

Four Poems · *Michael Burkard*

EACH OF THEM ICONS

1

o what is tired
but an old old song?
a major act of terrorism
flies like the night
flies to the moon—
even the songs of these dead
are becoming horribly familiar
old songs . . .

she was hit by two
or three bullets
as she crossed from the church
to her car . . .

this is what stevens said
when I was young:

the old man had never gone
to church and finally went
in a wheelchair with a bible
in his hands. and somehow the story went
he got up to pray

(whoever got up
to pray?)

collapsed and died
with the bible across his heart . . .

the finish was the detail
that he would burn in hell

and I assented yes
believing some dark condition
in the story

convinced
never knowing why

2

with the moon waning
and the lamp still on
in the house: why did the bones
believe stevens? what darkness
in that false story was a life?

—one doesn't know.
one knows the sun
and the fact of bullets
in the sun— one knows

there seems no reaching for spirit
which could amend—

if it is a basically orderly
universe

the sun
and the window are one

the lamp and the bullet
are one

or two or three or five:
an omission to five

and butchie stevens is out there
in this world tonight

either dead
or alive

3

John, there is an instrument
of time
neither you nor I ever decided
was relevant to the dream:

time
in the sense of song
for itself, light upon day,
dark upon night,

—I don't know how else
to describe it.
I am afraid to say:
"I believe in the dream per se."

Just as it is,
just as it was,
just as when I am empty of night
when I haven't dreamt.

But I am afraid.
They will say this isn't real.
Hearing them, I will say
this isn't real . . .

and hearing those voices one last time
will be enough to kill me.
I am saying out loud tonight god help me
for the broken places I have made.

4

and you who
know me
yet deny me
I feel from this lost place

where the words I have written
no longer understand for me
no longer bare any fact
any song except that they took place,

occurred through
me but are not mine . . .
for mine has changed as the time
was by the rock—

the fire had arrived at the rock one time
and I fled, not at all wanting to flee
but fled—and I knew I would not have been harmed
for the words of someone else

had written it.
I am not complete
apart from you I am less than that
—I whisper across the face of the night sky

and need you to hear me,
want this inutterable distance
to die physically, to break too
so I may never leave you.

This is not a poem, it is not owned
it is not loaned from another voice—
nothing I have said has ever been a poem
a category—I know not.

What does this make me?
Loved ones abound in this place of “home”
I am now in—and yes
as you said it is devastating—

I cannot accept their literal
silences—my mother
devastates me, my father
I let him rule

—we always let him rule
and we never said so
which is a twisted fact
which can make a life

feel like debris
because of the twists
of silence—everyday when I move
throughout this house I feel as if I

am watching my brother
as if I am him in body—
one family has digested me for so many years
I must fear all family—

as if the function of family
without anyone responsibly knowing
was to digest, eat alive,
take the spirit from one

and choke it . . .
and I am to blame for even citing here
in words no one will see—
the blame feels like a ship one could see

with fear returning again to the harbor,
horizon flat, water still
and here comes the deadly ship.
Jesus, it just left . . .

When I was living as a drunk
in Provincetown there was a time
in the morning when I would
accidentally wake

climb forward from the bed
and leaning out see 4 or 5
of the fishing boats heading
out—I could feel the cold

and their masts looked
darker than they were
because the sun had not yet
risen but was already giving

some light and at those
moments I wanted to live
more than I ever had
and I would sit in silence

which I wanted to last
an entire life.

5

One can't watch boats
an entire life—one can't
watch the sea an entire life:
these words were spoken
by a deadly ghost I call “mine”—
and “yours” and all the other deadly explosions
from the sun—but the sun is far enough away
to eliminate the accuracy of “deadly”—which
applies only in some fiction
which approaches it.
“One”—the fiction of my life,
my silence—need a sun
upon a horizon which will
eliminate the kind of darkness
which issues from my head.
The heads of state have issued
enough darkness for each of us
a thousand-fold. And also
each of us as “one”
issuing said darkness
when the light seems to die somewhere
and not accepting dark we desperately
fight “one”—
this one, that one . . .

6

One is both a house
and a dream. In the house
one dreams, in the dream one
constructs one's own house.
Each is too owned.

7

In the dream the fact was
he was making love to women—
the logic was men will therefore have
to be made love to as well—immediately.

He sensed in the dream
a controlling fear,
that the men had to follow
women. Then there

was a friend named
Mary, beside her
old old women on
a plain, waiting,

waiting. And in talking
with Mary he found
she too had changed.
Was more one

or one again
as somewhere
she had been,
alluded to.

8

As well as Mary
there is an ancient song
she sang, and he can hear it
by the rock against the sky:
the song is the icon,
the houses we thought
songs, the houses we

dreamed we thought
songs—each of them
icons, almost as
the brittle evening star
is an icon in the
desert sky—brittle as
he perceives the slightest
wobbling in the light—
it is in the brittle
air, a desert song
not unlike Vallejo's
black stone, white stone—
an ancient song which
seems to have all to do
with the universe.

9

The desert is not a far piece
from the sea—in a few geological years

one floor will inherit the other—
the houses will vanish

as historical figures vanish—
a species will erupt

so far down the road
it is difficult if not impossible

to vanish. To say the image will
have the weight of a fact

is to say one will not vanish—
to say each will be the other

is to say one will not vanish—
and I do not say that.

But on the road to that far road
I say one is the other, the spiritual

the real, the real the spiritual—
the fact is

the image, the image the fact—
this is the house, the desert.

10

The house is a sea
is a desert.

The moon at sea
is the house at sea.

The moon shines upon
the desert floor

— the sea contends
with the moon and sea.

It is night
and the sea seems to shine

as the fishing boats
head out.

The desert is silent
except for a sea of stars

which are almost loud
in their clarity.

The night is a sea.
The house is quiet.

One is everywhere,
everywhere feels one.

House, desert, sea:
each is already

within eternal space.
Space. Space.

The form is an icon
of space.

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(moonset)

Oh on a certain morning I want to guarantee
my father did not stop. The neighbor stopped and on a certain day
I failed to say hello to him, he did not
speak to me for weeks. He was a crazy neighbor. Wound up dying

at a railroad crossing in Shelburne, Nova Scotia, with his wife. His not
speaking is not connected to his death, although I feel now there was
a time

when I may have put the two together knowingly or not.
I placed death close to the most personal events,

the ones I called queer, where I either reflected myself to myself or
simply saw this person I labeled fool, me, asshole. It got so bad
that at the end I would drive around in the truck by myself and call
myself
an asshole: for I had even had a kind of rhapsody