

*K*obayashi Maru: *A* Bedtime Story

And

*D*eadlocked 000

By

E. V. Noechel

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... E. V. Noechel's poetry has a social conscience that just might be divinely inspired. Her subjects are tragic and masterfully composed. Permit me to be brief, they are lengthy breezes, I'll let you get started--Go... (Oh, woe betide me, I am not a Trekkie. In the event that you have the good fortune to be, you'll know that Kobayashi Maru is Trekker-talk for no-win situations. I realize having to offer this explanation, once again, exposes the limits of my qualifications. (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

Kobayashi Maru: A Bedtime Story

For Elijah McClain

part one

Elijah, when you were being killed by marauding American police,
men who saw you as the big bad wolf—it sounds almost comical now,
if it weren't such a tragedy, Shakespearean, really:

you, whose violin lulled orphaned kittens to sleep, the hum
of your bow gently pulling notes from strings, the wood beneath
your chin purring like their own lost mothers—you,

the panting mouth of predatory death? More the gentle
one who lifts lonely baby cats by the scruff, using his very front
teeth, tiny and often forgotten between the canines, precise though--
small and perfect side by side by side, to carry lost tabby infants
back to the bed they've wandered from, controlled precision
moves rivaling the steadiest hand of a diamond cutter.

Even as they turned you into the next lost child,
you declared aloud your own defenselessness,

chanting your mantras of harmlessness to all beings
and your steadfast refusal to break your vows of pacifism,
even as they murdered you on the sidewalk of your own hometown,
did it feel familiar? Did you perhaps remember, once they injected
a toxic dose of veterinary drugs into your shaking arms

Tibet of 70 years prior? Did it feel the same when that life was taken
from you by Chinese soldiers in the icy Himalayan mountains
with your fellow monks' spirits hovering, the air dead yet still humming
with your chanted wishes to take the whole of the world's suffering
away with you, begging to carry its weight on your back
as your soul rides to the skies in the stomach of a circling vulture?

A pacifist facing down the heavily armed. Your declarations
of defenselessness once again your only weapon
against those determined to silence your people.

Did it ring a bell? Spin the wheel of dharma? Hum into eternity
like the low vibrations of singing bowls or the fine motor
skills that control the quiver of the violin's bow scratching
notes out of strings like the cyclic purrs of newborn kittens
against the bellies of their mothers, an endless loop

of sound that says, "I am here. All is well."

Elijah, you're their greatest fear. Strength without force
is a monster these warriors and tyrants don't know how to fight.

part two

Now, as you lie on the pavement, with the warm passing up
through your clothes and into your veins,
may I tell you a story—a true one? Not at all long ago,

maybe a handful of years, on the same continent that caresses
your cooling body now, there was an adolescent wolf cub
whose entire family was killed by land management. His life was spared
but in exchange, he was collared with a tracking device. And once a year,
like Santa Claus they would fly to him, helicopter blades biting the sky into pieces
with a sound like world was going to end. And his would

with high-powered telescopic rifle blasts from so far above, it must
have seemed like the sound simply caused their heads to explode. One after another.
His mate gravid with pups, his cubs half-grown to gawky, popping

in horrible red firework bursts right where they had been trotting
behind him moments before, a noise rising out of White Ear—a cross
between a yelp and a throaty deep cough as she dropped.

And the wolf would lie flat to the ground, eyes closed, expecting to be next.

But instead the nightmare noise faded away. Every time he was left
to lick the ears on their bleeding heads, to nuzzle their paws in a vain
effort to please make their bodies work again. Please.

In that moment, did he remember the first time at just a year old, seeing
his parents, his sisters, and his mother's new litter wasted in a pile
of yelps then silence while he grappled for control
of his brain as it was forced into a helpless drugged sleep? Did he remember

waking up on the bloodied ground with a heavy box strapped
to his neck and the bodies gone to be stretched over taxidermy forms
in an office educational display somewhere?

That wolf must have remembered the next time it happened
and the next time. Did he start to believe it was a disease he carried--
an exploding Typhus to his Mary.

Now please, can I whisper one more story before you have to

go again? Please--I don't want to be

this radio collar anymore, my white skin

a deadly betrayal to the men and women murdered

all around me. How didn't I know it was happening? Not

till technology became a witness did I have a clue

that murders blossomed red and real wherever I went.

Black bodies falling all around like lost mothers, lovers,

family, best friends, strangers, my mentors, teachers, and heroes

like you. Snap snap snap and they're gone day after day the same

true story repeating itself and I didn't even know,

didn't even know this, even notice.

But I remember now. I want to be wolves together.

We can be majestic, we can fight back with our harmlessness

and our teeth. I don't know if you'll take me,

but I know I have to try. I will remember. Now.

Deadlocked

Jason was 10 when he was messing around
at a friend's house, and the
friend found and fired his father's
poorly hidden gun right into Jason's belly. It's a story
that's become such a trope, I almost don't want
to write it down because it no longer makes you
cringe the way I want it to. Does it help or hurt
if I add that I always tried to be away from home
when Jason would come over to play with my brother's
action figures and trains and drink Kool-Aid and chomp
down Little Debbie cakes with his mouth wide open,
twirls of icing and devil's food churning into a dark brown smear
like dirt in his mouth? It would make this awful, wet chuck-chuck
sound when he chewed. Chuck-chuck
chuck-chuck. It totally grossed me out. But
do you care less or more about his sucking chest wound

when I add that he was a dreadful whiner and I was a teenager
just trying to hold my head together between the hormones stretching
my body into something it didn't used to be and my family
tumbling into its own private nuclear winter all around me?
Something like a chuck-chuck-chuck can be enough

to make you wish someone was dead,

but not really. I never imagined how he'd look
in the initial confusion at the bowling ball punch
to the point about one fist below the solar plexus
or when he saw his small intestine for the first time.

He was just a dumb kid. I didn't want him to bleed
confused and cold, mesmerized not only by the amount and color
of his spreading blood, but also by the look on his
friend's face, crumpling like a toddler

wailing for his mother. Jeezus.

But don't worry. He's okay now. He's like 40
and probably has his own irritating, spoiled
kid some other teenager is avoiding

when her brother invites him over to play
video games or some shit. He probably

has his own gun now. Jason I mean,

though it could be the kid too. People
do that, don't they? For target practice or shooting
small, unimportant animals as a bonding
experience, something to share with your dad, right?
He didn't die after all. Life goes on.

More guns get bought. It's life.

My friend's cousin's family didn't quit hunting
When he shot himself in the head at 11 years old
Because the older kids ignored him,
And I don't know what happened to the pistol
After it went off in the hand of my mother's student's
Mentally handicapped sister when she cleared his name
From mom's roster right in the car beside his own mom,
Just rifling around in her purse for gum. One

letter changes everything forever. Could his killer
even comprehend why he was never coming home
after getting carried away in a confusing rush of flashing
lights after everything turned into red. Red lights
red blood, red car, and the stick of burning
cinnamon Big Red gum she finally found and curved
into her mouth while the men carried the boy away
his face now just red red red. Leaving behind a soaked
red car seat. Could she understand, a compromised
toddler, why her mother's face is red all the time
now and there's an empty bedroom in their home?

I wonder what happened to the gun

After the day does a 180 and there are bits of brain
to clean off the window when the police
are gone and the world goes quiet. These are just a few
the ones I know within a degree or so of separation.

Nothing ever changes for the guns. Blameless

as the children who set them off, they
keep being bought and carried and stashed and stolen.
I don't even know what I'm trying to accomplish
with these words on paper, temporary as the bang
that makes eardrums wail, thin as the moment after it

when everything turns red and goes quiet.

THE POET SPEAKS:

Re: Kobayashi Maru: A Bedtime Story

For far too long we've been told fairy tales where black men are big bad wolves and white women, babes in the woods. At the same time corporations that have much to profit off of our public lands have been making wolves out to be monster killing machines when their entire species as we know it has been changed forever--their bodies and minds made everything they are--as a response to our species' relentless persecution and attempts to eradicate theirs over centuries. As a Buddhist pacifist, also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and a vegan animal rights activist, Elijah's murder hit close to home. Despite so many similarities, would I have been treated the same, put down in the street with veterinary meds for having my mental illness triggered? Probably not. I am a white woman. It's expected that we will fall apart in a stressful situation. That we will be scared. That we won't fight back. We are automatically seen as victims. Black men are seen very, very differently. Even ones who literally lie down and die when attacked, repeating over and over that they are not a threat, that they are pacifists devoted to the gentle treatment of all species. We can't keep believing in made up stories intended to lull us back to sleep.

Re: Deadlocked

I'm not sure I can say much more about Deadlocked that won't just sound like something everyone's heard before and practiced catchy rebuttals to. That's why I wrote it. We are the children who keep getting shot. We stand there looking confused and hurt and horrified every time it happens. The guns are just there being guns, doing what guns do.

AUTHOR BIO: I have been the recipient of grants and residencies from the North Carolina Arts Council, the Vermont Studio Center, Headlands Center for the Arts, United Arts Council, The Culture and Animals Foundation, and I-Park. My poetry and other works can be found in multitudes of magazines, literary and otherwise, and my fourth and most recent book of poetry is available via Foothills Publishing of NY
