

The Failure of Certain Charms

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The Failure of Certain Charms

And Other Disparate Signs of Life

GORDON HENRY, JR.



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge CB21 5JX United Kingdom

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First published 2007

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Lightning Source Inc.

Typeset in Swift 9.5/13

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ISBN 978 1 84471 326 4 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared in other places; some will probably appear somewhere else—thanks to all those editors of journals and anthologies who were kind enough to publish some of these works.

Megwetch to:

all you thirsty dancers, to all the old men from Dunseith, to Jess
to Mary Anne, Kehli, CJ, Mira and Em
to White Cloud Woman, Bear, brother and sisters
Diane Wakoski
LaVonne, Silvia and Nieves
Robert the Photographer
Robert the Guitar Maker
Steve the Preacher Potter
G. Home
Terri and Larry
Nate (the Plain Brown Rapper)
my nearly adopted son Ray
Robert the Zimmerman
Tom Waits
John Prine
almost all of you magnificent Ojibwa writers and activists

In memory of

Francis, Louis, Zahquod, Wahsay Geeshig, Old Eagle Woman (or she
who was also a Hunts the Thunder), Townes and Smoke

With hope for:

The younger people and
the generations on the way

Beshig: The Failure of Certain Charms

Calendar of Wasted Seasons

Moon of cats in heat

Moon of garbage dogs

Moon of the expired license

Moon of slick highway

Moon of telephone creditors

Moon of Anishinabeg names in the night

Moon of evaporated milk

Moon of uncles and Jack Daniels

Moon of woman against the lips

Sleeping In Rain

I

Wake Chants circle, overhead, like black crows watching her will stumble through weak moments. Like when she heard the carriage outside and went to the window with his name on her lips. Or when she looked over in the corner and saw him sleeping, with his mouth open, in the blue chair next to the woodstove. She saw them, dissembled reflections on the insides of her black glasses. Moments passed, etched like the lines of age in the deep brown skin of her face. She's somewhere past ninety now; bent over, hollow boned, eyes almost filled. She lives in a room. A taken care of world. Clean sheets, clean blankets, wall-to-wall carpeting, a nightstand and a roommate who, between good morning and good night, wanders away to card games in other rooms. Most of her day is spent in the chair, at the foot of the bed. Every now and then, she leaves and takes a walk down one of the many hallways of the complex. Every now and then, she goes to the window and looks out, as if something will be there.

II

Motion falls apart in silence, tumbling, as wind turns choreographed snow through tangents of streetlights. I am alone; to be picked up at the Saint Paul bus terminal. I fucked up. Dropped out. Good, it's not what I wanted. What is a quasar? The tissue of dreams. Fuck no, there are no secrets. There is nothing hard about astronomy, sociology, calculus or Minnesota winters. Those are just reasons I used to leave. To go where? To go watch my hands become shadows over assembly lines?

A voice clicks on in the darkness. "We are now in Saint Paul and will be arriving at the Saint Paul terminal." Let me guess. In five minutes. "In ten minutes," the driver says. It figures.

III

My uncle's eyes have long since fallen from the grasp of stars. Now, they are like the backends of factories; vague indications of what goes on beneath the tracks of comb in his thick black hair. He was waiting when I arrived. Waiting, entranced in existence. A series of hypnotic silences, between words, that had to be spoken. Silences leading me to a beat-up car in a dark parking lot. I am too far away from him; too far away to be leaving for something further. I don't believe he doesn't like me. No, that's not quite what I'm getting at. It's something I saw when his shadow exploded into a face as he bent down over the steering wheel to light his cigarette.

IV

The cold white moon over houses too close together. Front windows, where shadows pass in front of blue lights of televisions. I am one of them now; a sound on wood stairs. There is a sanctuary of dreams waiting for my footsteps to fade.

V

The old woman dreams she is up north, on the reservation. It is autumn. Pine smoke hanging over the tops of houses, leaves sleepwalking in gray wind, skeletal trees, scratching ghost gray sky. She is in the old black shack. Stirring stew in the kitchen. The woodstove snaps in the next room. Out the window, he lifts the axe. He is young. She watches as it splits a log on the tree stump. He turns away and starts toward the house. He is old. He takes out his pipe and presses down tobacco. She goes to the door to meet him. She opens the door. She tries to touch him. He passes through her, like a cold shiver, and walks into the photograph on the wall.

VI

The mind bends over, in the light through a window, down and across the body of Jesus Christ as he stumbles through the sixth station of the cross. It comes to me sometimes, when I close my eyes. September sun in the old church. Smoke of sweetgrass in stained glass light. Red, blue and yellow light. Prisms of thought behind every eye. Chippewa prayers stumbling through my ears. Old Ojibway chants fading away in the walk to the cemetery. I look at the hole in the ground. I look at the casket beside it. I look at the hole. I look at the casket. At the hole, at the casket, at the hole, at the casket, at the hole.

The clock glows red across the room; a digital 2:37. My cousin lies in darkness. Another figure covered up in sleep.

VII

Dust swims in sunlight of an open door as dreams evaporate in the face of a clock.

VIII

“Get up, I said. It’s raining and you, lying there. Get up, old man, I said.” It is my uncle talking. He found the old man where he lay in the rain. He had fallen asleep and fallen down from his seat on an old bench I tried to set on fire when I was ten or eleven. The next week they buried him in the coolness of Autumn coming. Weeks after, the old woman thought she heard his carriage outside the window of her new room in the city.

IX

Cities of snow melt, blurred in liquid between wiper blades. We are waiting for the light to change. My uncle is driving. The old woman is waiting. Not really for us. Not for us, but waiting. I will see her this morning. This afternoon I will be gone. Another bus. Home. The light changes in the corner of my eye turning away.

X

The room never moves for her. It is not like snow falling, like leaves falling, like stones through water. It is a window, a bed and a chair.

XI

As the old woman touches me it is like air holding smoke. I am something else. Vestiges of prayer, gathered in a hollow church. Another kind of reflection. A reflection on the outsides of her black glasses. A reflection that cries when eyes leave it.

As the old woman touches me it is like air holding smoke. I am something else. Fleet anguish like flying shadows. A moment vanishing. A moment taken, as I am being.

As the old woman touches me it is like air holding smoke. It spins it. It grasps it. It shapes it in a wish. After that there is a mist too fine to see.

Waking on a Greyhound Going West

From far away
Rice Lake loons
call
the distance
darkening,
in whatever was
dream, fading
as crows
lift, piece
by piece,
from dead
on the side
of the road.

Outside White Earth

Vision and breath
travel away in
the smell of rain.
Next to a pickup
an old man stands
sleeping drunk,
hand on zipper.

Leave him.

There is the liquor store.
Jukebox shadows of music
coming back around again
and again.
Torrents of faces
and women
shapes of smoke
opening mouths opening
restroom doors almost
as frequently.

At the touch of a hand
leaving, rain fills
your ears from the
roof, crumbling you
awake. You
stand.

Hand on zipper.
Face against a phone
number
on the paint
of a peeling wall.

Shell Lake

There is
the penetration
of the smell
of Autumn wrestling
pine smoke
moving
into
startled
whisper
of wings
over water.

A formation
of geese
across the
lake,
in the
corner of
the eye gone.

White Earth August Again

for Bob Fairbanks

Your face travels
tamaracks rubbing
thunder clouds in red
Galaxy glass

To the funeral of
a Fine Day descendent

The last human shadow
from the cemetery
is the first to feast
The one who takes
the red hand of the mother
of the dead,
as she bends, stepping
into a black vehicle
where her tears roll
away in a cloud
glass face sobbing,
silenced by the
sound of engine.

Leaving Smoke's

To Gogisgi and Claudia

Black
wings sun glanced
green, crows
circle and half circle
snowfields before scattering
over old barns falling
slowly paintless
against the sky

across the road.

Your car shivers
to start, windshield
trembling, Sky, Blue
barked breath floating
white through
fences behind his
back and the door
opening she waves from.

At the stop sign,

the prism hanging
between door curtains
still turns
sun colors
on the kitchen
floor.

On M-66

something or the wind
moves outside
and turns his head to

windowed dusk's sun
leaving behind barns
with glazed empty
snowfield
beyond the prism
still.

At Once You Recall the Thunder Song

A village leaves every
door open
and no one returns

Old stone woman smudges
blue dishes under
the blue-scarred moon
at the guild hall

Bingo night eats up
the aspirin girl
on the blue television

Messages are never received
for one reason

For another a wild
dog upsets garbage

Auntie uses an air rifle
to silence the screaming
of passionate cats

None of the singers
will go into the mission

Under the influence
of gasoline fumes
a boy runs naked into
a barbed wire fence

The tribal custodian
dances with a BIA mop

The Chairman's deep in a dream
of information
about using information
more effectively

From steep bluffs
you look deep into
the river
held back by pointless dreams
and simple songs of home.

Beyond the Refuge

The road to Chi Mukwa's
runs guild hall backlit
as Jack Million's jiibai
stomps through
the Pine Point school

I've been trying to tell you
a diploma won't get you
the blonde with a pack of Kools
in the magazine Aunt T bought
with the hot dish ingredients
at the Red Owl
before you both
went out to shoot pool
at Icecrackin' Lodge
where medicine wheel
tattooed urbans
wasted a Stone boy
where we wasted ourselves
in Grain Belt, Pabst, in sentiments
only skins nearly numb
could live in long enough
to love.

When Names Escaped Us

The boy painted himself white and ran into the darkness.

We let the words “he may be dead, bury him,”
bury him.

We took his clothes to the rummage sale
in the basement of the mission
We put his photographs and drawings
in a birdcage and covered it with a starquilt.

For four nights voices carried clear to the river.

After winter so many storms moved in
strangers came among us
They danced
They shoveled in the shadows of trees

Then, somehow we all felt
all of us were of this one boy.

The Failure of Certain Charms

Dark flows from the memory
of crows, gasping away west
autumn violet at dusk.

Rock loves the Strawberry girl.
I hear his voice when he picks
her up on the two-track behind
the red house, so he knows my
dream of her fragrance
in the White Earth wind.

He also knows I carry too
many musical memories
to the gates of the graveyard
under the pines.

This is how it is with me.
I am behind Rock,
a distant flute among gestures
and shadows.

The Strawberry girl loves Rock
and night spins away
one song, one fragrance,
after another.

Neesh: How Soon the Story Goes

Calendar of a Wasted Life

Moon of dripping faucet

Moon of the cold school

Moon of the return of big geeshis

Moon of snow buried yard angels

Moon of accidental death

Moon of per capita fireworks

Moon of dismemberment

Moon of two holy clown piercings

Entries Into the Autobiographical I

“Live in the nowhere that you came from,
Even though you have an address here . . .”
— JALAL UDDIN RUMI

“Autobiography is the subject of personal logistics of knowable selves. How does one put I where one is or was? One needs a center, around which to build. The center is rarely an I.”
— from the *Uncollected Writings of Dr. Gaween*

Evocation: From the wisdom of forebears to the clean clear northern streams, among Mississippi Band mothers and Otter Tail Pillager fathers, farther back beyond the current conventions of names and numbers, beyond the skins and skeins of dark heavy liquid, let me be in honor of those who came before, of the first bringer of light, of the charge of creation and the spark of Creator, let me live in a good way with the gifts of creation.

The First Door: I As Not I

I am not:

postmodern or modern; a sign, or a signifier, between signifieds; surreal or existential; neo-traditional or beat; transcendental or metaphysical; confessional, shaman, warrior, or sun priest; trickster, nationalist, exile or anthropocentric; psycho-dramatizer, or dishwasher safe, microwaveable, Sunday supplement collector plate; sell-out, or shade; or shadow chaser; or orphan boy, pop icon, trapper, trader, weaver, stone carver, powwow investor; or an angel looking backward; or an arboreal rodent, road kill, or coyote totem taster, clan speaker, band stander, or dream song; sonnet carrier, villanelle revivalist, or windigo washer; fumigator, suicide doctor, freeze dried mystic; or Lone Ranger lover, heaven seeker, or hell raiser; church leveler, drunken wonderer, sneaking, creeping, powwow playboy; or two thirds higher honor song singer; or hotel

lecturer, casino medicine keeper, or shell shooting, crow or weasel; otter; or turtle, better or worse, water spirit, star gazing, anthropological shape shifter; or check-out-line half breed hero, or formula detective, divided between ordinary and nonordinary; or authentic, natural, unnatural, deconstructive, white hating, Eros, or ethos; or pathos; or apollonian, dionysian, radical; or card-carrying, blood quantum physicist; or an apple, golden, delicious, or rotten, or otherwise; or a tomahawk, hair splitter, polemicist; or a two-stepper, ten steps from a twelve stepper; or thunder being, or light being, writer of wrongs; or pre-packaged, beadworking, pipe carrier; or pipe fitter, ironworker; or artificer; of law and politics, of extraterrestrial intelligence; or medicine wheeler spokesman, or blackjack dealer; or chaos theorist, social contractor under federal control; a plains clothes wardrobe keeper, sign wearer, or graffiti artist; or epidermal epistemologist with nobody home, with an idea, an ego, or a paper skin, or a well read skin, or next of skin, intellectual, personal mythologizer disguised as a historian; or a jessakeed, wabano, or a crystal gazer, or a new age bookseller with a men's movement mind; or a biological timekeeper, a one or only, to be forgotten, or a presence in absence, an absence in presence, intense; or a psychic autobiographer, or an archaeologist on the fringes; or a firekeeper/doorman; or a burnout, exclusionist, a disillusionist; or a sounder of the senses; or a sensual geographer; or a contradictor; or a great waboose; like or as the king of ghosts; or a star lake ricer, an either/or demanding neither; or a word waster, a word recycler; or an apocalyptic, problematic poser, or a wholly imaginative, word charger, gnostic; or a list maker, cataloger; or a horoscopic, celestial reflector; or a sacred mechanic, in the absence of culture; or a technological nightmare, flood recollector; or a little person on familiar terms with cultural giants; or a winter tongued salamander, licking the sky; or a relativist; or a roadman, morning star man; or a hanger-around the fort fetish hanger, with a broken chevy; or a first person, omniscient narrator of second or third confluences of

consciousness; or a hyper-essentialist, parabolic, metaphrastic, nabi; or a Cherokee or a Sioux, Lakota or Dakota; or a house blesser, pre-packaged strawberry mist; or a car fragrance; or a savior; or a minority; or canon fodder; or a fry bread concessionaire; or an ethnic festivaler, wild ricer; or pinik naboop; or a fighting illini, an eagle or a hawk; or a peacemaker, a professor of any kind of highly classified studies; or a synecdoche, collective or unconscious, anima or inanimate; or an actor, or a plotter, didactic, or mimetic, or metahuman, onomatopoeia, or polytheist, or an agnostic; or a death song poet; or prophet; or a pilgrim; or a ghost supper waiting to happen, pure spirit; or nascent name on the material precipice; or a materialist with second-hand clothes, or a euro-muse looking for a place to land, or shall I claim more simply, I am not any of the above, on any line, on any form, to be signed below, or signified as other, with any other signifier between terms and conditions, esoteric to names, spiritual or otherwise, exoteric to names, European or otherwise, or shall I claim more simply: NO, I am none of these.

These are just some of my relatives. Some of them are buried between memories of turning leaves, some live as we speak; some of them are on the road; some have traveled many roads: some of them not good, some of them red, some of them not red, many of them red not good, many of them good not red, many of them both or neither. Still they are my relations and for them I am thankful.

The Second Door: I as Traveler I

I am a traveler:

outside White Earth, child
nearly dead from lack of air,
in the heavy embrace
of pneumonia,
in Philadelphia projects;

One who fears Superman,
One who fears Zorro,
a gunfighting son
of a Bear dodem father.

I am a traveler:
in the hands of sisters
in Catholic services,
in schools where the mist
takes the shapes of children
and eats lives whole and complete
in cursive and the arrangement of
letters.

I am a traveler:
one pitch from perfect
on a dirt diamond
in a bay area park,
where still train cars are
the main attraction;
in an Oceanside elementary
school where velocity
times memory is the
spelling game rocket
with your name on it;
in a classroom where
everyone wants to reach the flat moon
on the flat wall
from the flat earth.

I am a traveler:
like Anishinabe
grandfather Joe V.,
the dead pow-wow