

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

John Amen: Three Poems

John Amen · Wednesday, January 1st, 2020

Family Systems

for Richard

Three weeks after his bullseye shot,
his cellphone kept dialing – long,
blank messages, I could almost hear
the engine of his breath. He should've
been the world's youngest maestro
but spent his years hiding in the valves
of a westside trumpet, blowing sparks
but no music, a part he couldn't conjure
once he inhaled. Finally I answered,
waited for the caller to begin his confession.
Hope can nail your feet to a burning floor,
grief can smoke the dirt under your shoes.
Morning after my brother's funeral –
blue sky, red blooms on the gardenia –
I could hear my father grinding his teeth
from across the room. My mother stared
out a window, whispering to herself,
deciphering omens in the birdsong.
I told you a thousand times, she blurted,
wild dervish spinning in my direction,
never hang a hat on a black doorknob.
Now look, just look what you've done.

*

Regrets

for Richard

I snatched the bottle from his hand
three weeks before he bought the gun.
I quartered the pills

& sponged the dust from his shutters.
 I read him headlines
 as he smoked cigarettes in the doorway.
 Then I drove the Jeep as far as I could
 until the gravel turned to dynamite.
 He left me his best mud,
 coffee-stained tablature,
 family bible, blood streaked across its cover.
 As the trigger finger follows
 the loud voice's lead,
 so grief's a flood,
 your fists hold back water
 for only so long.
 Then you're sleeping with the copperheads,
 flying between empty silos,
 waking with your lips on fire.
 All summer I've wandered the heroin streets,
 visiting every pawnshop in town,
 hoping to reclaim that hand-me-down horn
 he hadn't played in years.

*

Two Years

for Richard

Lingering June
 beneath the fingers of the dogwood,
 you strummed your guitar by the woodpile.
 Countdown, Luna moths in the kitchen,
 thirty grooves carved in the dining room table.
 I was leaving, first day of July,
 you stood on the porch,
 lit your cigarette & winked.
Summer's still burning, I wanted to say,
the Monarchs haven't come home yet.
Listen! The saxes are playing on 13th Street.
 I should've rolled down the window
 & yelled your name, I didn't, I slammed a gate,
 jabbing thread through my lips,
 speeding into the stories that came next:
 gunshot that no one heard,
 absence stamped into indelible print,
 three bloodstains on a cushion.
 Before I could release the clutch,
 the dogwoods were bare, ice in the birdbaths,
 two years gone like a skid on the highway,
 sky & sky like an empty plate.

I should've tried harder.

(Author photo by Chad Weeden)

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