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ASHES IN THE FLESH

Poems by

Alan Britt

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PIANO LESSON #2

Ashes in the flesh,
eyes in the wood;
music tucked up the empty sleeves
of the armless man.

A dark piano strolls along rainy streets
with neon signs
tangled in its hair;
and quickly disappears into our blood.

POEM WRITTEN WHILE CONTEMPLATING
THE ABSURDITY OF CLOTHES

The absurdity of clothes
has nothing at all to do with the brown stars
that unfold their wings and shake loose the dust
inside your blood vessels.
This peculiar state of our existence
has even less to do
with the flat green cactus dressed in its robe
of thorns.
Your nude statue faces the door,
and crouches behind a crocheted pillow
lying in a cane rocker.
If I stand in the wind and face east
my eyelids will fall,
(all this furniture would burn in the palm of my hand)
but if I stand in the wind and face west
I am constantly pulling at my trousers
fidgeting with my belt.
I could sit here forever
and contemplate the large white gull
swaying upon invisible waves of foam,
or beside the wall in this room
the naked bronze couple
embraced in love.

AN ODE TO CESAR VALLEJO
AND STEVE BARFIELD

There is so much distance
between the bone and its tissue
the hand and the solitude
the dream and its fear
the word and the mouth
the lips that are like a mountain
or an eagle, a hawk

So many words
get tangled
in the eyelashes
they are like a spider caught
on the edge of a rock,
the hands are whales
lying upon a beach

There is too much distance
between the eye and the grape
the wings and the legs
the voice and its ferns

When an eyelid arouses
there is so much running
behind doors
so much shuffling
of old feet
there is already too much sadness
between God and the buzzard

There is no silver
in your eyes
like there is
in the river that splashes
through lettuce leaves

PIANO LESSON #3

1.

If you close the piano lid over me
I will go to sleep.

2.

My lips swell with birds,
my ribs grow empty.

3.

I hide inside each musical note
that leaps from the piano.

4.

My sleep becomes filled with blood,
and my feet stand beside a wall.

5.

Behind my eyelid's empty space
a lizard plays a black piano.

FELLINI'S "LA STRADA"

Black brush strokes
create a body
among the weeds
A river splashes
inside the cheekbone
Legs break off
and drop
from the body
Arms reach
behind the moon
Footsteps appear on the flesh
Eyelashes crumble in leaves
A hand
falls against a rock
and breaks into stars
that create a sound
upon the river

THE PROPOSITION

"Come to me," you said,
"when you are ready."

The other, "come when your work
is done."

"Look for me," you said,
"inside algae near the tiny hoofprints
of stars."

The other, "look for me
in newspaper columns. I will wear
black shoes and smoke a pipe."

"Listen for me," you said,
"inside the pelican's eggs. The wind
gathers these eggs in a nest
of blood."

The other, "listen for me
in places I've never been. I climb
up stairs with a wooden smile, with ropes
and a suitcase, it's all I know."

So I came to you who are alive.

The other does not exist.

With a fish in my hair,
and hay in my shoes,
I dance upon the sky!

GROUND DOVE

Dove in the grass
with a broken wing.
You die in the children's hands,
their voices roll your legs.
At our door
with the terrified air
in my hands.
For two days
you lie in a shoebox
full of grass.
With infinite eyes
and a stiff body.
Little dove, please,
take my poem from me.

from MALAISE:

1.

Malaise, the overcoat buried inside our bones,
a breath that drifts beside our houses
and leans against the white bridge railing,
the unfortunate wheel that crushes our sad lives,
the child without a vision,
entire cities that crumble in our mouths,
and the blood that dries up in our shoes;
in the mornings we die of you,
vomiting and crying in our sleep,
we starve for everything that has been destroyed by you
and hold our broken faces
as you carry our families away in steam shovels.

2.

Malaise the sadness and tormenter, murderer of all we love.
Malaise the sea-going tanker
and its rusted hull that separates the oily waves.
Malaise the hand
coiling a rope around the butterfly's ankles.
Malaise! Malaise! a knife hidden in oily rags
and buried behind the moon,
the red sweater
that sags between two bales of hay,
the hay's secret wine and dark legs
that reach into the barn's membranes,
rusted nails driven through ice
into blue hands,
dead parakeets
slid inside house slippers,
the marriage
between painted house boards and dead lips,

the purple fluid
from the cracked eye,
the shotgun blast
above a dawn river,
the rusted chains
fastening the bloody doe's limp body to the pickup truck's
hood,
the champagne
spilled through a silk handkerchief over sun flowers,
the leaden eye
that crushes the lizard's tail,
the one armed man
who enters the swamp with a suitcase,
the mechanical pencil
that scratches its initials on the limpkin's nest,
the tractor
that dismantles the twigs of the gull's nest,
the abandoned washing machines
littering the roadsides of old eyeballs,
the photographs
propped beside the pillows of dying young war veterans
and their plastic urinary bags
that slide out of reach onto the cold tiles.
Malaise of the burnt flags
in the President's closet,
the frightened women
running through crowded Chilean streets
(and) the earthquake of blood in their stadium.
Malaise of the world,
the ash
on the flower,
the Seminole Indian
emptying garbage cans behind a Florida sea food restaurant,
torn shirts and dark hands,
eyes without roots,
arms that carry stars into the body,

bleached eyes
that float on piled up rivers,
pregnant women's gray bellies,
lead colored rain
bites the flesh,
lead fingers
burn the eyes,
lead hail
batters the mouth,
telephone wires
stretch through our coffee cups.

3.

This cannot go on for an eternity,
our eternity, which may last only an hour,
this must stop before the abandoned shoes
clog up our blood vessels,
don't you see,
doesn't this make any sense to you,
we'll pile the bodies into wheelbarrows
and wheel them into the stock exchange.

4.

A beach convulses
and the cormorant limps across oily sand.
An unbuttoned shirt
lounges on a yacht's deck,
at its leisure
it hangs two blue marlins on a white living room wall,
their beautiful bodies
marble eyes glued to their heads,
a cocktail conversation drones
and the tablecloth becomes a giant wave;
helpless fins beat against the walls.

AFFAIR

An angel of flesh hangs
from my roof top. The French
scream from their thick collars,
and the dog's bones
float across the backyard.
None of this says too much,
but the hammer strikes a nail
into the sun's shoulder,
and the cooking pot on the stove
closes its eyelid.
Where were you when it all
began? The poor arms
of Aime Cesaire are folded
in their pockets. His voice speaks
loudest, and we grab a blanket
to pull over the dead poet
who discovered too much eternity
while living in Madagascar. I hang
a hat on a nail and drop my words
beneath automobile tires.
This whole affair and the wind
together becomes too futile, so
we put on shirts with puffy sleeves
and we bang our hands
against the tile floors of the
rest rooms. But then some
fool asks for a meaning to it all,
so I must laugh and say,
"it is the cold, my friend, we
are only after the cold."

TAMPA

A cough folded in a handkerchief
slides underneath a rug.

The moon falls inside my shoes,
and turns to fine dust.

I wipe my hair on a window;
the banana flower grows from dark steel.

I ask questions about the wall,
and the sulphur on your lips.

Fish write my name on the air!

ST. CROIX

I am off on a long journey,
to a land where the chameleon dozes on patio chairs
and a night's collar is thick with stars.

I am going to St. Croix.

Where an emerald crown hummingbird
flies around my hair.

I am going to St. Croix.

But first, there are things to consider:
the salt shaker and its ocean.

I am off to St. Croix.

Then I must find a shirt, white
as the fence post and not stepped upon
by the cows.

I am off to St. Croix.

You must carefully hide the ticket
behind your right ear.

I am off!

But the clouds, my friend, the clouds
that eternally pass, those marvelous
clouds. . .

I am going to the island of tiny streets
and quaint shops, where an old negro woman
dozes in a straw chair and snaps angrily
at a racist world when a foolish photographer
asks for her picture.

I am going to St. Croix's hills
where my shadow crumbles between the bricks
of a ruined sugar mill,
and I am the ash
that lies at the bottom of its well.

I want to awake
near the bush's thrashing wings
when a red dove flies across my hair;
red doves sail across the road
with hinges on their wings.

I am going to St. Croix.

Where the children wave their sighs
alongside a sailboat.

I stand in a dirty street where black shoes
sit beneath a crumbling archway,
I place a gold coin in my hair
and wait for hummingbirds
to hesitate along a hedge of red flowers.

St. Croix's rum and dried lips,
its fishing boats and tourist restaurants,
its cocktail parties and white trousers
that lounge by the sea,
windy eyelashes.

I will go to the islands, yes
and sleep in a cactus,
I will dream of papayas
and exchange my childhood
for lizards that pant behind the window louvres.

I will go there, to the wind
 with orange bougainvillea hands
 and sugarbirds that monopolize
 a single leafless tree.

I will drink coffee beneath three red umbrellas
 and fail to notice the Danish guard's uniform
 faded behind tiny museum walls
 standing in a glass,
 the coat pockets eaten by harbour winds.

Maybe we will go to the restaurant
 where Matisse sleeps on the walls,
 where the prostitute reads a dull book
 and waits for a black pimp
 to tap the edge of her coffee cup.

But most of all the night. . .
 with its blue waves, and a rainbird's sigh
 from an almond tree
 high on a hill.

In St. Croix I walk
 and feel the earth's roundness,
 the ocean touches my shirt,
 I sleep with yuccas beneath my skin
 and cold stones inside my pockets.

St. Croix far away,
 farther than my shoes filled with death
 that stumble like tourists over bumpy roads;
 St. Croix of sea winds
 that dream among a canary bush's yellow flowers,
 wind with a waist of coral
 that walks beneath a sea grape tree.

Island in my hair,
I walk among weed flowers
and am transfigured by the strange scent,
We climbed an ancient hill
a hundred years ago
when the wind still strolled about with sugar crystals
on its fingertips,
I remember your sad head, tilted
with a dream on its lips
that was actually only a handkerchief
stuffed in the pockets of dark trousers
in a crowded airport,
you spoke to me then
with a voice that rose
from the ground saying, "but I am
afraid I will never see the white goats
that wander the roads of St. Croix."

from MALAISE:

31.

Something must come forth:
 dark with a long fin that swims in the blood,
 the bodies and more bodies
 without wings and unattached to one another,
 needing to be simple
 with only a shirt
 and a pair of trousers faded by a life
 spent rolling about on the hot grass.

What do you think of this,
 all of you,
 you must speak up, I cannot hear you,
 I have been dead for many years now,
 has life changed,
 why of course not
 then why do I expect it?
 So many years ago
 the Revolution, like turning a dead man
 over from his back to his stomach,
 have they changed any, the Revolutions?

You are so far away I am sure I can touch you now.

from MALAISE:

68.

If, perhaps, there is very little we can save
besides a few shirts, some underwear,
a belt,
and possibly our sarcasm,
we had better hurry
before the nausea claws at our bodies
and we bleed to death in our chairs;
the cellist falls out of his chair,
the dentist patient his,
the crane operator dies,
and the cab driver suffocates in his cab,
the professor eating lunch collapses on his plate,
the actress preparing herself for a talk show coughs up blood,
the auto mechanic has a heart attack,
and the football spectator slumps forward in his seat,
a woman in a grocery store falls dead
her shopping cart rolls away,
the newscaster drifts into a coma,
and a theater owner dies of cancer,
a young black woman, our neighbor, in stretched white sweater
and bleached blonde hair
walks across the parking lot,
before she reaches the front steps
she throws off all her clothes and dies,
the newspapers that carry her story
blame it on suicide,
the neighbors said she made too much noise.

TENNIS MATCH

So. . .
where are we now,
young and athletic?
The sun spits out tennis balls.
Our green stem racket
throws shadows over the face.
Someone waves a voice
in the breeze.
White shorts
perch on stone:
the moon's amputated torso
washes up between the beach's black feet.
Our geography
floats in our half dead cells,
flies from the crow's silver eyes
and dives below the snail's river.
What do we know
of the name Eliot buried
under a curled seashell,
except for its ragged claws
that hang from our sleeves
and shudder
each time those white balls
come pounding against the blood?

DREAM

My dream has a cricket
trapped inside it,
he trills
and trills until
I walk out into the darkness
to greet him.
He has sad eyes
and holds a tiny wooden lantern
filled with dew.

THE PRECEPT

A white thigh

the cold touch

the window's daylight climbs
about a chest of drawers' darkened wood.

HIGHWAY 81, NEW YORK, JUST BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA LINE

A silver owl
perches
among the sun's dark branches.

PERVERSION

I don't do anything
anymore except sleep
with a pair of long gray wings
on a white bed.

Nobody believes me
but it's true.

AFTERNOON

Someone picks apples from October's lips.

A hand touches a knee.

The trees take off their wigs
and roll in the blue wind.

WE SAT

We sat before the black wood
having a conversation of fire
and grapes,
somewhere your torn body hung
from a gate,
you flashed black stone eyes
as I handed you
the leaves of our words

ERIK SATIE

Inside that dark piano
is a potato,
from which all his music grows.

VOICES

Voices
sing and wings
beat in darkness.
My hands
sink into black dirt:
(severed roots
in search of ancient water).

A JOURNEY

i shall journey to the sea,
"ah, but you have left the moon,"
the moon may follow,
"ah, but you have left the bride,"
the bride must not come,
"ah, but we all are alone,"
from whose voice were you borrowed?

MAN OR POET?

When they want me to be a man
I am a poet.
When they want me to be a poet
I am an ordinary man.

This is the only way I can live.

LIFE

There is nothing else to give.

Life is nothing more than a cat
stooped over beside a lamp.

DEATH

Death wears pale eyelids
inside its fruit.

Life carries with it
cold water and a cane.

HEAT SONG

The heat pushes its hand
through my hair.

But the men in blue shirts
walk silently down the road.

The heat tosses a blanket
over my curved bones.

But the women wave their white blouses
in the wind.

"Do you hear what I say?
I don't understand!"

Let me leave the black dirt
upon my collar.

But the heat pushes a loose hand
around my waist.

BALTIMORE BELTWAY

You take the road of smoke to Essex or Glen Burnie, but I want the one to Pikesville.

The highway crawls through sand and weeds and curls around the city's thin waist, cars drive up its shoulders and through its bronze colored hair. People fall to their feet with exhaustion and give themselves up to the highway.

Sometimes the highway stretches out too far and breaks off at the end, then I have automobiles in my shirt pockets, their exhaust beneath my eyelids, frantic men inside my body.

One afternoon a woman in white dress removed rocks from underneath the beltway, the hazy light penetrated my flesh, that was the day the beltway collapsed and dissolved into ashes on my finger.

Although no one has ever told me this, I just assume it's true.

THE STARLING AT JOHNS HOPKINS

Just outside Remsen Hall's red brick building
the starling sings,
and sings
among the oak's gray branches.
The students yell across an empty courtyard
a large dog limps past
I huddle inside my green jacket
and listen as though I were in a summer woods in New York.
The starling sings in the empty branches,
a most amazing variation of songs,
a shrill whistle, a chortle,
he makes a sound of tiny water drops
falling from a faucet,
and then a clacking sound emerges between his yellow bill.
He listens when I sing back,
he is patient and tries to teach me how to sing,
only my variation of song is limited,
so he listens very carefully
and when I am finished
he starts his song all over again.

THE QUINTET

A coffee ground odor
rises from your arms,
cold air hangs in the room,
the quintet plays its musty instruments
and slides a resinous melody under doors,
brown hair lies upon your body,
spiders crawl around and around your bones,
your body floats along the walls,
I roll in the darkness near your cold flesh,
the curtains' confused flowers
drop onto the rug.

THOUGHTS

We all carry poems in our trouser pockets,
and rain shocks the afternoon's head. Our
black cat sits by a window on our side
of the rain; and another cries incessantly
from a different room. When I open the carport
door to show him the rain, he dashes off to
the right and under the car, then he howls
to get back in. The afternoon creates this
confusion. Like a mad patient who hides under
trees from the nurses. . . She reads poems and
writes her name in the dew. At least that's
what I think she does; you may have a
different opinion altogether. The afternoon
does this to me, makes me think of cats
and mad patients. Makes me think of a white
dress heaped across the telephone wires.
The songs of the thunder are ground beneath
the shoes of neighbors who sweep off their
back porches. When the afternoon lifts its
hands from the pockets of its sterilized
coat: I no longer know who I am, you have
taken my identity away. And, again, sometimes
I realize the long silence since my wife has
left the house; I rush outside to make sure
she is safe.

THE FINAL TIME

The wheels bounce along the grass
and get stuck in my bones,

that is exactly what I should
have said before,

but it doesn't matter anymore,
the colors of the eyelid have dripped
over my hands and are keeping
me awake; I can't sleep, and
I can't dream.

A stone grows at the end of your fingers.

The marriages go round and round
like two birds dropped in paint;

the mouth on the one begins to sing,
the moon sways in your ear,
the head on the other bursts open
and grasshoppers pour out into the darkness.

The world is so senseless,
but the white handkerchiefs of your hands
keep me alive.

POETIC STATEMENT

I express myself best in a symbolic language; therefore my poems, at times to others, may seem strange, but to me they are as familiar as my face, hands, or feet. Each word may be a little jar filled with love or death.

And as with many other poets, I feel that my poems are extensions of my nervous system. If the wind blows a dry leaf from a branch outside my window, it lands in my poem. If a dog barks in the distance, my poem wants to chase after it. At times these crazy poems may only turn out to be "familiar shadows." Sometimes shadows filled with water; other times shadows torn by light.