

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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