Four Poems (2020)

**September 6, 2017**

Her gypsy moth-thinned crown lets damp dawn down,

you’d think that sawyers had been harvesting.

Brittle trunks stand gray as a mourning town,

tattered canopy weakly shades since spring.

Some luck has kept the summer heat at bay,

her caterpillar’d hardwoods might have broiled;

whole hills have had green curtains chewed away,

below bared heads the shallow oak roots toiled.

A sprinkler dribbles into withered moss,

one feeble hope to block relentless change;

these northern woods show gaps and voids and loss

while mid-Atlantic weeds extend their range.

We like to think we have things in the bag,

Then find ourselves saluting a new flag.

**Black Locust**

The ag station grades this Lake Hitchcock sand

unfit for pablanos, melons and chard;

that 4.9 pH won’t do the trick,

red Chieftain spuds will need a shot of lime.

Diligent composter guy, I lay on

some alchemy of oak leaves, peels, coffee

grounds in March and April beds, rake

the future: become something, you nothing.

Pumpkins and squash volunteer into the

fray. What’s wheat? What’s chaff? What forces transmit

these wiry suckers, agendas unknown,

from dark lurking stumps inside the tree line?

Such pinnate art-deco migrants can be

plucked when young, when they jostle and crowd

the dainty heirlooms and exotics that

gray garden clubbers nurture each winter.

The State classes Black Locust *invasive*;

our new-grained love quest for orderly past

does not cotton to roughnecks dismissed by

18th century Yankee pamphleteers.

Their long march up from the James outstripped Lee;

this sandy peneplain succored not-quite-

acacia into smooth beech bowers where

their dead can stand for decades without crowns.

Their short allotment means they must work fast;

soft-scented belles grace Memorial Days;

vomit-scented they yield green to the maul;

pileateds avoid their dusty trunks.

Impervious to water and to time,

the wood burns hot, no need for showy flames.

W.P.A. Blue Ridge split rail fence

holds strong for car-borne Yankees reliving

that sepia vibe of long gray lines while

suckers sneak between locust floor boards in

the one room school house to peek at antique

tools the United Daughters buy each year

with proceeds from bake sales and catfish fries.

**Tattoo**

It’s eyes averted in the locker room;

razz, expound, but look at tape balls on the

rubber mats, no inspector general,

besides, the Zamboni is off the ice.

Carl’s maybe thirty-three, a tree guy like

a lot of the Monday crew, keeps it

simple, not some former prospect with a

forty-game look in the A before his

knee went, or frustrated D3 hot dog,

just here to break a sweat, not joke or score,

hustling silently for his whole two hours.

Our late winter melanin deficit

is stark, one of the single guys got a

little pink at the other end of a

ninety-nine buck Spirit ticket, but we

are white men, under stark fluorescent tubes,

so Carl’s chiaroscuro calls my eye.

(Two decades back I mistook a tramp stamp

for a succubus siphoning precious

bodily fluids through a girl’s kidneys –

I should be inured to the Age of Ink)

but that crisp chevron on Carl’s left bicep,

red, green, frames a black eagle: sure enough,

there’s Grampa surrendering to Zhukov,

conscripted Reds stealing his field jacket,

marching east in the snow to sweep the floor

of a Yak factory where typhus gets

him thrown into an unloved Ural ditch.

Liberal arts crack pipe nonsense, you say?

Well, maybe Carl’s a bitter Irish guy,

got underbid by a hungry team of

Ecuadoreans, now he’s dreaming of

mixing them up some Zyklon B cocktails.

Or did Carl think he’d end up at Timex

like his old man, and his old man, get the

benny’s, the mortgage…those jokers moved where?

Young and marking time in Boston, I house-

painted with possible cousins in the

western suburbs, nice Victorian jobs.

My preppy boss subbed a Dorchester crew,

four to six Mic roughnecks depending on

how the night before went. Two were Airborne

at Dak To, now getting bleary, breaking

down in their late thirties from much hard fun.

Lunch tales of how they had loved playing hoops,

but the neighborhood changed so my boys cut

those rims right the fuck down rather than let

the niggers play. Now I’m tugging at my

sweaty gear, exhausted, your typical

no longer prime puck-chaser reaching

for the snooze button on the winged alarm.

Carl shoulders his bag without showering,

the long-sleeved *Motta Tree* shirt bunches as

he gathers up his sticks. A rolled baggie

hits the floor; we can’t help giving a look.

It’s full of puppy biscuits, little bones

that could be bowties for a gray squirrel.

***Pull***

To shelter our new lit candle my love

and I must traverse three river valleys.

The western stream splashes lean and sporty

play boats cork and dagger April runoff

heedless of dog day’s dank milfoil smother.

The middle is a trickling rust-belt ditch;

highway speed glimpses of rebar snarled in

barberry and vacant brick sockets of

Hank Morgan’s faded ingenuity.

Last, most grand, rides so broad a bald eagle

on the far shore suggests a pin of light,

where the ocean takes over can’t be marked.