

Slurries of speech.

Stumbling to sleep is a lot like splashing through the pools the tides leave when they recede, stubbornly. I stand by the shore like a conquistador, imperial in my swimtrunks.

I stand by my father. I was the young Napoleon; I'd just seen Egypt, France, underpants.

I flatter a Corsican honor to challenge him to a sunset duel. The tyranny of pistols cracks; roses clenched in my little teeth, I snicker, and you stagger, theatrically, but draw again, ratttat, and flee. You stood by the shore like a great matador, a blotter-paper silhouette, mercurial in the night.

I fall, face and belly  
within the ebb I find things animate and inanimate; spindles of driftwood  
show you the power of distance and time.

In the water you find the mad radians of the sun clear the panes like minnows,  
like some postulate of M.C. Escher, and I roll on my back again.

The clouds flow like goldenrod; riderless blue bicycles with bells of jingle shells  
are the envy of every boy. The jingle shells pile on the shore, blown towards yachts and gully avenues in mountains and lime tsunamis and into cars and calderas they compound and wedge with the resonance of permanence in the echoes of a knell.

In the water you find that wind chimes are mediated like the tick of a clock; crickets,  
my head is full of them.

I listen to the dull simmer of summer, sweet dulcimer to my ears; Phoenician,  
burned anew, peculiar melodies of echolocation are the apartheid of poetry.

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Drenched then I knocked and was given my reproach for wandering from the house in the rain — a black, funny tea. I entered the dank 6' by 10' tool shed my father would avoid leaving, and shook myself like a dog. I wetted my father, who may or may not have been aware that it was raining, and bumped into the samovar, which smelled of old creosote and menstruated a thick steam. My father chuckled and asked why I didn't knock more often. I asked why he never left the tool shed, except to find food or cigarettes. If only I'd knock more often, he instructed, he would have everything he needed in that shed, although his health was failing him. He spent hours and hours at a time in that shed, for years and years. He cited a terrible pain in his gut, no longer latent years after returning from Vietnam, as the cause for his idleness, his smoking, his drinking. I never learned if the pain was a physical one. He asked why I was drenched and began to talk of Vietnamese rain, and I remember.

Oceans of Napoleon and dragons at dawn; serpentine red monsters of a Chinese New Year brought the deluge. It was the kind that falls on beaches, the kind that chokes the air.

Acid dawn moon  
shine like neon.

You hunted birds of prey. You told me during a hunt, my first, when I was twelve.

Blue-lipped fowl  
skewered the sun.

The triskelion in motion, I fired, and I saw the rain, and I remember.

Heavenly stars  
are reticent.

It was the kind that chokes the air.

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Shed memories flooded back to me, each with its own élan.

We watched laser green monsters on the hills of your TV set,  
noir and sci-fi were our staples.  
You did a mean impression of Humphrey Bogart, unappreciated at

dinner parties, when we could coerce you to attend.  
You were a blue collar man, couldn't stand the bellyache of primrose  
tuxedos  
that asked for polished jest.  
Like a surgeon, you operated in the bowels of Yale,  
deepening their tunnels, punishing stone.  
You were an overseer,  
and I want to be a doctor.

You began smoking, and Humphrey Bogart  
began to sound more and more like Jack Nicholson.  
I played Chief, the Medicine Man, and I shook a painted gourd at you,  
and rolled my Rrrrs like a porcelain Aborigine.

And like a true Smith, you blew my soul like beachglass,  
a hot earthen globe, spinning in the kiln,  
a sharp, redolent ware of clay imagination  
that spun its intangible drift.

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The years passed between us, five on ten,  
and came and buried our words like the Terracotta Army.  
You asked me to behave myself, to conduct myself like a symphony.  
I acquired what I thought was your strength, the fortitude of Sing Sing or  
Alcatraz or some other grisly tomb, indifferent through idle centuries.

And I wonder about my own future.  
And it's not so surprising,

When I think back to your father,  
who had a loose belt and enjoyed his westerns,  
who could swim farther than any other man.  
He was the man with bluecheese hands,  
and eyes made of glass.

And I think of myself, growing older, a game of complacency,  
enjoying any number of westerns and war flicks, knowing where to  
keep my eyes, but knowing my own children will.

God, 19 and already living vicariously through my children.

My father laughed, a bit.

I went to visit him in the last bed he knew, towards the end,  
and though we joked and reminisced,  
I had to ask why he'd kept in his shed.

He looked as though he could barely speak or keep his head up.

Stephen, sit down.

Stephen, there is no greater sin than unhappiness.

His hand wavered hesitantly.

I was stationed on a beach once; I can't remember its name, but I can still see it, as clearly as if I was lying on the sand. My patrol and I came upon a unit of Vietnamese men one morning, camped in a shady glade, just beyond the beach, and as we approached we realized that every one of them was asleep. They must have been patrolling that night... As we spied closer we realized that there were too many of them to fight. We tried to sneak past the group, unnoticed, but we awakened one of them. He looked straight at me and began screaming and screaming. Several of the others arose in a hustle. We shot every one of them, some of them lying on their backs, sun on their faces, in a dream. Did we have a choice? Afterwards we realized there wasn't a loaded gun amongst them... There were too many bodies to bury that day; I didn't want to count them all. We doused them all with kerosene, and set fire to them in mounds on the beach. But the ashes — the ashes precipitated in the air, and full dead Vietnamese men rained from the sky. The smell of burnt flesh smothered the beach, but the bodies, though bloody, were unburned. And our commanding officer, killed once in a battle, walked straight from the waves, and marched, covered in weeds, right up the beachhead and into the jungle. I met your mother in a village later that week, when she was just a girl, and I stole her on horseback.

And these things have weighed on me. I tire now. My, we can still talk, can't we? Here.

He scratched from his pocket a handful of change, and placed it in my palm, and his head went to his pillow, and he smiled.

And my pockets broke and these things scattered on the sand.

Eternities of red ribbon and flying fish and dead dragons came, a mad deluge, its torrents battering the earth.

I don't know what your last words to me meant, if you did any real fighting in Vietnam, if your words were the manifestation of strong anesthesia or faltering neurochemistry or the struggle to answer a difficult question about a difficult question.

I imagine your words — your reasons — were scenes from films you'd seen, and maybe that is good enough. Who am I to judge? Maybe that is what life is, in the end. A collection of scenes presented in a dream, where children can imagine themselves as Napoleon or Medicine Men or Humphrey Bogart in some outdated noir, glorious for its age. I guess we spend entire lives trying to understand these scenes without ever realizing that their meanings are entirely individual, that heroes can die before the credits roll, and this is Vietnamese rain, a fantastic feat of cinematography. We build our lives through and within it.

There are more questions I would have liked to ask that day I visited my father in bed, and I think I have, in my dreams. The answers are always clear, so clear that I forget that I am dreaming — all moviegoers do. We are in our shed, in the theater in which we roared, and the mad applause dies away for just a minute. And by the time I ask if beauty is nostalgia, if the examined life is for the tragedians and other intellectual trash, I hear my father, doing a ridiculous impression, but this time it's of me. And I chuckle. I know, at least, that I am not asleep in the theater.

And the film begins again. It is one of my favorites. I hear the camera shutter and the roll of film and I am sailing, flowing brazenly through the currents. In the breeze and the air I am the actor without a script.