

# 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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