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WHAT TO SAY IF THE BIRDS ASK

W.E. Butts

About the Author

W.E. Butts is the author of several poetry collections, including *Sunday Evening at the Stardust Cafe`* (1st World, 2006), which won the Iowa Source Poetry Book Prize, and a chapbook, *Sunday Factory* (Finishing Line Press, 2006). The recipient of two Pushcart Prize nominations, his poems appear frequently in such journals as *Atlanta Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Poetry East*, and have been anthologized in *Leaves by Night, Flowers by Day*, *Under the Legislature of Stars*, *Heartbeat of New England: an Anthology of Contemporary Nature Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is an associate professor of English at Hesser College in Manchester, New Hampshire, where he lives with his wife, the poet S Stephanie.

for William Kemmett

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Birmingham Poetry Review: "Testament"
Poetry East: "Against Happiness"
White Pelican Review: "What to Say if the Birds Ask"

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THE LAKE

I don't know how Father managed
that summer I was five,
on his factory pay,
to bring us to the glistening lake
and white clapboard cottage
for a week, its small rooms
filled with early July light,
and what seemed to me a thousand birds
singing through the open windows,
past the waving flowered curtains.

Perhaps he borrowed the money
from my uncle, who would
be dead a few years later,
at fifty-four, the only time
I ever saw my father weep.
But we were happy those days,
my parents and I,
by that lake called "Silver,"
and in its bright water
that returned us,
redeemed and shivering,
back to our currency of air.

Each afternoon, I walked
along the shoreline,
gathering shells and stones
from where the wet sand
touched a mysterious silence
that somehow
also lived in me,
even on that final morning
of clouds and rain,
when we left for home.

SACRAMENT & PENANCE

Whatever I'd done to offend
is a lost memory now,
but the day that nun, red-faced
and stern, slapped my cheek
so hard my seven-year-old soul
felt stunned as she accusingly hissed,
"Must you always be different?"
was somehow both sacrament
and penance. Poverty had made me
a boy named in whispers
of kids who gathered in the hallways
of St. Peter's elementary, or at the edge
of the school yard at recess,
and not even the kind smile of the girl
with blonde braids who sat quietly
at her desk was enough to believe in.
But it's true my father returned every dawn
covered in dust from his factory job,
and my mother worried her rosary beads
each Sunday Mass, small fingers soft
and wrinkled by dining car dishwater.
There was faith in a barbed hook,
glittering lure, and my father, summer nights
at the creek bank lined with lanterns
of the poor; the coal-heated house in winter,
pot-bellied stove, and Mother's warm hands
those afternoons I'd been too long in the cold;
the simple prayer that brought us all,
evenings, to the supper table, where that question
was an answer, then a promise
my newly anointed life would have to keep.

THE CALLING

Again the boy calls after the man, and again
I'm walking through memory with my father,
following the trail of theater aisle lights,
down the carpeted path to our seats.
It was 1953, and we'd come to see "Shane,"
and what a nine-year-old might learn
about the friendship of men and clarity of evil.
When I watched Jack Palance, as the hired gun
dressed in black, shoot a stubborn homesteader
and then grin as his body fell
in the mud-filled western street, I knew the name
of all things wrong with the world
was "Wilson." And later, I wondered about the future
of what was right, as a wounded Shane
rode away from that Wyoming valley
and those settlers he'd saved,
the boy Joey hollering for him to come back.
I was too young then to dwell on the enigma
of the woman he could have loved, guess the reason
for the hero's stoic silence, or contemplate
the symbolism of mountains shrouded by clouds.
In the lobby, after the film, I passed a full-length mirror
and imagined, for a moment, who I would become.

OUR FATHERS' CLOTHES

And so now we wanted other lives,
sixteen-years-old on a summer evening,
coming out of the small town's theater
after "Dr. No" -- Ursula Andress in a bikini,
suddenly emerging on a white Jamaican beach,
suntanned and rapt with private song;
Connery as Bond, dark browed and sexual,
stepping out from behind a dune, singing back.
And later, in a perfect tuxedo, Bond wins
at roulette, and deftly places a chip
in the cleavage of that night's good fortune.
These were not our fathers' clothes --
those men of field and factory labor,
Friday's poker ante, Schaefer beer,
a cigar's reward, gabardine trousers,
and rolled up sleeves. But when we stopped
at the Hickey-Freeman men's store
window, our reflected images
dissolved the mannequins' blank stares,
until we boys became the characters
in a movie of our own making, confident as men
dressed in slightly tilted fedoras, carefully peaked
handkerchiefs pointing out the breast pockets
of our blended wool, three-button coats,
jacquard print ties in Windsor knots
on Hathaway shirts, the cuffs of pleated pants
just breaking over polished oxfords.
Then a fade to the final scene:
we walked home through the dimly-lit streets -- - Dash
our fathers' sons.

THE INDUSTRIAL DIAMONDS OF 1964

That spring I dropped out of college
and took a factory job back in the small town
I had been so certain I'd never return to,
and stood at my task of gears and wheels,
where I cursed --or it could have been prayer --
through each shift's final hour.

In the lunch room, old-timers
mocked the new hires, argued
about Kennedy, Oswald, and Ruby,
and how those damn Cubans were
behind it all. That was why we had
to stay in Vietnam, and to hell
with the hippies and Commies.

We were grinding circular saw blades,
fitting them with industrial diamonds,
and each hundred-thousandth inch meant
a paycheck we might live with, something
to take every Friday to the bank and tavern,
place of dimmed lights, twenty-five cent draughts,
baseball scores, boxing matches,
horse racing odds, the two-dollar-bet,
and a chance few of us believed in.

I think of those men now, and remember
our labor, the metal shavings I washed off
my hands and arms each night at the sink,
the ache of shoulders and wrists, the blessing
of sleep, the pre-dawn wakening to rock and roll
music playing on the clock radio,
the gem-like glitter of a few last stars,
and then the turbulent and risen sun.

TESTAMENT

This morning, when I woke, you were
already gone, and outside the gray sky
had lowered its wet, dark hand
over the houses on our street.
Birds gathered on the lawns
like old friends. When was it
I first learned to take in loneliness
like breath? When my brother was born,
he was already dead. Jesus had sacrificed
himself for my sins, and was gone.
Uncles and aunts took up their coffins
before I knew their old stories of barges
and trains, and so it was up to Father
and Mother to make me whole
with history, until they, too, left.

If it's true the dead live in us, then don't
I also hold their emptiness as so many
prayers I repeat those late hours
I might stand alone by the window
of a rented room in a strange city,
neon glowing like a false god?
Or perhaps I walk down a country road
at dawn to a river bank, where the mist
begins to rise like some new faith.

I've come to believe in the living
and their sacrament of speech; how each word,
in the telling, is its own necessary story,
which is yours, which is mine.

"THE QUIET EARTH"

Here is the world, scorched and silent,
and a man convinced he is alone in it
wanders the empty streets of the city
blowing a sax, and because there is no one
left to care, he walks into a department store,
rummages through the clothes racks, stands
before a three-panel dressing room mirror,
his athletic, muscular body facing him
in a woman's white slip. Now, cut to an oak
cathedral door, an interior shot of a crucified Christ
glowing in the stained-glass window light.
Cut and the man bursts in, woman's slip and shotgun
screaming, "Come out now, or I shoot the kid!"
No one answers. He finds a truck equipped
with megaphones, and drives around the ruins
announcing his presence. No one answers,
but a young woman steps out of the rubble,
and she's the beginning of hope, the resolution of faith.
The audience is intrigued. By this time, he's dressed
in T- shirt and khakis. We learn there are others,
and events, for now, can go on. There's a mystery
to be solved, and the next looming disaster.
In the climactic scene of explosion, ringed planet
rising, and the man on a beach, alone again,
we don't know who's been saved, but must leave
to re-enter the world, its people and traffic,
music and voices, constructs and omens,
all those symbols and signs that insist we belong.

WHAT TO SAY IF THE BIRDS ASK

And if clouds gather now like distant cousins,
it's because weather is the mother of all things
cyclical. And if, through the afternoon rain,
the mail carrier comes with her armful of bills
and rejection, it's only to remind us of what
we may have yet to receive. But what unsettles
me this gray morning beneath trill and chatter of birds,
signals of a coming storm in a neighborhood of strangers,
is that first death, polished wood and Uncle's cold hand
when I was nine, the relatives and friends gone since then,
my futile guilt and anger, the failed language of regret.
But if it's true some words are, finally, the soul's
lexicon, then I'll say this: Once, there was a woman
whose shadow blessed the light of a room in Boston,
a man who filled the glasses of his friends with the best wine,
a child who tasted the soft petals of flowers and spoke
their many colors to swans rippling the summer pond
in a silent lyric. Today, alone by the window, I've been
translating the repeated warble of sparrows perched
on the maple's high branches. "What's next? What's next?"
they ask. "Soon," I whisper. "Soon, we will know."

AMOSKEAG

Now we've come to the rise
and swell of river, gray surge

and insistent swirl after a week
of high tide and flood; the green-leafed

tops of trees just above the water,
clustered like tossed flower bouquets

emerging from the sunken island,
and I wonder how our particular dialogue

of need could be anything more
than the mist that sprays the low air

and riverbank, or shorebirds
circling the aftermath and ruin of storm.

SPARROWS

Tonight, late in winter, it comes to this
sort of blessed quiet beneath the room
of my lover's sleep; I'm alone with thoughts
of comfort and loss, argument and lesson.

And solitude is the sister of joy and regret,
here in a difficult season of ice and storm,
where birds daily forage small bits of bread,
their hunger, like ours, so simple, yet more.

In these long hours by lamplight and dark
whispers of wind, I wonder what secrets
are hidden in the clear songs and cold air
that arrive, each morning, at our windows.

They are the questions, repeated again,
that we, too, must rise up and live within.

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AGAINST HAPPINESS

When the Dalai Lama first heard
the bombs falling on Tibet,
he whispered to a monk,
"They have stolen our silence."

Today, at the clinic,
again the loud radiation machine
whirred above my head.

But later, my doctor,
who is beautiful,
placed her delicate fingers
around my throat,
like so many butterfly wings.

I knew then it was time
to abandon my elaborate theories
of happiness and to be,
instead, the butterfly.

CONTEMPLATION AT A PARK

Listening at the fountain, I can hear its arc
falling all the way to the tossed coin.

Gulls penetrate the blue air.
Children run back and forth
between a stone whale and shadows of maple.

One girl swings from a low branch,
a sudden wind crosses the harbor,
and a small boat shifts in its mooring.

The mnemonic birds and summer flowering
our hope, and even faith, death
is held like rain in a leaf's green palm.

A homeless couple rises, like Lazarus,
from the shade of a troubled sleep
and walks out into the warm sunlight.

Whatever we've desired today
lies scattered in the shallow basin of water
that shimmers beneath the bronze statue of a boy
who raises an arm toward heaven.

THE GARDEN

In his garden, my friend
has become adept
at mimicking the birds
as now, through the night's
wet veil, he repeats
their many songs,
until even the prolific
mockingbird must listen.
A curious gecko hangs,
for a moment, over the top
of the porch screen,
then scurries into the shadows.

We've been sitting for hours
with drink and conversation.
I've just traveled
the Atlantic coast to be here,
and am thinking now
of that wise poet, Po Chu-i,
how he believed in seclusion
and clarity, yet sometimes
welcomed visitors, and once wrote:
Who says the moon is heartless?
It's followed me a thousand miles.

Tomorrow, we'll wake
as the red-eyed Cooper's hawk
rises above the blossoming
purple bougainvillea,
waving banana leaves,
that extravagant bird
of paradise, and the mango
trees heavy with fruit
nearly touching the ground.