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Cut

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An abstract of

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

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By William Stallins

A poetic examination of violence and how it interacts with myth, youth, perspective, and family. The goal of these poems is to get at how we value, portray, and deal with violence as a society, and how that affects us as individuals. This thesis operates through a specific lens of Protestant Christianity as myth, and is focused on American violence and its representation in particular.

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Appraisal

Hills roll. Clumps of grass
and thickets bulge out
brown and green and shades
part brown, part green,
but not quite brown
brown or green
green. There are trees
too, but they don't matter.
The sky doesn't matter either.
It is blank for me. I am walking
up this hill. I reach
a tuft of grass, my toe tearing up
the root. A glint catches me –
a spent bullet. I pick it up.
The mud and the rust
cling like lichen on bark.
I imagine blood on it too.
Then it might
be worth something.

I.

Eden

You told me that the tomato from the supermarket
tasted just like the one from my garden,
and now you walk around like I can trust you.

I only trust a person who knows the soil,
who can sink their hands in and pull them both out
with black or red or brown clumps clinging
to their skin. I do not know the soil but I do know
what to eat from it and how to eat it.

You look at me when I shake salt on my watermelon.
You probably take yesterday's chicken out the fridge
and reheat it in the microwave.

I'm sure the last time you ate out the garden was Eden.

Adam Enters

I push
no plow because I know no need
to plow. Every tree bears fruit.
Every flower holds
shape. I hold no hoe because
I know no need to crack the ground
open. Every crop is raised up
by some updraft of heaven. No
rod, no children I might spoil.
I do not even know
violence. But yes, I am alone.

Bleating

Dear Brother,

For the last two weeks I've been trying
to write about Cain. I don't know what it is.

When you hear the story, do you see
two men or two children
out in the blistering field? How long do you think
Cain waited there for Abel to blink? Waited for him
to scrape himself out of that creation-fresh dust,
face red as the throat of a lamb. Brother,

I take comfort in God's mark on me. The promise of a curse
on those who kill the cursed. The Bible says
Abel's blood cried out and the ground swallowed it.

When you read the story, do you hear
the crops churning or the bleating of the lambs
as they wonder where their youth has gone?

I've been trying to say how much I miss you now.
I've reached some total understanding
and yet can't find the words.

Judgement

I don't fear God or judgement. I don't fear
who I'm told to fear and I don't fear
the people I really should. You say the rich
would chop my head off to save ten cents
on a brick. You tell me that the policy makers
would use my blood to sign a treaty,
but I'm not so sure. I think the murderers
are in prison. I think they'll end up
in Hell. So I drink, smoke, root for my favorite teams,
throw out the food that rots, clear the topsoil,
burn gasoline, and never sleep. I write words
like I ever gave a shit about anyone but myself.
Like I won't be looking for a scalped ticket
outside the gates of Heaven.

Blood Over the Door

Does God count the baskets
floating down the Nile?
Does he already know
the number? What I mean to ask is,
how many times has the Nile turned
to blood? How many children
did the rush of the river sweep away
before it carried Moses to Pharaoh's daughter?
I've been finding it difficult lately.
It happens most when I look out over
the ridge, the sun setting.
My hands feel young, if you understand.
The sky blotches red and my toes
feel wet, my eyes water. I am
not Moses here. I am not the Pharaoh
or the Israelite. No, I am the first born
son, and will be after I am the father
of my own. I've read Exodus. I'm waiting
for God to wake up and turn the Nile red.
I know so much more than Egypt's children,
and God killed them, too.

Scales Piling Up

I'm jealous of the apostles.

Wasn't it so easy for them? To have Christ
come and pick them out of the crowd?

Peter was crucified upside down,
John the Baptist beheaded, Stephen stoned –
lucky bastards.

Every road to Damascus I walk down ends
while I can still see.

But I want to see tongues of fire.
Let me see Jesus on water,
or at least let me get drunk on it.
Let me meet my fate, whatever it is.

Foundation

I'd like to say I'm a bit like Jesus.

I'd like to say that's not blasphemy.

Jesus called Simon, then named

him Cephas to build his church on the rock.

And here I am, pouring my church on the rocks. Outside this bar,

there's a church. Inside any sinner, there's a rock,

unnamed. Rocks erode in rivers and rain. Time

is still precious. They stopped building churches so tall,

and I wonder if they ran out of stones or seconds.

Peter may have been called first, but Judas died first.

We don't like to count him, his erosion.

He is as much a martyr as any of us.

The price of faith is the mason's wages, a stone turned over,

the bar tab. I pay with thirty pieces of silver.

II.

Cartoon Violence

When Wile E. Coyote plummets
a hundred feet and carves a coyote-stencil
hole in the ground six-feet deep,
we giggle. It might be harder
to stomach if he crashes
with a splat as the blood and bile
of his entrails run across
the technicolor desert
like a river in red-yellow sun.

When Bugs Bunny shoots
Daffy Duck in the face
and Daffy's beak twirls around
his neck like a horseshoe
scoring a ringer, we at least chuckle.
It would be harder
to watch if Daffy's face
were blown apart – eyeballs tumbling
down fleshy pulp and teeth
like true violence. We don't hope
for peace. We hope our necessary victims take the bullet, get up, and laugh it off.

1st Grade

I kicked my feet to climb through
the air in the swing. I always liked to know
how high I was. Up there, I caught
the glint of a toy dinosaur embedded
in the grass. I thought it was lost.
Back on the ground, I picked it up.
But it was no toy. It was a wetness on my fingers,
a paralyzed face, ants boring holes into
the underside, carrying chunks of meat towards
my palm. A dead chick. I dropped the body.
It hit the ground, kicking up dirt and ants onto my feet;
the air squirming around me.

Harvest

Corn field. Stalks meet the reaper
and it's my tenth birthday. Cake
on the picnic table crumbling
like cornbread. I stand
in a field of soldier dust.
A baseball bounces. I slide
into the body bag. Goodie bags.
Birthday cards. Toy guns.
Candles out.
Clouds wisp like white
icing in a blue mouth.
Bi-plane. Two-seater. Anti-air
shells of firecrackers,
mortars that fire only once.
Boys that become men only once.
Home plate. Booby trap.

Soitenly!

He had only meant to bop
Moe on the head
and pinch Larry's nose, wring
his ears – but here we are.
Blood trickles down the temple.
It is no artifice. Certainly,
we won't look away.
Curly looks to us
for help. He hadn't meant
to go so far. We don't jump
into violence, only slip.

Shoe-Box Blues

I am twelve when I cut my first pig throat:
no blood, but fluid squelching out of the veins.

The formaldehyde burns through my nostrils,
singeing the hinge of my own throat.

Pig preservative pools brown in my desk chair
as my teacher shows me how to snap

the neck. Tells me it comes before
the cut. Dead-black

eyes reflect. I cradle
the head in my palm.

Come look,

arteries stretch like rubber bands
over a shoebox guitar. I pluck

and sing a fragment only I know.
My teacher cuts the strings

before I reach the chorus.
Each student takes

their pig head
and sits it on a desk. I
eye my handiwork.

We vote on the cleanest cut,
but we're such poor judges.

Detour

When I was younger, a storm
vomited debris into my math class' windows,
as I sat, scrunched against cinder block.
The storm snapped all the telephone poles
on the street while I waged a bet
with a friend. Whoever got home first
would win.

Out the window:
traffic cones slouched over –
I wasn't sure
if they were into it
anymore; leaves crowned
empty trees
like tufts of fur;
a sign said
Ringgold. A tornado had refurbished the hotel
off the highway. People died.
I had never seen what its rooms were
like before.

A tree had fallen
and destroyed my friend's
house. I won five dollars.

Running From It

A coyote stalks a cat
that stalks a mouse
that climbs a stalk
of corn to escape – no,
it's the body of a snake,
that wrings the mouse
out like the coyote
wrigs the cat's neck
like I wring my hands
when I deliver the news
that our cat Oliver won't be
coming home. I'd rather
it be him than me. Only
one of us gets a free heaven.
How dare I return
without the head of the coyote?
How can I explain living a life
of sin and doubt and blame
that even a mouse could outpace?

May 2020

A man dies on my news feed. Then, *riot*
on the screen. Men die every day on TV,
but the director yells *cut*. Those men
get resurrected. I wish this were different.
I wish this were the same. We do not look away,
not until the next commercial break
reminds us

We're all in this together.

We are not. Some of us wait
for the director to yell *cut*.

Get up. Mr. Floyd, get up.

III.

A Rurality

The tobacco worms out of the ground, the wheat slithers,
 the corn pierces, the soybeans—I don't really know
 what the soybeans do but I see trucks
 haul them off the land. Cattle sit around
 and flick their tails. They look at us funny. We work
 for the people we know who know people.

We pray with the people we know
 for the people we can't know. We get stuck
 behind the combines on the backroads. The interstate's
 a four lane highway and the state highway's
 two-lanes. And we ain't never been to Tulane
 but the banker came from there.

We know all the water tank truck drivers
 and half those in the oil trucks. There's no pride
 in anything but working hard and hardly working
 and whiteness. We watch

Fox News and baseball and auctions:
 three hundred cattle for one-fifty a pound.

Special occasions mean Cheddar's,
 an hour away. Everyone knows
 everybody and their offenses and their run-ins
 with the law. We don't call them crimes,
 because we're white, not criminals. One cousin

smoked meth and one died of heroin and one got arrested for transporting cocaine but it was a
 rough time for him and he needed the money and it was his first trip and one beat his wife and
 one tried to pipe bomb the school but that was the 80s, back when bombs were more morally
 neutral.

We speak a lot about hell.

We hear noises outside the window
 but don't check on them anymore.

My Blood

The congregation watches
my father's sermon
like fenced rabbits
heaped on clover beds:
fat, slow. But no cat could hope
to haul all us rodents in. God included.
Are we not made in his image?
I know that man, was made in his
image. I refused the sacraments,
after he blessed him, my blood
tainted with rat poison.

Cracks in the Concrete

Leave the bucolic and tell me
how many stars there are to drink for.
The streets of Decatur roll, like green
plains with salt on the breeze. Streetlights
slink among the trees. Potholes
the most threatening predators – maybe
a serial killer cowers amidst the pale,
vinyl-sided bungalows in his Prius,
resting his eyes. But I wouldn't know.

Weeds sprang up through the cracks
of the concrete driveway with scabs
on the stems before my father sprayed Round-Up
to kill them. The sun shined diagonal
beams that cut his cheek, left it
peeling. One spray wilted the weeds.

I always found joy in that death.
Maybe that's too dark of a thought –
the wilderness I live in now called *civilization*
has the fewest stars, yet never enough streetlights.

Worms

We didn't own the pond or the fish
or the ducks, but my grandfather knew
the man who did. We owned the worms.
I was too young to use the reel, too weak
to hold the rod. I watched the bobber hover
on the water and waited for it to slip below. We lost
every worm we hooked. Fish or no fish.
I caught a catfish, two pounds, that hacked at my knee
with its whiskers. I had used up all my strength
to catch it. But we didn't own the pond or the fish,
so we threw it back. We owned the worms
until we fed another man's fish.

Bird House

When the morning was martin purple
you rose and cooked hummingbird dope.
We watched the hummingbirds
fly so close to our heads
that we ducked, not wanting
our hair stained with their
sweat. They do not sing
like martins. But they come to us.

You tell me how grandma would
put the martin box up every fall.
Now it crumbles to splintered rot in the shed
and her grave sprouts
Western Kentucky bluegrass. Martins visit
when we can't.

We walk to the garden, pick peppers. You
say what to pick, how hot peppers glow
red on their tips like cigarettes
you never could put out.

You are going to leave me
like the martins in the spring.
And then there will be a grave, a hump
of Western Kentucky dirt.
I will grow peppers there,
and string them up to dry.

Predicting The Past

On the cover, a tobacco root stews in rain.
I turn a page, can't tell if the pinch of my fingers
oiled the pages or wiped the dust off
the yellowed folds of the Farmer's Almanac.
Drink in the rain Western Kentucky will get
in 1967. Take in the air my grandfather will breathe
before the emphysema. Page fifty,
and he will have heart attacks.
I can't find the page that says when mine begin.

Separatist

The rim of the casket
was smooth bore,
like an aimless gun.

I ran my fingers on the edge,
eyes closed, tracing it,
the wind tracing my scalp,
scraping the hair on my face.
I had forgotten to shave.

Eight of us, four on each side,
clasped the handles,
stepped on flat headstones,
tried not to trip, as we grunted and held
against the strain. We sat the coffin
down. It slid into place. The weight
off our shoulders, I refused
to straighten my spine. As an old man

I'll live on scraps,
wash every headstone
that touches the ground. For now,

what impresses me most
is that Heaven has no ceiling.
What impresses me least
is the resurrection. I want
to crack some code to Hell
and find a back entrance into Heaven.

Passing On the Double Yellow Line

The steering wheel decays
in my hands; the gas pedal

shivers under my foot. Streams
of condensation vignette my world.

We are fish. I drive like I don't want to
crash; I don't care where I go.

Last breaths are like a
line. There's the catch. The overlap. Overtaking

you is like spilling
onto the bank

just to be thrown back. Hold
your breath. Those headlights

racing toward me
wink at us

like we've been here before.

By the Way

I pluck grass out from around the azalea's roots
so they can breathe, while a coiled snake
lays shaded by the buds. I leave it there.

I mow the yard, stop at a cluster of dog
shit nestled in the blades.
The spot goes unmowed.

I check the mailbox for bills,
but it spews old mail addressed
to you. I pull the flag up.

Driving down highway 411, a dead horse
rests in the skid marks of memory. I drive
past.

You might find the house empty. Or me,
stranded on the side of the road. Leave
me there. That's what I'd do.

Wasted

I have six bananas on my kitchen counter,

I'm forcing myself to eat one each day.

I started three days ago. Yesterday, I threw out
the raspberries and the blueberries – a carpet
of white fungus enveloped them. I poured
out the half gallon of two percent, it smelled
like the cracked eggs in my carton.

The plums were soft, the peaches tart, the grapes sour,
but I ate those anyway. Mold scoured the cheese,
so I cut out the mold. I have six bananas to go. I bought
a twenty-four pack of Modelos, a Captain Morgan and an Espòlòn,
and, no, there's nothing left.