

THE BUFFALO POEMS

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(POEMS 1999-2002)

- 1. FROM BETWEEN KASTEL & WHITE STONE QUARRY (1-6)**
- 2. ON THE RUINS OF PALESTINE (7-17)**

1. FROM BETWEEN KASTEL & WHITE STONE QUARRY

1 (*Palimpsest of Place*)

Swell of hills across Judea

stretch
to open clear
between peaks where
sky

slips lower
into smooth cols -
down slender neck, as sweat
in crook of a collarbone -
sloped stunted shrubs
half-burnt trees or absent
trees

coal dust on gnarled
thornbushes, their tufted centers
thick in place of
and the air

parched
edges curling inward like bleached and
brittle parchment
here, in midday
mid-range
at footslip on incline
where stones scattered
are white markings
to nowhere

massive beast of crowded herds)

his solitary ruins
to this narrowland
still brown body
in still and dry heat
as though suspended

The scene should be framed and hung on walls as

is, as
from anywhere
in these hills -
highpitch of air punctured -
single shot
in perfect flight through will
pierce fur
flesh and he too
will fall

another small
soon

indistinct
dark decomposing

heap
as ancient and pointless
as the rest

The past I didn't choose
that is mine.

The desire unwieldy and wide
in a body disobeying

again and a mind clouded
down. A doubt,

ruined metal rooted
at a roadside along the rush of cars,

the unrelenting rust taste at the tongue's edges
that will not lift with water -

doubt in a place of stonesteady
believers. Always misnamed, he is this

and he is what wakes
when I wake, wherever I wake,

what sleeps when I do, he is
what walks when I walk, his weight

the lead-marrow in my bones
singed and spiked branding on my legs,

longings, words. He is what I dream,
the black ropes

that will not hold, the blood

that flows unnoticed though the dirt

stained darker smells of fresh
kill, he is the someone,

something of broad uncertain shape,
dragging a broken self

into these jagged hills, my always
foreign horizon.

3

From my home between ruined
kastel and white stone

quarry where waiting
is skies blind and silent

blue but for the breathing
that swells like a bruise where

waiting is just
waiting

the return of children
the returning of bodies

back from somewhere else
nearby

blown up pieces scattered
wide across a marketplace

blood stain
two-stories high

or pieces
piled up on a ridge in a dark

border crossing night
Quarry was the heart

gouged out and fed
to the hounds, quarry was

a place of stone incessant
drilling

to nowhere but dust
and emptied crater the quarry

was a heap of dead bodies
If back then the buffalo

had just lain down not
raced beside trailing smoke black

tracks dark indifferent
trains that stormed

across open spaces to slash
a gold quiet

in two and their thick-furred breathing
wet with fear and phlegm

beneath black clouds, black
shotguns slanting from the windows

to pick them off one by one, easiest aim as
they kept pace

with the trains and if they had just
lain down in the dirt

if they had just
stopped

then or here
where there is nothing

left
but blankets of dust

4 (*no name or mane*)

It is the soul
suddenly

wandering off

like a butterfly
or a buffalo:

it is
soul-loss

Frayed red string round the wrist
cannot keep it tied
to body

to me

*canst thou bind the buffalo with his band
in the furrow? or will he harrow
the valleys
after thee*

who is now sadness
and sickness -

If
it comes back
I'll get well

I've been told

but the names I call

re'em

anoa

tamarau

carabao cape wild

bovidae or

bison

furred words

lumbering forth from

gray-tinged skies

final pre-storm

rays, chill even at this distance

are all wrong

How then to call

the lost soul

back

I would follow it

wordless

into what valley

who

hath, as it were

*the strength
of the buffalo?*

but am stopped

body stripped
left behind:

breathing carcass

5

Like the red-starred
ambulance
which raced
through city streets
beyond city

limits with siren and lights flashing
toward the child

fallen

wingless, windless

from a jagged
rooftop

broken on stones below
three-year old body still

breathing barely
and the ambulance
at village entrance
stopped

*sweet bird beside the buffalo, both
motionless*

Like
the ambulance with white
smoke trails
from exhaust

metal hot
in the late cool afternoon
where children play

high
voices
carried away
by last light of
all the suns setting

where an ambulance
has stopped
at the road-block

at the village entrance
waits
for army escort

toward the child
meters away

breath now bird threaded air

ambulance unmoved before
the alley rising rushing toward howling
the uncles pleading
promising safety in
the now uncertain
dusk grey

light where the ambulance waits
its unweildy

shape

idling

*the buffalo deaf and still
in hills crouching low
before mourning houses*

6 (*And when you see Jerusalem*)

in her shade of scarred
stone walls around stone
homes roads hills in her
storm of stones thrown from ancient lookouts
with stone-sacred certainty and stone
memories placed gently
on stone tombs

And when you see that city that
Jerusalem her open squares covered
with rocks tossed hurled
pitched at moving targets the ground on which
we would stand unevenly stitched
patchwork of protest
and prayer-frenzy

When you see that Jerusalem
encompassed by those who love
her history of boulders still unearthed
and her history of exposed rocks hoarding the sun's
winter warmth when you see that Jerusalem
encompassed by those who
love her

More than life more than the lives
of their sons and daughters
my sons and daughter
who sleep in warm rooms their cheeks flushed
skin sweaty and sweet as they
sleep in this pale safety
that will not last

When you see Jerusalem
surrounded by the armies
of those who love her too much
love her weight her warmth her steadfast bulk immobile
behemoth in moonlight her promised
permanence engraved
in the stones

They love too much —

Then flee! Flee to the mountains!

2. ON THE RUINS OF PALESTINE

7

I live on the ruins of Palestine

Slow to speech thick
of tongue quick
in anger ancient
parched

fear

In the ruins on a land
through a night
ignited

By a single
singed vision
and another
single spark

Cradled close in a charred palm
chiseled in a stonedream
carried across history

Through the dark beneath our bare
feet

Strangers all

On the ruins of Palestine

frozen in flamelight
behind our clenched eyes -
imagined marker
of near-by
water)

“Blessed is she
who in her lifetime has seen
the most water”

Who has seen has not seen
blessed is she

9 (*a fable and a nursery rhyme*)

The children were missing limbs
In the southern sand region they
were missing:
a leg a foot an arm
I sent my northern children out looking

The moon was full the paths were white
night
was smooth just the ripple
of my children's high voices
skipping stones in the dry wadis:

Hunter horn berry and bird,
hunter horn berry and fish.
Hunter clover nut and bird,
Whisper a secret, make a wish.

Daniel led the way said
he was unafraid and held
his brother's hand
Beneath an olive tree they stopped
to eat treats I had packed and to play
echoes and acorns

Hunter horn berry and bird,
Tell me, child, what have you heard?
The sky at sunset is redder than red
And buffalo-ropes will be your bed.

In the southern sand region
under starched white sheets
the children reached
for missing legs that ached

and called to them
to leave the fevered body behind

Hide and seek in buffalo-clover,
You'll wake up, child, when the hunt is over.
Hunter horn berry and bird,
Tell me no more of what you have heard.

My children went looking for
limbs the other children would no longer need
My beautiful children came back
flushed
empty-handed

10

when we no longer care
 who or how many
are dead
 our own
 running through sprinklers
 in the still
 ablaze
afternoon

when we are too weary
 too hot too bored
 to read even
one more name or
 that day's favorite
tale:

two teenage daughters dead in a day

two bodies on two stretchers
 and their mother
 fallen upon them her mouth
 mangled in open agony
as she strokes their lovely long legs
 now covered in flags

 one more bomb
in a season of many

when we cannot remember the name
 of the smallest baby girl
 carried through narrowstreets

amid crowds of mourners
 curled in her father's arms she is
 tiny

slightest bundle
 of cloth bread wild
 flowers
in her father's arms

carried to the graveyard to the crumbling
 edge of driest dirt
 in a season of stray
bullets

 noone claims someone
 aimed

when we count our days
 by which bloody "incident"
 killed whose children
in what village or city
 while we travel

 to work
and back home
 and we no longer care

so long as our own
 can still run through sprinklers
 in the late-afternoon
blazing
 heat

11 (*the Still Hunt*)

Conceals himself a hundred
yards upwind in a wallow
or behind
the rise in bluff where
he marks the lead cow
at perfect center
of cross-sights (cross-bones cross-
love

hung high from a
bleached-white tree)

She
will not lead them now
away from danger He
has named first shot for her
aimed first shot
below her shoulder bone
to rip into darkshelter dry
echo
of her lungs
where breath rushes out
will not return

Bewildered
she drops to one foreleg then
to the other kneeling
in dust we are kneeling in dust
what do you
hear
what does the herd

hear

A rifle's rupture of space
 across river ravine
ruminants and the land
 at last stampeding
 as again

we take aim

12 (*what has anchored us*)

The ballast of their breathing
 in the next room in the bed
beside in the darkened house
 enchanted
 breath expanding

to the rhythm of our fantasy:
 buffalo stars
stampeding through
 unblemished skies
above a sacred land we imagined
 our own

The weight of the unwritten
 truth
at well-bottom: rabid fear
 perched on the back of the absent
buffalo

The certainty of migrating cormorants
 in massive flocks their flight
 path and patterns
absolute: they return every year
 to rest here

in the Huleh valley around the reflooded
 swamp of the north where
I walk October 2001

one year after
the women of Sachnin first

buried their faces
in the rough wind-dried still
sweet smelling clothes of their
dead sons

October 2001 twenty years after
 I first returned Now
 in the marshy valley at red
 mountain's foot at dusk:

A still life in the spectrum's
 every noble colour: indigo
 and scarlet reign the returned
 lake reeds and sedge rooted

in water thick and crowded the canvas
 lit from behind with brightest
 whitewash Time still in a perfect
 porcelain bowl my sons

transfixed at lake's edge
 by shifting shadows of the huge
 water buffalo hiding in the bush
 and by the birds frozen in flight

their dark V marking the fragile sky their
 perfect hearts my frightened heart
 just before they wing
 out of sight

But they are extinct extinguished
 flame fire flushed color
 of cheek
 favored child you would (in another's world)

could could not protect
 (you crouch together for cover)

 or the blue-eyed father moving
 south on a besieged road to bring
 his soldier son home

drives into a daylight ambush death
 rises from the roadside shadows
 he can see it race towards him

 between first bullet and last
 son home hope
 are left waiting

there is no bringing him back

there is no bringing them back

the buffalo

their bellowing thirst in the then
 dried swamp still distinct
 in a quiet dusk

and their shadows:

last stagger of a memory

or is it

this late-afternoon crimson light
and the lies

we continue to tell ourselves

15 (*April invasion*)

What stands between us
impenetrable

Lumbered from distances
ice-crystals still in hooves

Tracks tars tanks
rumbling where starred

Roads made ragged ribbed
chests bared ammunition

Residue on hearts inside
beating

Horns of bone cannon metal
covered in dust down

Dirt paths blind blind alleys
demolished walls

Reveal eyes all I
can see crushed cinder-blocks

Concrete cement and stone
hearts beating

Beating dark fur red rugs
still draped by gaping holes

Herd a heap heard the whole

loss lost

To bodies left in the rain
rot in the sun

Will noone cover console
carry them away

They are evidence
of what was

Here home school street
what has

Obscured the beloved's face
I hear a heart

whose
voice like my own

asking:
How fast can you bury your dead?

What stands between us
a girl

Her hair black long
her eyes

Lovely.
This is not suicide

she says
in the grainy video-taped

interview This is
Sacrifice

Selfless spirit to sustain
Hope Kill

as many as she
can this beautiful human

bomb I've been told
How the Buffalo stepped forward

during the time of famine
Worship

its selflessness they say
with explosive belt strapped

around her belly she looked

Pregnant

she looked lumbering larger
than one self

in a moment the moment before
deafening stops up time

and space with nails bolts glass
splinters what is left is

mangled
metal blood flesh

to be scraped off the street
collected in sandwich bags

so the whole the whole
can be buried

whole:
Howl!

O gates; Cry, O City!
The whole

of Palestina
art dissolved into tears

of mourning.

17 (*dispossessed*)

Drought of years
duration

Longer than any

In memory than any
memory

Beneath
Blackhills Judith
Ridge Highwood

Mountains
Sioux and Araphoes
on short-grass plains

in search of search for
forage last Herds
the stories solitary

White Buffalo
who will lead them
to water

On a slope
of Olive
trees wild Mint

Myrrh Anise red
Anemone the people
of Mi'yar

in search of search for
Markings
of former homes

razed after the War
and the Well
where it once stood

I am writing this
unrooted

In the moment
Before

Stampede to the bluff

Fire behind us
Alongside us

And ahead

Where escarpment ends
Our wild plunge

into Sweet untouched air