

EQUALS TIGER

BY ERIC KOCHER

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by Eric Kocher

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Thanks to...

Third Coast: Seance for the Living, The Poem Where You End

Rattle: Dispatches from the Dream of Personal Flight

H_ngm_n: Painted Lady

Pebble Lake Review: The Same, For Your Eyes Only

Diagram: My Poor Heart

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MY POOR HEART

So plagued by cholesterol
and disease. I am reminded of

each small word that makes it through to the other side,
this side, this painfully visible world.

If you eat right, if you move often enough
and quickly, certainly

at least some things can be avoided.

We all know this is not true. No matter
how many egg-whites, how much potassium,
here is this machine programmed to fail

and to fail spectacularly. In each body,
in each of our movements

there is the wake of a hundred others,
and so we must imagine,

and consider quite carefully
how we will be mourned. How we slowly build
the monster
that one day kills us.

PAINTED LADY

The worst part
is how my thumb
could erase her

body but not
the nausea draining
her body down

to a dull hum,
her skin against
bone: the scaffolding

not around her heart
but the movement
of her heart wrapped

in a cocoon, the way
she emerges weeks
later, covered

in butterfly wings
folding and folding
in the kerosene sky,

finally refusing
the kiss, the spark,
the mere possibility

love could move
next door, never cut
the grass, not make

a big deal
when she lets her hair
down, I want her

to tell me I should leave,
tell me loneliness
is a compass needle,

a pencil tip, that
she is just a sketch
I trace with my thumb.

SÉANCE FOR THE LIVING

Everything but not your body
is alive and everywhere is
graffiti on some wall

caught in a still life as a bowl of fruit
the fruit itself waiting
to be peeled, to be tasted. To show

the world as the back of a nude.

Temptation is how you lick
the seal of an envelope.

The alternative is even worse:
alone in paradise without
the irony or the apple.

How we eventually become
someplace to walk barefoot
something to dump out of a vase.

There should have been
a dress rehearsal for the last
syllable to make it as far as this world.

You'd think this would be easier.

Goodbye is such an obvious
thing to say. I hallucinate

the opening and closing

of garage doors. I have nowhere
to be—try to follow me here.

THE SAME

You see,

bullshit has a soft voice:

We husk through layers

of the day,
boxes crumble

into homes. So soon the sky
is at the edge of the face.

We are the same.

You see.

You and I learned to be alive the same way

in dark rooms, hallways,

lost inside a thousand red bricks,
hands fastened to our chests.

UNTITLED STILL LIFE PORTRAIT

I.

There is a man on my desk
with his face buried
in his hands. Some days

I think he is weeping, stuck
like this, curled up
in a ball of wooden grief,

others he seems to be hiding
from a world
unbearably full of possibility.

These days I cup him between
my hands so he might
lift his head, look out the small

space between his thumbs.
So that he is free,
for a moment, from himself,

the story he must be reading,
over and over,
carved out of his palms.

II.

There is a man on my desk
who has found secret
happiness. Some days

I think he is trying to keep
it all for himself,
as if one could do such a thing,

others he seems to be hiding,
caught in a game
of peek-a-boo with the eternal

newness of his Zen universe.
I want to know
what he knows or perhaps

what he refuses to know
so he never
has to wake, so that he is free

for a lifetime to create himself
on the dark canvas
carved out of his palms.

THE POEM WHERE YOU END

Think of this as a membrane,
a calloused fingertip, a layer

separating us, the shape
of the blanket you lay beneath.

This is your absence from these words,
the white space, the ink, the lull of the hard-

drive like a freight train. I hear it sing
I can't feel you baby, I can't feel you.

Think of yourself as guitar music
listening to rain smack against

the glossy broad sides of leaves.
You're a minor key, a bamboo flute,

a red buoy twenty miles from shore.
Try to think of this poem as a violin

with no strings and yourself as a bow
saw teething the neck of a tree.

THE LUNATIC RHYTHM

All these people and I am writing a poem
to cure my loneliness—a séance
not for the shaman but his archetype
dancing around the fire in my skull,
the lunatic rhythm of his feet
trying to coax the dead awake.

Burials are a way to remember
what our bodies were capable of, one
falling inside another. I think of a child
erasing all the lines in a coloring book.
Mad scientist. Something made entirely

of previous failures—the debris we leave
in the wake of our absences.

And the birds are trying to relive
the story they were told by the sky
and this in itself is a kind of insurance
music will survive the ability to hear it.
Often there are no record contracts.
Often the world is too bright to see the stars.
I have a theory about the moon.
There is some math involved but X and Y
remain chromosomes. What equals what.

I am trying to make non-sense, give or take
whatever I set out to say about loneliness,
how I kiss everyone I meet on the mouth,
how no one asks why I drink sun-

screen or what the side effects are,
all these people care about is what can kill
and where the weather is nice this time of year.
This isn't going at all how I planned.
I was trying to ask for some sort of gravity—
a satellite to orbit my body, something to pull
on my oceans with invisible strings.

RAIN IS WHAT THE SKY WANTS

First I watched your fingers
move the hair from your eyes,
then we took turns reinventing each other
as sea creatures: you were the anemone
and I was lost in a wreck. Tomorrow we could pass
on the street and I wouldn't touch your hand
but I would remember how to be touched.

What was the story we were writing?
The myth of the destroyer as the creator: the storm
as peace in the middle of a violent lull. Now
the rest of my life to forget rain is sky
that wants to be a river, that sewers rebel
and overflow into streets (a testament to the science
of failure). I forgot how to refuse by any means.

Maybe we were only a sudden frenzy,
a stampede, no, trampled dirt,
the brief cloud of dust swept along by impatient
wind. Finally

I was a starfish: I was taken apart
and systematically reborn.

OUR LADY OF MERCY

I am not the patient but the victim
of myself, I tell the nurse who smiles
and pushes her hair behind her ear.
On a scale from 1 to 10, she wants
to know, how much discomfort
am I experiencing right now? 7, I say,
for the piece of my thumb that is missing,
8 for the glass under my flesh, 5
for the florescent lights, the smell
of disinfectant and all the things that need
disinfecting, 9 for the boredom
and the hunger for real tragedy.
Vinegar, she says, for the blood
on my shirt and pants, warm water
with soap is fine for skin. She takes
the bloody washcloth from my hand
and wraps me in gauze. You're a mother,
I say but she pauses, her face empties,
says she is not. She hurries out
to get the doctor, to get away
from the small piece of her I asked for,
the soft poking, prying into her life
and she returns without looking at me
but saying to me the doctor will see
me now but by now she means
in 3 hours after the sun is up
and I'm on my 5th gauze cocoon
ready to just use some duct tape

and go to sleep. The doctor takes me
down the hall to a room
where he can see through me.
He shows me pictures of my bones
and the small object that is not part
of my body. He tells me he is sorry
for making me wait, a baby girl,
a 4 hour labor, stillborn. He pushes
a needle into my palm and I go numb,
but I still feel the pressure of his fingers
as he puts me back together, piece
by piece, until I am whole.

DISPATCHES FROM THE DREAM OF PERSONAL FLIGHT

It is my first winter home and the moon
appears as if it doesn't understand its place
in the strata of heres and elsewhere.

I am getting high because I know how

to be part of a body that leaves itself
for something ethereal. I think of Laika,
the dog we sent into orbit, the first Earth
born organism to leave the atmosphere,

all of the commands she might learn:
sit, stay, how to become a satellite.

The story goes like this: she survives
the ascent but only lasts a few hours

before her heart beats itself silent,
how she remembers the cold
streets of Moscow and they howl
for her to come home.

I think of all the planes with their turbine
groans, proof the voice can spiral
out of control, that we can still
be heard long after we've passed.

There is a theory some insects navigate
according to the relative position
of the moon and this is how easy it is

to get lost in the electric glow of streetlights,

to hold onto the idea of some bright shape
thousands of miles away from here
where there is no such thing as night, or winter
for that matter, and home is how close

you can get to the sun before you remember
Icarus, a river of sky, a river of hands,
and your wings are gone, incinerated,
and perhaps you continue upward

like a cartoon whose universe is drawn
by a sea that trembles
only if acknowledged and a space that opens
and continues to open infinitely.

I too am trying to escape. I too am full
of waves that are breaking. Here the air
is always moving and when the trees shake
I think of the wind-chime

my mother made of seashells. My mother
made of glass. The woman who drove me
to the E.R. after I tried to parachute
from a tree with a bed-sheet,

she explained that there is something
we are always avoiding, the moment
at hand, for instance, where I am
smoking a joint on the roof

of the same house I grew up in,
where I am writing this poem
because it requires a sort of downward
motion to exist. In one of my lives

I slide off the roof like a sheet of ice.
In another I was already falling.

EQUALS TIGER

Yes yes this is all happening in only three colors
and minus the tiger each one of us would have survived

In the corner of the great American substandard
A seed awoke and discovered the study of not being

acknowledged by career fairs. I am comfortable
purchasing glossy pictures of exotic wildlife.

What's your spirit animal? Mine only comes out after
the super-ego has fallen asleep on the couch and the sub-

conscious orgy is in full swing. I forget which theory accounts
for my dad not watching Top Gun but somehow

knowing each time Goose dies and seeming a little bit
sadder for it. I forget which theory predicts the one

unflushed shit in the toilet. I have often constructed
tax returns out of all the cell phones that have been lost

at zoos. How does "often" make this any different?
For example: often when sad, we play in a minor key.

Fortunately, scales are only a thing that has been taken
and arranged in a certain way. Fortunately we are alive

in the age of motion detectors. Yes smoke. Yes carbon monoxide is the silent thriller. If only the Tigris was more

involved, I would say this more often: rivers are going to save us. Rivers in Iraq are everywhere. Jesus will not forgive

you for turning the product into a caged spectacle because sin is like walking into a spider web

and then always walking through it.

YOU MUST FORGIVE ME AFTER READING THIS

I am outsourcing all of my poems to my feet.
Verbs are still worth something here
where it is said we have the highest concentration
of bones, making a distribution of labor

a practical investment.

I once tried to explain fertilizer to a Redwood.
I once lived a year of my life without music.
For two weeks I shit blood and spoke of it to no
one, and once I did, I told my mother

and I suppose just the idea

of someone worrying was enough to heal me.
Sometimes I fantasize about my family
dying together, all at once, maybe in a car crash
and I am somehow saved by this.

The truth is, and it makes me

wander sometimes through this yellow-lit
suburbia, that my father will probably
die on the couch he has watched the last two
decades pass from, my sister will out-

live us all and hate herself

for it, and my mom, I like to think, one day sinks
into the garden she has been revising
for years and this is what makes it complete.
The truth is I mean very little of what I say.

I have paid for sex

with alcohol and dignity. I have paid for love,
by the minute, with a calling card.
I have asked a god that I don't believe in, again
and again, to give me each thing

that I want, to give and give

and give until I am asking this god to give me
a god. I have at least four pairs of pants
that I have never worn. My credit score is better
than my karma which, in turn, is much worse

than my self-esteem.

The truth is I am writing this for myself. You
are only vaguely involved. You are the card-
board used to watch the eclipse and I am the eclipse.
Or maybe I am the sun and you are the moon.

Or maybe you are the sun

and the moon and I am the Earth, the point of reference
without which the eclipse would be irrelevant.
Maybe the whole metaphor is wrong. I must confess,

I have been wrong before about the way

one body can block out another.

I once thought entire continents could vanish.

I once asked a stranger if I had a nice shadow. If you were that stranger, it is nice to finally meet you. I dream about you.

Once you were only a left hand.

Once you were wearing my grandmother as a scarf.

After you read this, you must forgive me.

I assume this needs to be said simply because I need to say how sorry I am. I apologize

for ever getting you involved.

I apologize for all the insects I have killed. You see, it is necessary to suffocate fireflies in a jar, to take an ant apart, limb by limb, and then crush it between your fingers. It is necessary

to believe, while it is still possible,

that there are things in this world that can be controlled, which, depending on how many oil wells your father owns, will always be true. The truth is I don't care about the truth. I am not saying

I lie but I lie

and I keep on lying. Often I fail in secret.
Often I sleep with all the lights on in the dark.

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

I lie, this is for your hands
and your mouth to hold beneath a wet tongue,
for your tongue to roll like a dog in the grass.

This is for your sundial
nipples to count down on.

This is for your monster's
monster: for your mother, for each cigarette
you smoke, each day
you sandpaper down to the bone,

This is a way to touch your dead father:

a way to make love stay

(when it wants so badly
to walk home in the rain).

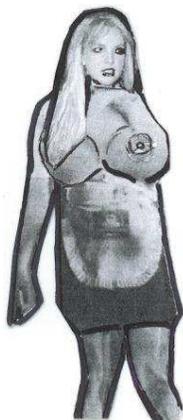
This is for your clay
elephant, for your stampede, your dance
around the fire's dance. This is for the woman
you drew on the inside of my skull.

This is for your bills, your debts,
this is so you don't have to work
the night-shift, this is for your overdue rent.

Take this, give it to your landlord.
I am sorry, it is all I have to give you.



Eric Kocher graduated from Binghamton University and is currently a student in the MFA program at Houston.



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