

New Pastoral

By Trevor Clark

Mother Vine

Under live oak eaves we passed, past the gate
of our mayor's cottage, each step hushed

as we crossed his dim pasture on the way
to the Mother Vine. In the August moon

the plump scuppernongs drooped through the trellis,
their skin just shy of ripe purple, crimson tinged,

pulp surely still ascorbic. On knees we crawled
beneath the lattice and sprawled across the dirt,

onto the bed of an impromptu bower.
Drawing closer under the enduring vine,

our eyes hung on the dangling fruit above,
that hesitance given earthly form in this.

To Goat Man

You kept me from bramble thickets and marsh hammocks,
where the schoolyard reports stated you left stamps in
the humus, chanted through the boughs of cedar and pine.
To some boys, you were pure
beast. To others, a lecher of our own
flesh. I imagined only horns.

Freshman year, when I read of fauns and satyrs,
you grew cloven hooves, a docked tail. You got a human tongue
& learned the local brogue. I searched for you in souvenir paperbacks
& the memories of elders, but you were not there.

At sixteen, thumbing the *Coastland Times*, I found what they called your home,
a yellow cottage in a maritime forest, detailed by zoning codes.
When I went to see you, I found no creature, no man,
but remnants of both—bottle shards, guano,
a graffito mural of Baphomet—but no heirlooms or indicators
of where you have gone.

Creation Myth

The turgid blue clotted.
From a swelling continent, from a fracas of currents
lobbing soil into the mouths of one another
it grew. Becoming earth, it yawned from the brine,
form building with the sinew of meadows and creek veins.

Breaker of Horses

You are taught to rein in the tongue:
to yoke its bridle taut, diminish
its flourishes and leaps.

This, a gospel of prudence,
I clutched to my chest until
my mouth became a tawdry stable
of nicked ivory & plush for this beast,
three-year steed
with a penchant for throwing
those who dared perch its saddle.

* * *

Last night, in the early hours,
while the barkeeps were busy
polishing copper & the sidewalks
clustered with all those stumbling,
I dreamt of this horse,
Spanish mustang of lore roaming
outer shores of my youth,
brays & whinnies melding
with the thudding breakers,
the laughing gulls' clamor—

& Hector was there, doubled on the dunes,
his whip strewn in calligraphic form
to splay *shirk* over coarse sand—
a peripheral word from some novel
that I have never spoken.

Decoy Removed from its Blind

Perched on the cabinet idles a decoy
cast of whittled balsa, charred steel pellets
inset for static eyes. Strokes of cedar
green, February gray, cattail beige,
with a finish of lacquer & wax wrap
the Mallard in plausibility.

Unknowable hours must have been shaved
with amateur blade & hardware store paint
for it to replicate such mortality. Its purpose:
to lure in its pulsing brethren,
for them to find solace in its soft bob,
settle into Remington crosshairs
as if anchored to the surface
and get riddled with birdshot,
feel dark steel bore in pocks,
then stain the brine with new color.

Exuviae

Cicadas rattle in the sassafras eaves
as a chorus, lending odes to the marsh steam
while they boil in their carapaces,

yearning to rip from themselves,
surrender their casings and litter
brittle exuviae, sun-shriveled & well-worn,

and cast forth a new form in the same
fashion as that May evening, three months past,
when their plague came writhing from the Earth.

Slipping through the rind,
A slit my thumb forgot
Gets kissed with acid,
Lighting my veins
With citrus sweet as blood.

Sonorous Variations on Follain's "The Art of War"

In the arbor a vine
with tendrils supple as young minds
beneath where an oriole perches
silent and watches a swarm
whose prime draws near.

 The sky remains filled by winds.

Collared workers
pine for how to reap more,
so they might reveal
the proverbial pearl & behold—
but still they find their nooks
in theory unreadable.

Withdrawn from a sheath of loam,
the ibis' bill proclaims
disparity with a landscape
hushed by winter, agitating
taupe and umber with the zeal
of a clementine placed next
to shucked turnips and coffee
stains on a granite counter.

After True Detective

Queen of Erath, Louisiana,
the bayou howls around you
& your crown of antlers.

Poised on haunches beneath
Spanish moss that drips from
an oak, you hold court with

horseflies for subjects,
cicadas your minstrels.
The marsh grass curtsies deep

for you, Dora Lange,
as a squall rolls off the Gulf
and fills the cumulus sky

with a wind sharp as
the shivs that pierced your belly
before you were Queen, the shivs

that made you more
than a body for ritual
pleasure of worldly men.

Seed Bombs

They dug through garland & tinsel
in thrift store bins, tossing aside
knotted strands of lights to find

ornamental bulbs that could
have their hooks removed,
their caps plucked off

and get loaded with seeds
of indian paintbrush,
bluebells and laurel,

then be hurled onto concrete
foundations and shatter,
diffusing their freight

into every crevice and pore
in a slab of cement, infiltrating
wherever it reveals the soil below.

“Shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?”
—Charles Olson, “The Kingfishers”

On a field's edge it lay, tucked into the detritus
of razed stalks and pine needles.
In August's derecho, the hive detached from
its limb, as did a colony from its hive.
The swarm dispersed into the east
on a straight-line wind, far from
their nest framed in hexagon chambers
where maggots now squirm through
granulated honey, awaiting the day
they will sprout wings and rove the sky
until a gust disseminates them
like yellow pollen from an April pine.

Squall

I woke with
swollen knuckles
when the side yard's
poplar scraped
at the window,
its raw twigs
clacking on glass,
after a night
that punctured drywall
and ruptured bottles.
Through the branches,
I saw
the dawn ooze red
into the hollers between
Appalachian peaks,
folds of
the Earth
filling with the proverb
that shepherds
take warning—
for surely today
a thunderhead will
crest the western ridge
and open itself
to the valley,
spilling out rain like
shouts in a gin fit;
a booming calamity
that will send hounds
scurrying beneath tables,
that will rattle every
lampshade once it begins.

Soft-Shell Season

When clawed husks line canals
& shuckers crowd the docks,
we reap soft-shells from the Pamlico.

In the brackish sound, when flesh is prime,
the Blues molt, only to thatch coats
for untold seasons in clouded depths

Where wire pots line the floor, waiting
to lure them with dangling meats,
so that we might hoist the pinching bounty

before we strip their aprons, expel guts,
cleave mouths & pluck the eyes
to imbibe in this May's feast.

The Call of St. Lawrence

The basilica's chime & clatter swells down the avenue—
its song familiar, though its name I've never known.

Years ago, this was sacred harmony
of Sunday morning eucharist,
the giving of alms & a waning homily.

Tonight, it echos off art deco buildings,
through graffiti corridors
and empties at a passage carved through
stone for the domain of interstate.

This is no call to prayer,
just a counting of the hours.

A Sweet Potato

These fenced-in vines
hide their roots' bounty
with perennial flowers,
all blush in the center.

We tilled the garden early
for winter's crop of chard,
and upon turning soil
you yielded a tuber,

sprouted amidst the lilies
and yarrow of late summer.
Kneading the skin, I know
we reaped it too late,

with every blemish defined
in the garden's half-light.
But imagine the sleight of a knife
cutting it down to size, to be

simmered with coriander and placed
among a spread from the harvest
we reaped that August eve,
now several months past.

Centos from the works of Kenneth Koch, Terrance Hayes & Marie Howe

Wherever you went, there were woods,
The trees in ruffled sleeves
rising and growing bigger.
Swift breath intake shows they're excitedly aware
of bloodshot despots, the dictators rubbing their rope burns;
the long dead months before the appalling blossoms.

I was amazed by you in Houston,
wrestling beneath a star clogged night
surrounded by light—like Shrodinger's Cat that would be dead if you looked
From a great distance
At the dogs behind each low fence, the branches we'd torn
of broken magnolias in full blossom.

It was only one moment in a life, my leaving you.
I asked God to give me a different life.
The last time we had dinner together in a restaurant
I was learning from you how to develop
a black banner of surrender
for that thick silence in the dark, and the first pure thrill of unreluctant desire.

For Great Aunt Kathleen

It was the sort of flood you imagined
we Carolina islanders face in every
gale, every nor'easter that spins off
Diamond Shoals and rose our sound's
brackish tide, hissed salt into
the boughs of power lines.

When the wind stopped
and tides retreated past Brooklyn
into the Lower Bay
and the tropical heat hung
in August's air like a washcloth,
you found your basement filled

by the usual boxes and relics.
But new was the water that held them,
that suspended heirlooms and mementos
at pelvic level. Coney Island postcards,
a program from the old church in Harlem
and a photo of your long dead

Eddie swirled amidst the rainbow
oil whirlpools of the floodwater.
The sky over Hamilton Beach
stayed vacant for the first time
in decades, void of the roar
from 737s plunging to JFK's tarmac.

That night you would call your sister
who shared the hurricane's name
to tell her it was not the Verrazano
that separated you, but the confluence
of your familiar Hudson
with a sea that bridges continents.