Eight Poems

by Brent Newsom

from Love’s Labors
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Smyrna

By a strip of highway spilled beside a swamp
that exhales sphinx moths and hums mosquito hymns:
their kids sack out on sofas while the men
make sweatless love to tired wives, then go
perspire in oil-smeared, orange hard hats
on cafffeinated graveyard shifts. Days off,
they jaw across their truck beds lined with cans
in the gravel lot outside the donut shop.
Come winter, dawn and dusk, they tramp the bogs
with shotguns, taking life as it comes to them.
Pass through and you’ll be met with friendly waves
and icy stares. At the edge of town, by the caution light,
a metal sign, green, lettered in white:
WELCOME—riddled with steel shot.
Esther Green Plans a Funeral

Lord knows, Claudia, I can’t have it
at the church. Bill quit years ago,
onece the girls were grown,
said it wasn’t worth the trouble
of putting on slacks and his good white shirt
to be patronized by neckties and comb-overs.

He’d still have himself a Sabbath
of sorts—I’d come home to him sitting outside
in his faded flannel and jeans,
handsome even leaned back in a lawn chair
smoking his Winstons.
He’d ask how the sermon was,
follow me in to help with lunch.

It was one of those Sunday lunches
when I noticed red flecks
on the whisker-tips of his mustache.
He’d choked it back who knows how long.
Don’t mince words, he told the doc,
so she said the spot was softball-sized,
the rest of his lung likely black
as a burnt marshmallow.
She showed us a malignant cell—
looked like those prickly sweetgum balls
that fall to the ground in winter.
Only softer, a pill of lint almost.
Next day, Bill went back to work,
which was not a big surprise.
He lasted weeks, which was.

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Pfc. Mason Buxton Wets a Hook

All warfare is based on deception.
—Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Whether you’re wiping out a phantom weapons cache
or planting homemade bombs in cardboard boxes,
trash cans, saddlebags—Sun Tzu was right:
the lie lies dead at the heart of war. By it
we live and die. The art’s in choosing lures.
(A shiner? Melon lizard? Chartreuse worm?)
That’s part. But a naked lie won’t nail a bass.
You hide the hook inside. Then drop the bait
between two cypress stumps, jig your rod
at five Mississip, crack open a cold one. Sip.
He bites, you set and reel—then watch the lake explode.
An American Love Affair

The whole idea of riding atop a series of contained explosions was abhorrent to many.
—Edwin Black, Internal Combustion

In fact, it seemed a marriage made in hell.
To ride astride ignited gas and spot
a hefty dowry for the right—why not
store a load of TNT in the tire well?
It was courting disaster, seemed vaguely like sin,
so thousands jilted the car. Was it some joke,
this notion of motion? They smelled the noxious smoke
that drifted from beneath its flawless skin.

But that exhaust became a tart’s parfum:
enter Henry Ford, his Model T
a winsome mistress masses could afford,
a locomotive whore. America swooned—
enamored, moved, driven to ecstasy.
We paved. We drilled, refined. We spilled. We warred.
Pfc. Mason Buxton Embraces the Suck

Back home in the Louisiana night, my wife squeezes the hand of some ponytailed nurse, cursing my name with every push while I wake again in the cradle of fucking civilization, another day the same, decked out in battle rattle, lugging an idiot stick, extra mags stuffed in my flak jacket, roam the same brown streets and wait for necktied Beltway clerks to sort out this Sunni and Shiite shit—and I can almost hear her grunts and groans and the crunch of ice between her teeth, almost see her lips wrenching with pain as the doctor inserts the forceps into her and tells her, Again, and, One more, and she screams—and from a hundred feet I feel the blast behind me and tuck beneath the rain of dirt and rock, then sidle along a wall and turkey peek around the corner, see vics spread-eagled on the ground, some dead, some dying eyes-wide-open in the arms of women already wearing black, and at the checkpoint, a pool of blood and fur, a donkey ear (Shock and bee-haw, we call it later), then I’m holding a soldier whose arm hangs from his shoulder by shreds of sinew and skin. A month goes by, and I’m at Ft. Living Room. I have a daughter and lie awake in bed, sleepless at oh three hundred, seeing behind my eyes the placid sun hung like a medal in the bone-colored sky.
Mid-June, a gangly, wide-eyed eight-year-old
with pinkish, peach-fuzzed Dumbo ears
oversoaped the dishes his first night,
deliberately, gleeful as soapsuds spewed
from the Kenmore onto the kitchen tiles.
I went for the mop while, firm but calm,
the Director sent the boy to bed, which he also wet
deliberately.

I didn’t go home that college summer
but part-timed as a nursery vendor
at a big-box lawn and garden center—
made “color” the first thing “guests” would see,
trimmed leaves gone brown with drought or disease—
and interned at the ranch for troubled boys,
hired-hand-slash-babysitter (Role model,
the Director said, A presence)
with a furnished, private room, rent-free.
Discipline was not in the intern’s job description,
so Dumbo clipped my heels, yakking with candor
while I pulled squash and young cucumber
or set an iron fencepost, pretended to listen,
which should have been enough. A presence.

He felt so deeply I felt embarrassed
when he spoke of why his mother left him
with grandparents (now I can’t recall—
the psych ward, drug habit, jail?)
and of why his grandma and grandpa left him
with us. It made me hurt inside,
he said, but I know they’re too old
to keep a kid. He was wiser in that way,
and more mature, than I, unacquainted
with such frankness and such grief.

But on the ranch’s hard red dirt, tenderness
was taboo. Ten feet up the climbing wall,
he screamed. The others jeered as he clung too stiffly, then slipped. He wailed, knowing only the rope I held saved him from falling. He’d felt those lines go slack before. His dusty sneakers strained for solid ground, and when they touched he clung to my waist, rivulets on his dirty cheeks, snot quivering on his upper lip. He needed more than I knew how to give.

I volunteered for extra hours at work, preferred to pluck dead blades from sprays of purple fountain grass, arrange displays of garish zinnias, set pallets of young crepe myrtles outside the gate. I lined up pots of hostas straight as rails in a white pipe fence, napped on patio chairs whenever I could. Evenings, I unrolled a rubber hose, gave everything another splash of water. The caladiums leaned toward me, giant green-veined ears eavesdropping on my prayers for autumn.

By August he was gone; but I still felt the weight of him, hanging in mid-air by the rope that linked our bodies like an umbilical cord, still heard his voice grow shrill and dry before I let him down.
Agriculture

twenty-one weeks

_The three-finger salute_, the sonographer says, as though you’re giving me the bird discreetly: your two femurs brackets around your penis—an underside view of you transcribed from sound to image. _A boy_. For a moment I feel some mystical male bond already shooting roots into the earth.

But someday you will hate me as I hated my cash-strapped father when he planted five acres of peas to sell the summer I turned thirteen, woke me each day before dawn to pace the rows with a bushel basket. One afternoon, customers watching, I told him I quit. Red-faced and sweating, he rose to his six-feet-one, roared, _Boy, you’re not going anywhere_. So I wasn’t.

Now, from this doctor’s office dimmed to just your greenish onscreen glow, I see my dad was a good one and loved persistently, if too quietly, perplexed at times by my zeal and my silences. _Boy_, your hate will be our harvest, the grain we glean from the seed of some failing I cannot yet name. May we gather it into sheaves and grind it into flour. Let us bake whole loaves, son, of bread we both can eat.
Saint Gerard

thirty-eight weeks

I help her on with the gown, a cotton curtain, paisley print fringed with ties and metal snaps but no arm holes or back, nothing we feel safe calling a neckline. Her lips move as if in prayer. I wrap the gown around her, press the rivets home, then bow the ties behind. This looks like love.

A sudden cramping after we made love. Her labor starting? No. Now she’s certain. It’s not her time. She wants to go back home. I drove us here. She starts to cry and I snap at her: It’s too late to leave. On the wall, a prayer to Saint Gerard, patron of the pregnant, for safe delivery. I mumble maxims: better safe and so on. My fear for the child has trumped my love for her. Lying down, she trembles like cornered prey. Though we’re alone, we draw the striped curtain. A nurse enters. A latex glove snaps against a wrist, and two lubed fingers home in on her cervix, press toward the child’s home these past nine months. She grimaces. I’m safe, seated beside the bed. I watch, and she snaps her head away, to hide the face I love. Something’s descended, a heavy, opaque curtain of silence hanging between us. I read the prayer on the wall and recall, she asked me to pray an hour ago, while we were still at home. I said I would. Then a magician’s curtain closed, and poof!—just smoke and lights. A heist; a safe emptied of compassion. An inside job. What’s love if not the patience to pray? Guilt’s whip snaps

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at my back. *Mea culpa.* How I wish I could snap
my fingers, be back on our saggy couch, and pray:
*God of peace, make mine a patient love,
and free from fear.* She turns. Her eyes plead, *Home.*
The nurse agrees. Mother and child are sound, safe.
I exhale, then help her dress, draw back the curtain.

At home, my penance of final touches: the nursery’s curtains,
safety plugs, old frames prepared for new snapshots.
And this: to pray that I might learn, and relearn, love.