Memory of a skeleton

Jon Eastman

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MEMORY OF A SKELETON

by

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ii
Here is the skull of a man: a man's thoughts and emotions have moved under the thin bone vault like clouds under the blue one: love and desire and pain...
I

SOME POINT BEHIND
For the River

In shade, this deep oak still bends to hide a hollow throat where your eyes first competed with soft curves of light escaping into leaves.

We knew each other like all the meanings of the dark that made secret names to mark and leave in the heart of the trunk.

I held you through summer, watched for signs, our hot blood collecting under skin, your colors deepening like dusk in the fall sky.

I forgot to doubt my own voice, a mirror repeating your image till the first cold nights brought others waiting for the ice to crack.

My friends are still eagles cocking their eyes. I am a red fox searching the snow for traces... You are the face of the river, always moving away.
Delivering Papers on the Moon

On the phone you said you wanted to meet somewhere—at the corner of Bel Air and Main, under that streetlight. We had to compare a few clouds of breath, discuss those men walking on the moon. But snow exploded before dawn and whirled into drifts. White fences took on white shadows. Time settled in the heavy limbs of trees. Instead of meeting we worked hard just to walk, one house to the next, stopping only to stare into a livingroom—someone still up, cold light on the moon splashing blue from the television into dark—then on with our separate assignments. We met hours later, by chance in the local pool hall. We played slow, smooth games as if weightless, shooting and stepping back into the dark around the table, satisfied with our silence.
The Boy

In school he couldn't write.
He drew elaborate suns
and stars in margins.
And there were the large symmetrical breasts of beautiful women, some of them shaded like bullets. He drew bullets and breasts and thought of a braided whip he found coiled on a nail in his basement.
Each crack set off a purple sun in the dark, a ghost of sun he thought, that loomed behind his eyes.
He drew stars and whips and thought of Tarzan, the part where smugglers tried to burn his eyes out for ivory tusks, and him waking at the last second--stuck so long to the jungle floor it made a landscape of his skin.
He drew suns and tusks and thought of the lawnmower that died in a cloud of blue smoke--pushed too hard, too fast through wet grass.
That day he left it for good. Outside his house dried frogs hung, baked black in a willow.
He made friends that way, taking kids home to show them frogs in a tree. He drew suns, frogs and stars, then quit going to school one day, the day he nearly strangled a boy who tied his shoelaces together while he slept through recess.
He still cracks his whip in the dark, hangs frogs in the willow and looks as if he'd get a strangle hold so quick neighbors steer clear as alley dogs. He doesn't draw dogs in margins. He never sits down to write like he used to in school. He never learned to.
Down the street there's a grocery where he talks baseball over the counter.
The owner knows him as Bill, not his real name.
Pig Purge in Perry Hill

Police have shot to death 10 pigs that terrorized residents of the Perry Hill, Iowa community.

Dusk and mothers swaying
under porchlights give up
their patterned calling.
The last horrible clanging
against their children
catches in haggard trees.
On the horizon
some of that ridiculous fear
is still with us.
With wolves a body could be sure—
howling to tell you yes,
they're still out there.
But pigs--the only warning
that scuttling out of nowhere,
that grunting too late.
Mrs. Picillo said
the cops are acting like Ww II;
it's nothing more than a pig purge.
Her husband owns those pigs,
and we're afraid to walk into the woods.
Working the Skeet House

Lifting their guns easily
men call for black pigeons
stacked at our feet, each one
indistinct like a face turned away
in shadow, something flat
glimpsed blocks away in the street.
Already imagining arcs in the off-white sky, they make themselves steady. Even the fat are poised.

In a squat house, two of us
too young to be calm and working,
work the skeet, chilled hands
cocking the arm, a bird on its lip,
barely set before the muffled call
from outside, the quick jerk of steel,
pull, pull. Clay flecks spray
like blood, a splattering at high speed.
There is no time to think,
to joke of some other morning.
The men out there haven't the time.

When a stray piece sings in
through the only window
we flinch at its burst,
board splintering behind us
like a deep cracking in the lung.
Some moments we turn
for a split second, eyes
cold and locked, as if to say
you are the man next to me,
the one who is going to die in my place.
In Memory of Jean-Pierre Kolbach

Slouched over soup
his cheeks hang
wrinkled
then suck hard
through rubber lips.
He laughed like a crazy man this morning,
bought us beer
and drank white wine,
joked about the war,
the Nazi with a broken bottle
who gouged a hole
in Jean-Pierre's skull
while he crawled in mud.

We were still
as his fingers traced the dent
grown smooth as his bald head.
He joked while we licked foam
off beer the waitress brought--
we couldn't watch her legs--
about a prison and two camps:
Auschwitz and Treblinka,
the cold turning the ground hard
under bare feet,

joked as we drank
about a Polish man
they hung upside down in the yard
till the blood filled his head,
the head bulging
deep red and soft.
They popped it open
and he watched the sun
go down in blood,

joked and walked us miles
around his city
with our questions
mumbling Luxembourg,
the underground,
when the Nazis came.
We listened in the old air
believing
his hands behind his back,
the ruins in the valley,
our shadows lengthening over stone.
Tivoli Fountains

The bus lurches, sweeps a corner--
coffee and a continental roll
swirl up. This speeding is not funny to us,
we are Americans and not from New York
although my friend passes for Italian--his olive skin--

until he speaks: he says again
he's been to Tivoli. We say Tivoli
Tivoli and faces turn. We hold on,
smell the foreign sweat of the workers.
Their oil mixing with ours
greases the rail, the sun dances.

A Sicilian man across the aisle
eats patties of speckled meat he takes
from pockets of his black coat. He knows
we would not take one if he offered--
he doesn't bother. Out of town

we pass the countryside: tall
dark trees, squat twisted trees.
Our teeth form skins of red dust from the road.
Miles before the village Tivoli
drifts up, its pools like the whites
of so many eyes. Cool must ripple there

above the stone banks. Didn't I tell you
he says when we arrive--a thousand
lips and nipples spouting under wet branches.
Drops, caught in the sun
over and over against the clouds.

I can only agree--when
a Japanese family asks us
to take their picture against the fountain
with gods and huge porpoises--
I can only smile and agree.
Salamanca, N.Y.--Lentoloa, a swimming pool installer, was arrested after driving 30 miles to his hometown and charged with unsafe backing.

After thirty miles
he must have been tired
of backing into the future--
transmission out--looking through
that empty chest of car
before the world outside, before
anything disappeared.
Center stripes went under
without their usual, satisfying
zip. Telephone poles
lost their illusion of perfect
interval. Even roadside gangs of birds
didn't care to swoop out in front of him,
sensing no dangerous draft,
no close calls. All day
lying on his back in the deep end,
working along a twisted fault--pastel
walls brighter than the overcast sky.
Reflection bothered him
now as he tried to focus
on some point behind,
a mirage of thin silver pools
quilting the highway
somewhere between Falconer and Friendship.
He made up his mind--take it
easy, smoke a cigarette.
And if not for the odd splashes of paint
abrupt on his make-shift van,
they might not have noticed.
He wanted to reel back
the landscape, show them
his slow, deliberate style.
He wanted to walk away on his hands
screaming everything's ahead of me,
going backwards, even upside
down like this.
Summer in Missoula

No romance at the Shady Grove Autel,
just cabins, Chinese Elms
and dirty white petals dusting trails
like a lover's fallen eyelids.

Dappled faces deepen in lawn chairs,
stare from shacks across the road
while a short olive-skinned boy sings
bad arias, entranced by the afternoon.

I watch him walk and sing, fat
vibrating on his chest, imagine
a paneled room, palm leaves, sun
casting yellow prints on a floor.

I squint, trying to make the river
clear as mountain streams must be,
trying to make clouds white
above the Waldorf paper mill.

At least I am old enough to drink now,
gamble in the bars on Broadway
and drive back to the Shady Grove crazily
flaunting what little I have in the dark.
Letter to Carol

I must confess. I've fallen
for your romantic faces,
your mysteriously clear eyes
teaching me something each time
I look into them. More than once
I've wanted to take you
fishing, get your views on
casting an image, reeling
in a symbol. We could talk
in a more casual way, not worrying
about what I said
or what you said, just
allowing ourselves to surrender,
make connections.
Do you remember that photo
you showed me of women plowing?
You were so right
about the hard subject
and the soft focus
working well together, how
accidents can show something
deeper than understanding.
I've been undressing that idea
for years, myself. With your help
I've seen its body in mine,
your body. Let me thank you
and let me tell you finally--
you can be trusted.
Trust yourself like a good metaphor.
Getting High

Someone on a beach
makes a guess at our location--
the wrong side of the sky.
I'm talking with a retired accountant,
retired at forty and making it
fine. I don't envy him for that.
I envy him because he's a drunk,
in good shape. Yeah, he tells me,
my son's a writer. I laugh.
I'm not used to alcohol at this altitude.
The third bottle of Mateus
seems better and better.
Anything sounds right, like
the earth will reverse its poles
before we kill ourselves.
Nothing to worry about.
We're having such a swell time
the stewardess eyes us with contempt.
We know the flight is short
and there is nothing else to do
but look at blue and white,
our boring shadow, the circular
rainbow racing on the clouds.
II

SICKNESS IN THE AFTERNOON
The Landscape Near a Resthome

The long afternoon wanes.
The color-bruised sky,
loose in its frame,
shifts across farm fields.
Again today Grandmother rests,
her thin lids close at last.
She knows how long there is
to breathe the evening air.
Grandfather gambles in her dream,
whiskey-brown hands pushing everything across.

If only she could have seen
how different today has been--
black trees holding their limbs
in phosphorescent green,
blood tulips limp, deepening
in shadows stretched across lawns.
She speaks and her breath drifts in the warm air.
A gold eye appears in a cloud.
Waking, she sees its rays enter her room,
like showers beginning over coal-black fields.
Eulogy for Homer Poe

I wasn't alive Grandfather but I imagine the day you loaded cattle for the city: Edna, in a white dress, clings to you on the platform. Like a bad movie, she wants you to sell, come home with money for Danita's clothes and the doctor. You agree with her freckled eyes, soft crow's feet pinched against the wind, her hair fanned out like that sheer curtain in your room. But the boards shake you apart.

You gamble in Des Moines where you've never kept your nerve; the games too big: black jack, stud, palms sweating on the cool felt, drinking and drinking and waking busted. It must've been hard. Harder for her to stop you I've heard. Mother told me when she felt I was old enough to hear. The real story tells itself in Grandmother's walk. Bent inside her new dress--camellias recede as if purple were shade.

You must remember her face in shade, with a quiet smile on the porch. You kissed it then. Now there is nothing left to do but shake from the Parkinson's, play cribbage. I can imagine at night: a path of moon invites you to try and let your feet down, walk to the kitchen in how many years. You remember following it out to dark caving in over your fields--a steady hand nestled in your crotch.
Warning of footsteps
downstairs—a song
begins low,
a blue scar lost
above the hill
will come back in another
part of the sky.
I am hungry
for your hand
against my face,
your cool arms
lifting me up for soup.
But you are
not the one playing piano,
you are someone
I have known
only in half-sleep,
someone unexpected, hair
falling soft
arabesque.
The song hesitates,
letting a chord stretch out
into all the rooms.
Opening to breathe, fever
haunts my tongue,
the depth grows again
under the blankets.
Like darkness
you enter slowly,
you bend over me.
I keep trying to
come toward you.
But the song
the song has stopped.
The Woman Passing Van Gogh's 'Church at Auvers'

You could be sitting, somewhere else—
on a smooth bench by a well, in shade,
rubbing a wetted corner of dress
over your taut forehead,
but you are walking in yellow sun,
just now taking the left-hand path.
Ahead, the church's shadow,
a fresh wound over the grass, flowing
and painless. At this moment the light is
hard—the gold-leaf roof of the right wing,
the wave of lillies bending
toward you, the linen basket
and your own blazing smock. Without
sweat and squinting it could be simple,
a kneeling in the deep lawn,
your gaze open into sky above the spire.
Instead, you pass into its shadow,
look up at the dark side of the church.
The stained glass wheels are calm,
grey like your husband's eyes
turned away from the fire. Rested,
you take up the basket and step back
into the hot dust. You keep your eyes
almost closed, letting the path lead you away.
In this seizure

stabs of light glitter
in the neighborhood trees.
You watch two women walk
arm in arm through a scattering
of green shadow and gold.
One has slender
slender bones that quiver
against a cloud of gnats--
she presses her lids down
and sweeps out her hand
like a dying ballerina.
Without turning, you see
the dog, the one poisoned on Saturday,
dying again under the churchyard fence.
No struggle, just a lurching
back--swelled tongue, eyes
a mirror for the yellow sun.

Your friends have gathered
in the alley. Their voices
go as far as the tracks
and come back. They turn to look
as you waver on the porch;
and you are looking too
as your legs give and your squinting
cheeks break like glass.
Horses scream from a trailer that passed
yesterday. Someone with cool fingers
lifts your head and behind the face
you notice clouds finding
their proper place for today,
for this moment.

for Joe
No Chance

Boxcars drifting apart,
slugging together again just outside.
A matter of chance you say?
But last night I decided
to love you and you
thought it a good idea.
While you slept I woke
and went to the window to see
if the clouds had uncovered the stars,
those same reeling stars all lovers
get up to look at, shaken
by a sense of faulty separation.
But these are my stars, fixed,
there for a reason--to bring us together
under them. Yes I know
I'm always too serious--
listening for everything as suggestion,
pushing you for straight answers.
The brown moss is letting go
of the roof below; I'll slack off too,
now that I've decided.
I feel like waking you
with this one clear intention,
like a cliff-diver ready to aim
for nothing definite, for the first time.
Ex

Parked out front
again he leans his bald
skull into moon and whiles
away the hours.
At midnight he gets
out to circle the house and smoke
a cigarette under the maples.
I sit up, watch
his arms dangle ape-like
and white, watch the house light
up room by room.
His ex, Mrs. Treffor
hasn't slept, well,
for weeks since he's been here.

One night, I heard
outside my window, Goddamn
how dare you accuse me
of beating our son.
Mrs. Treffor chased him
out in her thin nightie like
a Scottish ghost across the heath.
There was a moon then too
and some coughing bird to add
to all their screaming.
But the Burlington
Northern drowned them out.
Now it's getting colder,
he still comes
every night and sits
like a cheap detective
gone to sleep. When
he goes to the door
he pauses before pounding,
shadows floating
on his back. The dogs
soften to his whisper.
And I wonder each time
if she'll soften,
let him in.
Finding a Pin-up Girl

Whiskey bottles light up first, dull sparks through soot, then your breasts, half-buried under coal. I never expected to find you here of all places—torn background matted to the dark floor so well I thought I'd found a real woman, small enough to keep in a jar.

The old man must have kept you above his work bench, assembled miniature trains and coveted you in lantern light. Back then they added words to heighten sense; yours read: "Bloom of Youth" and you are, curving back on velvet, one leg raised slightly and crossed.

Of course I want to kiss, the way he did, that part of you hidden, pink and wet. I want to ease into your glance and feel my blood drive shrill as the peal of a small whistle. Whatever it was that made him hole up and drink hard breathes on my shoulder—

another woman, sore bones, age. I brush years off your blushing waist, decide to take you out of here. This is no place for a girl like you—still young, an offering still burning in your cool smile.
Afterthought

Forget the way light was
circular on the carpet.
It was nothing, a colony
of specks before our eyes.
And forget us, intertwined
awkwardly on the bed.
We were just making ourselves
love like tired swimmers
make themselves swim.
Forget the breeze, lapping.
Remember what you saw
behind my back. Remember
that we were always able to lie
face to face and take it
smoothly, knowing it didn't
matter. But it kills me
how we pulled our hearts back
like people folding up a blanket
and leaving early.
It kills me how we died
so many times but never drowned.
III

MEMORY OF A SKELETON
Waking into the Night

White air beams
form a shadow breaking in the clouds,
like fingers opening under dark water.

Wakened trees stand closer against the light.
My legs wade into this cold night,
bones cracking like wood.

I think of faces, light filtering
through skin and falling on a thousand streams,
of features slowly changing.

Startled men hear their wives crying at a window.
In a field the moon is hunting
for small animals.
View from a Third Grade Room

My child-ghost gets up, goes
to the window. He remembers a day like this--
clouds bleeding low, cold light--standing
here, looking out from a new body, a lover

moved by a delicate white dress, a boy,
his blood sprung from a yearning
not understood. He cares that a woman
is running toward a line of white houses.

It matters that she stumbles,
smearing her dress on the yard,
stumbles where a tree darkens her skin,
where branches shake like a wing

against the rain and driving air.
The glass collects the room on its face, solid,
close. But I am still with him
outside, arms extended like a sleepwalker

at the edge of his dream, standing,
waking back into himself, myself,
with a bright shock, with
the first crazy arm of lightning.
The Stunning

Jacob Mugisha was forced to batter to death more than 20 of his fellow prisoners in Idi Amin's camp at Naguru.

Cell window at dusk. Tire tracks sit up like ribs in the red dust of Kampala-Jinja road. In the center of a field, shadows gut a stand of trees like souls gone out early to greet the night. Mugisha, again tonight you are the executioner, or dead. No. No one can know what it is, this choice. All men look up at the moon. I see it in each dark eye: each man curls up under me, carrying out all the good he's ever done.

The worst was Musoke, only 17; I huddled with him in this cell not knowing that night the chill of his death would enter my hands, the sound of his death, the long echoes from sky, would gather forever in my bones.

Again tonight, in another breath the door will fall back hitting stone, hitting blood in the back of my head. Corporal Nyanzi will usher me out to the circle of guns and moon. I will take up that thick polished bar, heavy as the body of a son, and in the first blow be brutally merciful, bring reeling stars down on the quivering neck and batter the last remnants of fear into the dust.
Matacao Above Sao Bartolomeu

Heavy rain dislodged a 10,000-ton boulder, forcing evacuation of 1,500 residents from a shanty-town in Rio de Janeiro.

Is the old one
tired of his rest?
Will he fall
and crush us in our sleep
or will he come down
at day like a giant heart
broken loose from the heavens.
I ask only now that they tell us
he is shifting, not to trust him.

The truth is
his shadow on our rooftops
makes us calm in the miserable heat. His massive silence
is pleasant in our ears. When
the loud strangers from the city
call to us for our hair--
our black braids for Americano wigs--we laugh and point up.
We say hair comes dear here
subordinados, the sky
can fall any minute.

They say we must
leave soon, and what
do these scientists know.
Can they read his stone face
as we have for years. We
get up each morning more afraid
of traffic in the street
where our children play
than of him. No, no favela
is safer than ours.
Death will find us
wherever we go.
For a Crowd in Titusville, Florida

It was something in the air, the water broken, shot up with blood. It was something watching from inside you, a dark face you hadn't noticed was your own.

When he pushed against you, broke through to the front, you ignored him—just a boy you thought, playing. And you kept watching the gemmed back of the crocodile.

There was that wish not to let go of watching, being still. It could've been like that moment of sun through a windshield, space you hate and long to enter.

The boy was there, between sight and longing, feet kicking for a hold. You took in everything, a shock coming into hips, shoulders, though still it was not only seeing. Some turned away. Some wanted a breeze off the purple swamp to cradle against the sudden spell. It came late with thunder shaking up from the ground.

Two baseball players collided in Cincinnati—millions settled back. That night, in full moon the crocodile circled you and you, in all your faces, refused to look anymore, waited for that something to end, knowing it would not: the crickets, the heat, a girl's cry breaking up like dirt sifting down to the pool.
An Old Man in the Park

That night in forty three
he was searching for mines on the road
when the dark opened up deafening,
white. Limbs fell around him—
hands closing, feet curling,
each humming into its own silence

and softer light from the moon.
He wanted to run but he glided
over the grass, over those men,
and they looked up as if his face
were a small grey cloud. His arms
swept over them like pale searchlights.

In a dream he hears footsteps
brushing the grass. In another
thunder shakes up from the ground.
The men take cover farther and farther
into their bodies, windows
collapsing in their eyes.

Afternoon, and the windows are lit
in black glass. There are women
beside the silent men.
With a secondhand detector
he is searching for metal in the park;
the blades of grass remind him

of delicate buildings
seen from far above.
When a blast of light flashes near
a sunbather, white against dark green,
he stoops to gather it in, naming
those of the dead who could be dying again.
For the People Who Died in the Salsbury Rest Home

A fire is destroying a rest home.
Smoke appears in doorways,
enters their hollow gaze
mistaken for a small child
or a shadow of a tree
deepening on the earth.

When they speak
the sound is overpowering.
Outside the window a chainsaw
searches for the right pitch,
young men carry their hearts
carefully over the dead.

I walk out, see this day
hold its blackened bones
to the light. I find an opening
and suddenly come apart,
wielding my own dark laments at the sky.
Dog Dreaming

The dog is running inside me, legs twitching front to back back to front in my sleep. The gentle bird he chases will not fly off, cannot be caught. Grey brush and its wings blend, its scent and the cold wind blending as it sings on and on through the field.

I could wake him with a jerk and stop his blood exploding through me like a flame over and over the blank sky reeling. But I won't I'll watch for his eyes turning out of mine, my blood returning to calm.
Memory of a Skeleton

Chicago--The skeletons of a man and a woman, wearing winter clothing, were found in a luxury car parked in a garage on the South Side.

In the moment your hair came through exhaust I was red like the whole garage, tail light red that locks a stare--say the first time I stood changing a tire on the freeway I held my finger up to see that red come through--then your face drifted down angelic.

This was no dream: my fur coat warm as blood and you getting in beside me, sending that tremor through my legs, so good it made me open for more air. You asked what's wrong but there was nothing; I had only been waiting too long. You asked again slower, your lips sanguine, eyes gone liquid. Just then it must have been the best.

Oh your skin fell away like petals in the long winter. I missed the music of the car and your careless voice. When they finally came, letting in that white blast of light, they were years late, they found us laughing forever, our heads thrown back against the cushioned seat.
Mykinos

Sunrise, and the blood of rock flames on the far ridge. Our stones hover in wind above the cove, the giant Greek sun daring them: come closer. Even this far away it reaches to our fevered limbs like a silent mad eye. We are glad to surrender, to be young and naked in its golden heat.

You are in front of me, more slender than I have known you. Laughing crazy, we come down like spiders, to shady holes on the face of the cliff. The bright space, the colors below the water like soft gems, are why we are here suspended on the edge, why we will fall here, far from home, among smooth rocks glistening in the cove.