

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Justin Hamm: Three Poems

Justin Hamm · Wednesday, March 21st, 2018

First Lesson in Vietnam, 1987

It was how you stood on your trailer roof
 all that sweltering Independence Day, caped
 in a threadbare flag of our nation, encircled
 by Budweiser empties, plates of burning incense.
 It was how you stood there and also how,
 lit from above by those colorful celebration
 bombs, you made me believe in the myth
 of the romantic savage. I had no idea then
 what you'd tried to accomplish alone
 in the toolshed with the extension cord,
 nor how, in a few years, you'd be hauled in—
 armed robbery, just days after the first
 Gulf War broke out. I saw only your hair,
 shoulder length, and your scarred torso
 bare and bony, home to a tattooed menagerie
 of fantasy creatures: elf, dragon, phoenix,
 centaur, faerie, citizens of a land
 to which you'd gladly defect. It was all that,
 and it was how recklessly you lit
 bottle rockets and fired them from your
 hollowed-out walking stick. And it was how—
 finally—when my father cupped his hands together
 and shouted, *Hey, Chuck, give it a rest, guy.*
It's getting pretty late, you turned, delicate
 as a dancer in the shimmering moonlight,
 and offered him what little was left
 of your mangled middle finger.

*

To a Folksinger Just Arrived From the Midwest

Whisper salutations to your irises
 and tie those strange ornaments

into your hair. Crawl from your Volkswagen into the sweltering city and pluck something evangelical from your book of songs. Strum your dulcimer and enunciate as if to blow life back into fried chicken or restore the red to petrified roses. Give them mystery, ancestry. Give them not too much skin. Yours, never forget, is the music of freight trains and holyghosts. You need only the lungs to drown out the daily discord, the ambulances, the ring tones and the burglar alarms, and the city will place its heart on the steaming asphalt and ascend.

*

Rebekah Just When the Drought Was Ending

But the best thing about Rebekah was the way she floated always beneath the scent of woodburn and dusty Middle America, her keen ranch-queen convictions slicing deep and deeper into the tiniest of daily miseries with skepticism, demanding always some proof before she'd concede this life He pieced together for us cell by cell with ever shakier Godfingers contained even one malignancy.

Every bow-legged young bull rider, every sunburnt farmer of someday who stopped by to mend a fence or just to offer genteel salutations would see her backlit by sunset, dream her into his own mother and pray to the essence of the prairie to do what old bones could not. And it worked. She survived well enough to give of herself four more seasons among luckless kinfolk who every one drank greedily the blood she squeezed and felt the cracked lips of dry times less.

As long as there was some great need

into which she could empty herself
she could will the heart to continue
and none of the rules of dying applied,
but she must've seen that the new rain
wasn't baptismal or meant for her restoration.
When those stormclouds finally swelled
and burst into fat miracle drumbeats
she must've felt the change was coming on.

Why else open the windows so wide
with no thought for the evening chill?
Why else cut a hundred wildflowers
and arrange them into fiery clusters
but pour no water into their vases?

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