

The Bible of Lost Pets

JAMEY DUNHAM was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio. He attended college at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and received an MFA from Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont. He is currently an Associate Professor of English at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio where he serves as Editor of the literary journal *Flights*. Jamey's award-winning prose poems have been published widely in many distinguished journals and appear in several anthologies including *The Best American Poetry 2005* (Scribner, 2005) and *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (Scribner, 2003). He is also the co-editor of the textbook anthology *An Introduction to the Prose Poem* (Firewheel Editions, 2009). Jamey lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with his wife and their son and daughter. *The Bible of Lost Pets*, which was one of the inaugural winners of the Crashaw Prize, is his first collection.

The Bible of Lost Pets

JAMEY DUNHAM



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
14a High Street, Fulbourn, Cambridge CB21 5DH United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Jamey Dunham 2009

The right of Jamey Dunham to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

Salt Publishing 2009

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Books Group

Typeset in Swift 9,5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978 1 84471 563 3 hardback
ISBN 978 1 84471 ??? ? paperback

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



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

for Laur, Sam and Zoey

Contents

PART ONE	1
Prairie Dog Town	3
Go West	4
A Prayer for Slow-Poke Jackass	5
The Great Drink of Compassion	6
Scenes from the Field	7
The Lemming Parade	8
Wolf Tickets	9
In the Desert	10
Ed's Begonias	11
Stand-off in the Kitchen of the Angry Sun	12
Nuclear Winter	13
The Wolf Union	15
Wild Night in Urbana, Texas	16
Autumn Comes to Sugar Creek	17
Parking is Free on Weekends	18
Magpies and Orphans	19
The Widow	20
Family	21
The Holidays	22
Evening Hours	23
Dusk Falls on the Kitchen	24
PART TWO	25
Trickster in the City	27
Trickster on Hajj	28
Trickster at the Writers Colony	29
Trickster at the Free Clinic	30
Trickster at the Revival	31

The Man Who Killed Polka	32
An American Story	33
The Last Romantic	34
Another Lemur, Another Story	36
Urban Myth	38
The Same Only Lower	39
<i>Poem with Weasels, c. 1930s (Black and White)</i>	40
The Park	41
Return to Your Safe Place	42
The Zoo	43
The Bible of Lost Pets	44
The Neighbor's Dog	45
The Insomniac Sleepwalking	46
Watching Jimmy Die	47
Guilt Comes to Dinner, Stays for Pie	48
The Confession	49
After the War	50
PART THREE	51
Travels with Bear	53
Texas Takes a Holiday	57
Apocalypse-Boogie	58
Walking the Bat	59
A Perfect World	61
The Good Life	62
Gabby	63
The Shaman	64
Finding Jesus	65
At the Nunnery	66
A Rabbit for Helga	67
The Baby-Killing Factory	68

Blue	69
The Ripple Effect	70
Crossing the Equator	71
Pulling Taffy	73
The Deer	75
The Neighborhood	76
Inside	78
The Secret Lepidopterist Society	79
Fate Takes the Scenic Route	80
Laurie's House	82
The Man from Texarkana	83

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following journals where some of these poems first appeared: *Alembic*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Boston Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Double Room*, *Fence*, *Free Lunch*, *In Posse Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Key Satch (el)*, *Lit*, *Maelstrom*, *Margie*, *Mid-American Review*, *Paragraph*, *Pith*, *Quarterly West*, *Salt Hill*, *Sentence*, *Tarpaulin Sky* and *Third Coast*.

In addition, poems appeared in the following anthologies: “An American Story” appeared in the *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present* (Scribner, 2003), “Urban Myth” appeared in *The Best American Poetry 2005* (Scribner, 2005), “The Neighbor’s Dog” appeared in the *PP/FF: An Anthology* (Starcherone Books, 2006), “Urban Myth,” and “Poem with Weasels, ca. 1930s (Black and White),” appeared in *An Introduction to the Prose Poem* (Firewheel Editions, 2009) and “Magpies and Orphans” appeared in *Online Writing: The Best of the First Ten Years* (Snow*Vigate Press, 2009).

The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to his wife Laurie and their children Sam and Zoey for their constant love and support. He would also like to thank Lee and Debby Dunham and Lynley Culpepper for years of understanding and encouragement. Finally, this book would not be possible were it not for the generosity and kindness of James Reiss, David Lehman, Peter Johnson, Brian Clements, Chris Hamilton-Emery, Jen Hamilton-Emery and the many Editors of the journals, magazines and anthologies where these poems first appeared. Thank you.

Part One

Prairie Dog Town

I AM THE LAST black-footed ferret in this prairie dog town. I have a striped wool sock slung through my belt loop and a black toy mask over my eyes. As I nose my way down the street I toss a dime in a blind man's cup and suddenly all eyes are on me. People everywhere begin pointing at me and barking in high-pitched chirps. I run to the curb but the cabs won't stop, they barrel past like buffalo with their heads between their fenders. By now the barking is deafening. People are leaning out of windows and popping up through manholes just to chime in. I race around the corner and duck into an alley. A coyote crouching in the shadows over a dead chicken, casually stands up and lights a cigarette. Says he thought my kind was extinct.

Go West

I HIT A RACCOON driving home from work the other night. At first I thought I blew a tire but then I caught its yellow eyes in the mirror. I turned the car around and drove back to take a look. When I saw the poor thing splayed out in the road, I knew what I had to do. I took the raccoon home and placed it in my Mother's bed. I hadn't been in her room in years. The sheets were stiff and cold as I drew them back. I sat in the wicker chair in the corner and watched it lying there, breathing hard. Something about the raccoon fit with the room. The eyes that seemed so alive on the road were different now, seemed to reflect more light than they held. I got up from the chair and paced the hall. Each time I passed the door I could feel the raccoon's eyes following me. Finally, I crossed the floor to where the raccoon lay. I knew what I had to do. As I opened the door to the garage, I thought of all the suffering that could have been avoided. I turned on the ignition, closed the door and walked to the end of the driveway. I lay down on the cold asphalt and for the first time in a long time I thought of my Mother. I heard the car shift into gear and closed my eyes. The car rolled down the driveway, veered to avoid hitting me, and pulled into the street. I opened my eyes and watched as the car proceeded to the corner, turned and disappeared in the direction of the city. I closed my eyes again. I thought of the raccoon on the open road. Maybe it wouldn't stop at the city, maybe it would keep going, head west. I thought about the mountains, and the ocean rising up between them. I thought of marvelous sunsets bruising the sky, like the ones on the postcards from my Mother. I thought about what it was that held some people to the ground, while others passed overhead like satellites. I thought about that for a long time before I finally got up and went back in the house.

A Prayer for Slow-Poke Jackass

THE SHERIFF WAS BEAT. It had been a long crusade and still the west was uninhibited. He led his horse to the hitching post, then stopped, bowed deeply from the waist, and set it free. "Adieu," he said waving his pistol as the horse trotted off. Then he changed his mind and began chasing after it, cursing and spitting, finally giving up and shooting it in front of the orphanage. The children playing outside clapped and cheered, but the Sheriff shook his head and headed into the saloon for a drink.

An old prospector seated in the corner was selling tumbleweeds for a nickel. "They're perfect," he said, hoarding them like sheep. The Sheriff saddled up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. A few seats down the Lone Ranger was perched on a stool, anxiously peeking around from behind his mask and milking a tall glass of milk. He was waiting to meet with a representative of the Silver Bullet Suppository Company. "I felt like a whore," he would later confide to a companion who was not Tonto but whose strong silence must have offered some support.

The Sheriff finished his drink and pushed away from the bar. He took one last look at the sorry crowd and headed back into the street. Down the road the orphans were chasing horse flies from the carcass of the dead horse. They were collecting them in mason jars like fireflies. The Sheriff sat down on the stairs outside the saloon. He bowed his head and whispered a little prayer for the horse, then began bawling like a child. The children looking up from their game, watched the man with sympathetic eyes, but the horse, dead where it hit the ground, was wearing a grin as broad as the west itself.

The Great Drink of Compassion

I GO TO THE bar with the moose head that haunts me. I check my thumbs at the door and settle onto a stool. I order the great drink of compassion and cup it in my hands like a squirrel. Suddenly my own humanity overcomes me. I throw myself on the bar and begin weeping like a child. I weep for the moose looking down on me with glass eyes. I weep for the bartender who takes my glass away. I weep for the man in the flannel shirt and for the woman who walks past the window alone. I even weep for the guy with the rough hands and the gold watch who tosses me out on the street. I walk home through the snow with my thumbs in my pockets and a circus bear riding my back.

Scenes from the Field

THE CROWS TAKE OVER. Descend on the field and rape it. Broken stalks frame the ground like chalk outlines. The crows are thorough; comb the mud for every last kernel. They never look up. Forget about the sky. Forget me.

I am the scarecrow locked in traffic. Naked, I stand like a hood ornament peering over the nose of my car. Days pass. Years. When I finally look up I watch the light turn red and pass behind some clouds.

The Lemming Parade

THE APES ARE MULLING about the magazine racks and the rhinoceros are shuffling their feet. Somewhere a building realizes it settled and turns to the bottle. Oh for the lasagna roaster purchased from the gift registry. Oh for the days of dull lawnmower blades. A meerkat and a muskrat are playing pinochle in the park but neither knows the rules, they're just biding time.

The first snowflake settles to the ground. Then another and another. It's not snow, it's confetti. It's tickertape for the Grand Lemming Parade. See how they fill the streets, see how they celebrate. Up the stairwells, onto the roofs, see how they smile right up to the end. Their tiny tails trailing like comets.

Wolf Tickets

ON EVERY STREET THERE is a child. In every city there is a street, and almost always several. On every child there is a sucker or a yo-yo, a baseball card or some other such nonsense, but not always. On every corner there is a wolf. It's the same wolf on every corner. It has always been there. When the people were children it sold them ice cream. Now it's selling tickets to the Greatest Show on Earth. It's the American Dream, it's priced to sell, and people are buying, buying, buying. Lines are forming, every corner, every street, every city. All anyone speaks of is the possibility of an encore.

In the Desert

I AM LOST IN the desert with no water and no company to speak of but a ragged coyote that claims to be my spirit guide. As the sun rises over the endless expanse of sand, I pause in the shadow of a dune to catch my breath. Suddenly the coyote begins circling around me, chanting and waving its arms in the air like a giant stork. “Many years ago,” the coyote starts, “this land was covered by a great sea.” With this said the coyote pauses and looks about, as if a school of mackerel were passing over our heads. “Now,” it continues, “now it’s gone but the blue, the cool, ethereal blue remains. It comes out at night and stays until morning when the sun chases it back into the sand. There it sleeps, there it waits for us, just below the surface.” With that the coyote drops to its knees and begins digging feverishly into the ground, sending a spray of dust into the air like a tiny tornado trapped in a sandbox. I shake my head and get up, knocking the dirt from my clothes. “Blue,” the coyote shrieks over its shoulder as it watches me leave, “blue like the other side of a dream,” but I’ve heard enough. As I make my way over the next dune, I set my sights on a buzzard waving to me like a drunken uncle from a distant cactus.

Ed's Begonias

FOSSIL FUELS FIRE UP the local Bar-BQ joint and sure enough there's Ed, rake in hand. It's raining and Sunday and I can't believe I'm not in Dallas, but I'm not. Sometimes a pork sandwich is all it takes but today I need more. I need cement shoes and an alcoholic halo, rock industries and the kind of grave disappointment you just can't buy anymore. My solution is a fresh siesta, curled up like a pipe-fitter in his mother's sewing box. The rain subsides and Ed reemerges to chase the rabbits from his award-winning flowerbed. Night-crawlers rise up and beach themselves on the lip of the driveway as the mink in the hutch behind the garage chant a Buddhist prayer for peace. Somewhere from my childhood a dog barks.

Stand-off in the Kitchen of the Angry Sun

IT'S ALMOST TOO EARLY for coffee and the sun glares at me as it pulls itself over the windowsill, but I'm happy. I'm making an omelet. I'm standing in the kitchen, whistling in my boxer shorts, and my testicles are swinging in perfect time. It's going to be a great day. It's already a great morning and the first egg I broke was a double yolk. The rest of the eggs are quite normal, as is the milk, and the butter, and just when I reach for an onion to liven things up, three mice appear from behind the toaster. They are dressed like Mexican bandits and they demand my cheese. They have little sombreros, little pistols, and the one in the middle has its whiskers waxed into a handlebar mustache. As I stand there pondering the intricate mechanics of their tiny firearms, they inch across the counter and repeat their demands. No one moves. The only sound is the slow suck of hot water through coffee grains. Just then the toaster goes off and we are all struck by the image of hot toast framed against a window full of angry sun.

Nuclear Winter

WE ARE ON THE brink of nuclear winter and outside the snow-capped grain-silos are poised to launch at the first word from the cow. I decide to hole up in the attic and ride this thing out. It is a mistake. The cats are the first to realize it. They run out into the snow clawing at their eyes. The attic seems colder without them. In the corner of the room a coven of barstools have gathered around an old copper kettle. The mouse that lives inside fancies it a steamboat and patiently awaits its next port of call. The stools too are patient, waiting on the mouse as if for toast. It's a cycle really . . . the stools watching the kettle as I, myself, sit watching the stools . . . the windows staring in at me, unaware of the sunlight slowly warming the kettle . . . and so it goes, and so it goes . . . it's a cycle really.

A wire birdcage hangs from the rafter just above my head. I hook a Christmas ornament on its swing and give it a nudge. In the bulb's reflection I can see a room similar to the one I'm standing in, only this one is entirely red and appears carved from stone in the fashion of a cave. It is inhabited by a hideous creature with loose red skin and long webbed fingers and above it a red Christmas ornament dangles from a dripping stalactite. There is a reflection in this ornament as well and in it I can see a room even smaller than the last. This time it is an attic identical to my own and there is a man inside who bears a great resemblance to me, as a much younger man. He has a full head of hair and seems very confident, strong. It's hard to make out but I think he is wearing a crown on his head, no, it's a birdcage but it has a large ruby resting in it. In the stone's reflection there is yet another room and this last one is very small and very hard to see. There is a coalminer peering through the darkness and the beam of his headlamp has caught something shining above him. It is, of course, another birdcage. Inside this smallest of cages, is a tiny canary. It is a vibrant bird, though no more than a speck of color

in the grand scheme of things. The canary is sitting very still on its swing and has a single atom clenched tightly in its beak. The coalminer seems to regard the bird with quiet indifference but the bird has the look of one who knows just enough to be afraid.

The Wolf Union

IT HAD BEEN A long winter. Deer were scarce and morale was low. It seemed a wolf couldn't chase a rabbit without butting heads with a wolverine. Something had to be done. The wolves banded together and formed a union. A meeting was called and all of the animals of the forest were invited. It was a grand affair with much hoopla. One by one the wolves that had been elected to office took the podium and voiced the concerns of their fellow wolves. With each speech the wolves' spirits rose higher and higher. The meeting was a wild success, and afterwards the wolves ate most of the animals in attendance, except the bears and the wolverines. They were busy making plans for their own unions. It had been a long winter.