

WHITE BEES

Poems by

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WHITE BEES

W.E. Butts is the author of The Inheritance (Four Zoas Press, 1983), The Required Dance (Igneus Press, 1990), Movies in a Small Town (Mellen Press, 1997), and A Season of Crows (Igneus Press, 2000). His poems have appeared in such publications as Atlanta Review, Mid-American Review, Poet Lore, and the 1997 Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry. The recipient of a Pushcart Prize nomination, he holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College, and teaches English and writing at the University of New Hampshire and Hesser College.

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"The Maple" was reprinted in Heartbeat of New England: Contemporary Nature Poetry (Tiger Moon Press, 2000).

"Those who believe
In death have their worship cut out for them.
As for myself, we
Continue."

--W.S. Merwin

"And now the young,
Scarlet on their wings, fly away
Over the marshes."

--James Wright

for Amy, Chloe, and Catherine Edwards

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SEPTEMBER

You're doing nothing, then suddenly
there is your uncle with a club foot
and crippled hand, who loved sports
and wrote histories for children;
your father who shot the eyes off pool balls;
your boyhood friend who closed himself
inside the garage, motor running,
and went to sleep. I know a man who painted
his town the color of distant hills,
so stepping inside its shops and offices
was like entering a field of mint
or passing under forest light.
This month, on a calendar above the desk,
Japanese warlords have closed the bridge,
and the people must turn away from their temple.
There are times I've thought I was going to die,
but didn't. Tonight I'm here beneath the swords
that threaten to slice off the heads of faith.
There is a blue circle around the date of my birth.
I remember a woman who collected her past
like pieces of shell from the sand;
those glass beads of prayer
dangling from my mother's arthritic fingers;
the ragman, carriage, and horse,
peddling his iron and cloth. I think of a saint
who wore burlap, and spoke with rabbit and sparrow.
I know a man who listens to the hours
trapped in the throats of tiny wooden birds.
It's hard to tell from here, where the white bees
of my body have gathered, if memory
is sacrament or penance.

A CHRONOLOGY OF BIRDS

1951. Bored with magic shows
and lemonade stands, we needed
some deeper ceremony,
so when we found the crushed sparrow
by the roadside we stared
awhile, poked its body
with sticks, trembled a little
in our five-year-old fascination.

Then I remembered Father's harmonica,
ran to the house and took it
from its shiny metal case.
Up and down the small town's street,
our procession of children marched;
one boy carrying the bird
and its death stench
on a small slab of bark.

I pressed my tongue to each fret,
blew, but made the wrong sound,
a dirge -- not that first language
of breath, song, and trill.
Meanwhile, there were birds
collecting in the trees.
We could only answer them
with silence.

INNOCENCE

I'm dressed inside the family album
for First Communion, pushing my tongue
against the fleshy space where a tooth had been,
and I love Mother and Father, Jesus
and the Blessed Virgin,
a girl in my second grade class
who yells at me for following her.
Look, I'm nearly forgivable
standing under a chorus of angels
in this white suit, even though
once, while reading aloud from "Black Beauty,"
I declared that horse's coat
to be "smooth as Satan,"
and so was held back a year
because, as the nun explained
later to my shamed parents,
I was a strange boy who could not read.

There's a fast-food restaurant
in place of the dining car
where Mother worked, photographs
of it framed in plastic on the wall.
And I remember a trucker
who promised me cowboy boots and hat,
but never drove through town again,
summers on the front porch
watching the Thruway being built,
reports of traffic fatalities
in the local gazette, my father
telling stories to the neighborhood kids,
making each, in turn, a hero,
six-guns drawn, riding a sleek stallion.

[stanza break]

Innocence

I would save us all now, if I could,
from the herd of mistakes
galloping through our hearts.
Once, reshaping our lives
was an easy ritual of customized cars,
rolled-up sleeves, and petroleum jelly.
Then we left town,
or punched in at the factory.
Nothing was simple. No one was blameless.

1954: TWO PARADES

Just home from Korea, a decorated war hero was leaning toward the crowd, from the hotel's third floor, and we heard the drum roll, marching band, rifle-fire in the humid air, Mother and I, while Father worked the late shift.

Didn't I know what war was,
times in the weeds I waited for the enemy?
Little Bobby lost an eye in one of those battles,
shot out by his own brother's pellet gun.
I remember, all those childhood years after,
his glass-marble stare seemed wrong,
and his brother's self-hatred.

That was the summer the daughter of the kind woman
who owned the dining car my mother washed dishes in
became Miss New York State, in a parade of lace
and lilacs, their petals the pale lavender
of a heart on the breast of a graceless uniform,
or the satin that ten years later would line my father's casket.
We all stood cheering on the street
to wave along the beauty we were not.

PRACTICING FAITH

Mornings, Father walked me to church,
although he didn't share my mother's faith,
so I could become an altar boy and serve,
having learned whatever it is a child can know of sin,
and carefully memorized each necessary prayer,
and been told the names of each essential saint.

My father rose in the soft light like a saint,
afternoons in the pool hall, the men quiet as in church,
watching him bend over the green table in a kind of prayer,
as he lined up a shot and aimed with certain faith,
knowing a mistake in geometry to be the only sin.
Eye and hand, he believed, would always serve.

If I lost, say a coin, a book, and no memory would serve,
Mother took me through the house, repeating a request: "Dear Saint
Anthony, please come around." (Just now, I was without sin.)
"Something's lost and can't be found." Later, in church,
no matter what was not recovered, I would have faith,
kneel, and ask again, in silent, reverent prayer.

But I thought there was so much more than prayer,
or choosing different ways in which to serve.
I thought to question what I heard and saw a faith
to teach me what it meant to live simply as a saint.
I wondered at the many reasons for a church,
and brightly colored, numbered balls pocketed like sin

[stanza break]

Practicing Faith

forgiven in the dark holes of a smoke-filled room, and why sin was something I had to speak about in prayer.
Was hymn and chant the salvation of a church?
What did it really mean, to sacrifice and serve?
How is it I could be both pure and wrong, a saint?
Father's kindness, Mother's trust, was what I knew of faith.

Thinking of the hospital, I remember Mother's faith,
and the priest who came to baptize Father free from sin,
Father's breath a final wind to angel, man, or saint.
I listened to all we leave in death, and Mother's prayer,
and wanted to believe her voice alone would serve
to comfort as I joined the last procession through the church.

MOUNTAIN OF LOVE

Saturday nights, we skated
to rock and roll music,
and weaved around girls.
In our songs
there was always someone
who needed love,
and would, like us,
do almost anything to get it.

That year,
we wore fluorescent pants
with a buckle on the back,
carefully folded sleeves
and slicked hair,
laced our boots half-way,
and spun on full-precision
wooden wheels, each turn
waiting like a first date.

Rhythms of Duane Eddy
and Johnny Rivers
propelled us through games
of whip and chicken,
where danger could be played
inside the wings of our collars,
each of us knowing
he'd circle back
to join the others.

[stanza break]

Mountain of Love

It was not like now,
coming home from your job
on second shift,
your body aching
in ways it never did
at seventeen,
and you keep repeating
the wrong words
to some half-remembered lyric --
not from love, but need --
until you can almost believe
you are loosened
from that snapping line
your life has been.

THE NECKTIE

Father wore a necktie, third shift,
cleaning machines at the factory, blue fabric
shimmering like a summer night on the drab gray
cotton twill uniform of common deed.
Often, since then, I've tied his double windsor,
dressing for funerals, a wedding, dinner,
some occasion involving a dark room, wine, good jazz.

I've been looking at this photograph of you and me
celebrating my last birthday at that Italian restaurant
we enjoy so much, yet hardly go to anymore,
now that we have a routine of monthly bills and simple utility.
But I'm thinking how light flashed like a star in the fingers
of the waitress who took the Polaroid shot
I'm holding, how genuine her happiness
seemed at what we all waited for,
how his smooth hand-over-hand motion
had perfectly drawn the floral print knot.

IN THE WOODS AT HILLS ACRES

In the woods behind the house, leaves
swirl and fold like envelopes,
carrying their brief messages of wind.

For half a century, I've been walking
somewhere. Once, on a crisp afternoon
like this, I entered a clearing

just in time to see a hunter
with his rifle raised and aimed at me,
an instant when not even the chirping

lyric code of sparrows, that insists
we belong to the world, can make the heart
believe it could be at the center of anything,

and I was like one of those creatures
in the forest that seems certainly doomed,
yet somehow trembles through its next breath.

As my lover left this morning
for work, I remembered loneliness -- a room in Boston,
traffic angry in the narrow street,

and a man getting off the bus
at Fargo, North Dakota, bewildered
in front of an abandoned train station, years ago.

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MISSING

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MISSING

TODAY

Today is your lover, asleep
and dreaming the continuous fountain.
It is your body
dying without you.

It is the darkness
of distant trees
poised on the horizon,
like those strange shadows
of small animals
that danced across the moonlit ceiling
of your childhood.

It is a long-tailed kite,
or random bird.
It is a child
grasping the tenuous cord
of delight.

Today is the desire
of sudden rain, or it is you
driving through that rain,
not knowing the difference
between curved road and sky.

MONARCH

←for William Kemmett

We're sitting here in summer green
of the back yard, like a couple
of ancient Chinese governors,
wise with drink and conversation,
when you interrupt our talk of loneliness,
bad jobs, money, lost children,
to say, "That's beautiful!"

And it is -- a gold and black Monarch
waving between leaves,
underneath a young maple.
I believe this is sacred,
to witness a moment in the brief hours
of life of such a thing.

This is also a good time to speak
about passion, or contemplate
Li Po, who writes:
"One quick trip between
heaven and earth, then the dust
of ten thousand generations."

THE CONTEMPLATIVE

Some days he just doesn't know
what he's doing, why he cares
about changes in weather
or his next birthday,
which will make him older
than his dead uncle.

But there are times
he really feels part of it all,
responsible, as if someone
were secretly watching him,
and he is so full of love
for everything he cannot speak,
or he talks incessantly to himself,
asking rhetorical questions
about the rain and trees.

He likes to take walks
to the harbor, let the river
channel through him awhile,
buy an expensive cup of coffee
to go from a downtown shop,
sit around and look
at everyone else's life
stepping quickly across the crowded streets.

In his study,
the room where he writes
the other story of his life,
when things are suddenly quiet
and even the storm inside his brain
has receded to a light fog,

(continued)

The Contemplative

he stares out the west window at dusk,
as if his mind were a hand
that could lower the sun,
and bless the sky with many colors.

THE BURNING

With winter on all the calendars,
I stand alone in a room,

at a window.
My face floats

beneath the many fires
of stars,

above rivers of salt.
Snow falls from my eyes,

and a few crows fly out of them.
Tonight, whatever I think

is marked by flame.
If it were not for the burning hands,

I would be an arsonist of regret,
and my desire

a blue nest of smoke.
This is how I must live

in the shadows of ice,
and what the storm is.

COBALT

Here's an evening sky
to define the changing season,
as I drive toward the waterfront.
Earlier, at work, I was told
one of my clients is dying.
This led to a clinical discussion of how
he should die, and where, and once again
I cursed my inability to say "enough!"
I'm contemplating the sound
of foghorns at the harbor;
the drifting shadows of gulls;
the stalled, imported flowers
of the exotic garden;
the town's citizens walking through the park
in this time before the inevitable
coming of tourists and rollerbladers;
the dark wings of the heart.
Last night I said something selfish.
Although you are kind,
and will forgive me this, I'm afraid,
even after the most sincere penance,
one is never fully redeemed.
Nevertheless, I've stopped at a chic downtown shop
to buy a cobalt vase and single red rose.
Now, damnit, I'm remembering the Halloween afternoon
at the treatment center
he ran behind me like a child,
making little, harmless wind noises,
whispering, "I'm a ghost. Are you scared?"
I've forgotten when we began
collecting the blue glass,
but in our small apartment now, it's everywhere.

ARBORETUM

← for Richard Martin

The sun is a tumor
threatening our conversation.
Just now we're discussing
the possibilities of Zen,
the acceptance of everything,
the paradox of burlap
and sainthood.
We decide art
also has its place
in the world,
even as young hoodlums
in hi-tops are clustered
near bushes and trees,
like an exotic species of flora.

It's that kind of day
someone must have already painted,
and we are these two figures
made up of so many
colored dots,
distinguished from the landscape
by an artificial splash
of light.
But don't we really need
to be here like this,
thinking of our fathers,
the tattooed forearm,
sure stroke of a cue?
And what about our mothers,
their cumulus lips
floating in the spring air?

[stanza break]

Arboretum

Listen friend,
no matter what we make of things,
their details are always hidden,
like the songs
of those nameless birds
we never see.
It's like returning
to the difficult passage
of a book,
or standing in a roomful of flowers
with the body of someone
you might have loved once.
Let's study its pale, folded hands,
the heart gone gray.
Let's study the mysterious trees,
and the impossible names
we give them.

MEDITATIONS ON LEAVING

Neruda, as a child in the yard,
and his precious toy lamb,
spoke for hours
with an unseen boy
on the other side
of a high wooden fence,
until one day
he passed the lamb
under a hole they had dug,
and that boy
delivered his favorite thing --
a pine cone.
It was like any moment
when we are almost innocent.

Once, a friend and I
ran to the river
and broke the backs of sunfish
against wet rocks,
smoked from corncob pipes,
cut our arms with the knife
of our dangerous games,
and pressed the small wounds
together like a kiss.

I still don't know
how it is we become
what we no longer trust,
but this morning
before I left, I watched
your face turn away
toward whatever, just then, was.

AT THE HARBOR

The nearly stilled water
is clear enough to see
silt settling
beneath rippling mountains
and clouds.

Cormorants float
like so many question marks,
and pigeons rise
like conflicting thoughts.

Yellow-eyed gulls watch
as I toss in a stone
that disappears
like a monk's answer
to a novitiate.

Look at my hands.
If it weren't
for a particular loop
in a certain genetic code,
they could be birds
flying through spring rain.

But aren't we small boats
sailing each day
into another circumstance
of weather?

THE MESSENGERS

Between here
and there,
the radio tuned
to my favorite rock station,
I'm all engine and song,
my hands two birds
of determined flight.

Consider the complaint
of jay and wind,
the persistence of squirrel,
the burden of walnut,
the curse of dead leaves
on my windshield,
then the hours
of work I'm driving toward.

At each turn and stop
I wonder what it means --
this daily migration
of commuter and trucker,
schoolchild and police,
jogger and transient;
the punctuation
of blinking lights
and stalled traffic.

Tonight in the yard
with my tired eyes,
the grass wet
under my yellow leaves,
a ballet of light
dances around me,
and above my head
birds repeat
the day's small thoughts.

[stanza break]

The Messengers

But, just now,
on the elm branches,
those dark mystics,
the crows,
wearing their black capes,
their heads bowed
in the sudden gray air,
tell me everything
I'll need to learn.

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MISSING

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MISSING

PARTICULAR HEARTS

" . . . Love allows us to walk
in the sweet music of our particular heart."

--Jack Gilbert

I walk to the edge of the pier,
where curious tourists point out
a single harbor seal, bobbing and lunging
in the cold winter water,
wet, brown fur slick as sex.
Here is where we've come to be astonished.
"This can't be happening to me,"
we say when things go wrong.
We wonder about the seal,
what it's doing down there,
imagine webbed feet propelling
that impossibly large body
with great speed, toward some inevitable,
glittering fish. This is the chain:
we devour, restore. Today
you and I argued, but when I returned
from seeing all this,
our particular hearts tapped
against a blue door, joined
in the necessary, exquisite surge
toward separate places on our sweat-soaked bedding,
a river of twisted sheets wrapped around our ankles,
our two hearts taking up a constant rhythm
inside their respective rooms.
So many things make us think of our lives.
Isn't that what love is?
Like this morning, in the trees,
when swallows became flash and trill,
and I wanted you here, to listen.

SELLING THE CHURCH

The cold river behind me,
I walked home through a light falling of snow
and epiphany of wind,
past a blessing of Baptist church bells,
and thought how, when I was a boy,
houses of faith seemed eternal
as the soul we children knew
would someday rise from our shocked eyes.
But what did we know then about salvation?
That first year of marriage, I came to understand
my father, who each Sunday knelt in a pew
at Mother's church, although it was a place
he had no faith in. Months later, again
at the church on my street, I'm remembering this
as I read the realtor's sign: "Sale Pending."
Between maple and pine, birds cross
in a religion of weather. What we believe to be true
is what the caretaker raking the leaves
of the minister's yard suddenly says to me:
"Snow tonight. Frost on t.v."
It's the gray river and waves against wharf pilings;
the harsh cries of circling gulls and the harbor's silence;
the ritual of a pouring of wine and quiet speech
that is our desire, our prayer.

September

A Chronology of Birds

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Particular Hearts

Selling the Church


To be
corrected

TAZORAC
(TAZAROTENE TOPICAL GEL) 0.1%

SEPTEMBER

Flouire
Your doing nothing, then suddenly
there is your uncle with a club foot
and crippled hand, who loved sports
and wrote histories for children;
your father who shot the eyes off pool balls;
your boyhood friend who closed himself
inside the garage, motor running,
and went to sleep. I know a man who painted
his town the color of distant hills,
so stepping inside its shops and offices
was like entering a field of mint

I've been looking at this photograph of you and me
celebrating my last birthday at that Italian restaurant
we enjoy so much, yet hardly go to anymore,
now that we have a routine of monthly bills and simple utility.
But I'm thinking how light flashed like a star in the fingers
of the waitress who took the Polaroid shot
I'm holding, how genuine her happiness
seemed at what we all waited for,
how smooth hand-over-hand motion ^{his}
had perfectly drawn the floral print knot.

IN THE WOODS AT HILLS ACRES

In the woods behind the house, leaves
swirl and fold like envelopes,
carrying their brief messages of wind.

For half a century, I've been walking
somewhere. Once, on a crisp afternoon
like this, I entered a clearing

just in time to see a hunter
with his rifle raised and aimed at me,
an instant when not even the chirping

lyric code of sparrows, that insists
we belong to the world, can make the heart
believe it could be at the center of anything,

and I was like one of those
creatures [↑]
in the forest that seems certainly doomed,
yet somehow trembles through its next breath.

As my lover left this morning
for work, I remembered loneliness -- a room in Boston,
traffic angry in the narrow street,

and a man getting off the bus
at Fargo, North Dakota, bewildered
in front of an abandoned train station, years ago.

AT THE HAMILTON HOUSE

In the garden, we try to guess
whatever's missing
from the statue of a woman
looking down at a falcon perched
on her cracked foot,
her arm raised,
her hand a memory
of stone,
certain as love.

Today is the desire
of sudden rain, or it is you
driving through that rain,
not knowing the difference
between curved road and sky.

MONARCH

for William Kemmett

We're sitting here in summer green
of the back yard, like a couple
of ancient Chinese governors,
wise with drink and conversation,
when you interrupt our talk of loneliness,
bad jobs, money, lost children,
to say, "That's beautiful!"

And it is -- a gold and black Monarch
waving between leaves,
underneath a young maple.
I believe this is sacred,
to witness a moment in the brief hours
of life of such a thing.

This is also a good time to speak
about passion, or contemplate
Li Po, who writes:
"One quick trip between
heaven and earth, then the dust
of ten thousand generations."

THE CONTEMPLATIVE

Some days he just doesn't know
what he's doing, why he cares
about changes in weather
or his next birthday,
which will make him older
than his dead uncle.

But there are times
he really feels part of it all,
responsible, as if someone
were secretly watching him,
and he is so full of love
for everything ~~he~~ cannot speak, ^{he}
or he talks incessantly to himself,
asking rhetorical questions
about the rain and trees.

He likes to take walks
to the harbor, let the river
channel through him awhile,
buy an expensive cup of coffee

toward whatever, just then, was.

AT THE HARBOR

The nearly stilled water
is clear enough to see
silt settling
beneath rippling mountains
and clouds.

Cormorants float
like so many question marks,
and pigeons rise
like conflicting thoughts.

Yellow-eyed gulls watch
as I toss in a stone
that disappears
like a monk's answer
to a novitiate.

Look at my hands.
If it weren't
for a particular loop
in a certain genetic code,
they could be birds
flying through spring rain.

But aren't we small boats
sailing each day
into another circumstance
of weather?

THE MESSENGERS

Between here
and there, *— comm*
the radio tuned
to my favorite rock station,
I'm all engine and song,
my hands two birds
of determined flight.

Consider the complaint
of jay and wind,
the persistence of squirrel,
the burden of walnut,
the curse of dead leaves
on my windshield,
then the hours
of work I'm driving toward.

At each turn and stop
I wonder what it means --

this daily migration
of commuter and trucker,
schoolchild and police,
jogger and transient;
the punctuation
of blinking lights
and stalled traffic.

Tonight in the yard
with my tired eyes,
the grass wet
under my yellow leaves,
a ballet of light *light*
dances around me,
and above my head
birds repeat
the day's small thoughts.

But, just now,
on the elm branches,
those dark mystics,
the crows,
wearing their black capes,
their heads bowed
in the sudden gray air,
tell me everything
I'll need to learn.

THE MAPLE

I've never felt a sadness
such as that afternoon I drove home
to find the maple
chopped in sections strewn
across the yard like victims
of a highway accident.

From our third-story window
even the intrusive jay
and ominous crow
had been welcome.
You worried
over the squirrel
in winter.
Once, a single cardinal
was our only hope.

And there were times
we talked into evening
beneath its foliage,
sheltered
from light summer rains.

First, our neighbor built a wall
for privacy, then complained
some coastal storm

The cold river behind me,
I walked home through a light falling of snow
and epiphany of wind,
past a blessing of Baptist church bells,
and thought how, when I was a boy,
houses of faith seemed eternal
as the soul we children knew
would someday rise from our shocked eyes.
But what did we know then about salvation?
That first year of marriage, I came to understand
my father, who each Sunday knelt in a pew
at Mother's church, although it was a place
he had no faith in. Months later, again
at the church on my street, I'm remembering this
as I read the realtor's sign: "Sale Pending."
Between maple and pine, birds cross
in a religion of weather. What we believe to be true
is what the caretaker raking the leaves
of the minister's ~~house~~ suddenly says to me: *yard*
"Snow tonight. Frost on t.v."
It's the gray river and waves against wharf pilings;
the harsh cries of circling gulls and the harbor's silence;
the ritual of a pouring of wine and quiet speech
that is our desire, our prayer.

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Poet Lore: "The Necktie"

Poets on the Line: "Meditations on Leaving"

Spillway: "Arboretum"; "A Chronology of Birds"; "The Messengers"

"The Maple" was reprinted in Heartbeat of New England: Contemporary Nature Poetry (Tiger Moon Press, 2000).