

TERRANCE HAYES

Arbor for Butch

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a pecha kucha after Martin Puryear

[VESSEL]

I am with my newborn son and the man blood says is my father
in a shit motel and if each of us is, as I sometimes believe,
the room we inhabit, he is a bed used until it's stained.
Even if I knew this first meeting was our last, I would
have nothing to offer beyond the life I have made without him.

[THICKET]

In the far south where history shades everything,
there are people who fear trees. I once heard an old man say
I may be black as a crow but I'm white inside.
Nowhere else does the sky do what the sky does there
where the graves are filled with dirt the color of fire.

[RAWHIDE CONE]

We drank whiskey until we were drunk as the couple in the photo
my mother gave me to show him, the boy and girl swaying
at the edge of my future. I watched my father curl on the bed
like a leaf drained of its greening as my child cried
the way rain cries when it is changed to steam.

[BOWER]

Because I believe the tree is a symbol of everything,
one of us was the bough reaching across the road as fumes
scorch its leaves. One of us was a door opening and closing
in the darkness, one of us was a boat being carried downstream.

[MAROON]

My father and I sat in a motel room beside a highway
Where his pickup was the shade of a bruise beneath the glow
of the vacancy sign. Where he and his talk began
to evaporate. We were two fathers watching the faces
of two sons where the evening passed as it arrived.

[LADDER FOR BOOKER T. WASHINGTON]

Where the rain comes, long toed and crushing the high grass,
swamping the land, where a slave talked his children
out of running away with the bottom of his shoe.
This is what it means to believe in ascension and fear climbing.

[SANCTUARY]

In the far south where sap jewels the bark, the teeth
of the saws are sticky and bittersweet. But I wanted to carve
a door out of the wood and around that door I wanted
to build a room because I knew what my mother wished for
and I knew from far off what she would need.

[C.F.A.O.]

The arm of the boy falls around the girl heavy as a branch
in the photograph with the gloss that's been rubbed
clean and the blurred inscription which nearly delivers
its message before vanishing. I drove the long night
to see the face my son and I wear like a mask.

[SELF]

Where history can be a downpour of joy or guilt spilling
its wronged headed desire all over the body. Where
a boy and girl fought in a motel bed to make me, one desire
beating against another. Where my mother seemed to blur
calling him her first lover even after she said she was raped.

[BELIEVER]

In the far south my father, the first time I met him
where for that night and the next one, he'd sleep,
said God made nothing sweeter than pussy. We smoked
our history, we drank to our future until each of us was
a head of steam, clouds above each other's dreams.

[DOWAGER]

Where the plan was when I saw him to cut off his hands.
Where because of this man my mother would want me
dead, would want no limbs to branch inside her,
no cluster of sound waiting in a drum. Where
she wanted to, but could not shape her want into an ax.

[DEADEYE]

Sometimes my body is a guitar, a hole waiting in wood, wires
trembling to sleep. To identify what you are, to be loved by what
you identify, I thought This is how the blood sings into the self.
I thought what was hollow in me would be shaped into music.

[BIG AND LITTLE SAME]

The first time I met my father I believed I would understand
the line connecting me to him because a man rooted to his kin
can never be a slave. But he was like the road, skid marked
and distant, like the rain breaking above ground and beating into it.

[SOME TALES]

In the far south where as one man swung from the limb
Of a tree, he said I may be as black as this bark
but my heart is light. Where even when your lantern burns
out, they say the flame lasts. Where everyone I know
is ablaze with this story and darkened by its ash.

[RELIQUARY]

Certain arrangements must be made
if you want access to the past. With his room
without rooms and his truck without gas,
my father was a nail bent in the shaft of a hammer,
a wound the length of a kiss, a mouth bled of its power.

[CIRCUMBENT]

I am with the ones the blood says are mine and if each of us is
as I sometimes believe, little more than a bray of nostalgia,
we are like the village mule chained to its muling. My father
fit a slim ragged hand over the head of my newborn son
and said he sounds like a white child crying like that.

[MALEDICTION]

What if blackness is a fad? Dear Negritude, I live as you live
waiting to be better than I am. Before sleep last night I thought
how it would be to awaken with all the colors of this world
turned inside out. And that was the name of my suffering.

[BASK]

The story my father told me did not reveal one body inside
another, the arms of the boy who would become my father
embracing the girl who would become my mother, it did not hold
the sentence rooted to the beginning of my life.

[OLD MOLE]

I am not doing anything now, except waiting like the bird
who uses the bones and feathers of other birds to build
its nest. I am on my bed of leaves thinking about the past,
how my father dragged his shadow across the room
the way a storm drags its rain.

(stanza break)

[CONFESSIONAL]

Where there were too many trees and too many names
etched into the trunks, where the knots in the wood
Were the scars of old limbs, where, to be reborn, the birch pine
must be set aflame, where the door if I opened it might have
Revealed the love making or abuse still waiting to be named.