another entrance. I know that morality,
penance, a kind heart don't matter, nor the faith
I embraced or didn't, the people I saved. I know
the key is where I land on the scale of commitment.

Earnhardt, Sr., died for the game, and got in.
Many ancient Egyptians buried juggling balls
with them, as though endless practice and craft
were their gifts to the next world. They entered.
I ask if I can peek in, maybe stand on the edge
and look into the vast canyon of pits, arenas,
fields, fairways, pools, rings, tables, tracks,
courts, beaches, forests, mountains

where war is forbidden. Here is what I bring
for review: a nasty fastball, a runner-up ring,
individual initiative, a contrary attitude, the heart
of a poet. I bring a willingness to run like an outlaw,
honor the Greeks and Makahiki, invent new games,
practice past dusk, play on the second squad,
and keep score until I can get in the game
with eternity left on the clock. I hope it is enough.

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