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To Be Still: Poetry Portfolio

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To Be Still

Poetry Coda 2024
Leo Balaban

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Paint

What is more gay than the act of painting?
Other than, of course, the obligatory act of gay sex.

I never meant to treat my first time as obligatory gay sex;
He probably felt like a checked off box, and I still felt ugly.

I go through life checking off boxes, isn't that ugly?
I use a big black sharpie, I have no paintbrush.

I only use fingers to paint, I have no paintbrush,
My movements are jagged, chaotic, and ultra-specific.

My sexuality is jagged, chaotic, and not at all specific.
It's intertwined with a need to slap myself across the canvas.

Childhood was being slapped across the face by a canvas;
It was disorienting enough that I forgot how to truly be me.

How disorienting to put down my sharpie to truly be me.
But what's more gay than the act of painting?

4 Sunsets

The assertive sun
stretches a radiant flame
towards the moon for a dance.
The transition was seamless.

A composed sun
fights to shine past rainclouds
touching each gray corner,
turning them into gold.

Swiftly the colorful sun sank,
one last divine flash of white
left to be remembered.
That night was darkest.

The resilient sun
pushes every vibrant strand,
yet the moon's print on a blue sky
mourns what's already lost.

A Strong Oak

The tree spent the first hundred years depressed,
mourning the leaves that die in the winter.
The next hundred years, she was resentful
of change, the surrounding trees uprooted,
the carvings pronouncing love. How could they?
On a living thing. She would curse their love.
These final years she craves solitude
from the violent climbers and bark pickers.
Yet even dying she enjoys the company of one
who sits in her roots to read some mornings
while listening to some plaintive song.
Sometimes they would pause the human music to hear
birds' song and branches in wind reminding
them both of a simpler time, mourning the leaves.

Self-Comparison

When I'm the last man on Earth,
who will I compare myself to?

Will I need my hair to be more pronounced like a lion's mane?
My arms more flexible, like a chimp's?
My legs faster than a gazelle's?
My face prettier than a swan's?

Will I compare my happiness to the happiness of deer?
Their pack make me feel lonely.
The sight of an ant makes me feel even less organized.
The sight of a bear makes me feel even smaller.

Worse, I continue
comparing myself to everyone dead.
Every empty car will remind—I still can't drive.
Every building—that I still have built nothing,
Every billboard—that I still have no name.
Will every sunrise still remind me
that I'm not doing anything?
Something indescribable and important,
that anyone else would've known to do.

Still

I strive to be a lifeless object,
like a blue cardigan or a morning cup of coffee.

I dislike cardigans with their morning cups of coffee;
how rude to pity me while telling me to keep moving.

The pity I feel for people who need to keep moving;
they couldn't be still like the pearls of my necklace.

To vibrate invisibly like the still pearls on my necklace.
To move mindlessly is the peace of mind I look for.

I can't move towards the peace of mind I look for.
To be home and still as that beer can from last Saturday.

I stayed home and still didn't enjoy last Saturday.
If I could be as mindless as each falling leaf.

If I could feel the bliss of each falling leaf.
I'm striving to be those lifeless objects.

The Life of Leo

May 25th,
In Brooklyn Heights,
Near 9pm, I'm sure they felt the Significance.
The hospital surely rumbled when I was born.

The first sound likely heard
was the chorus of the Subway Seers
in the train passing below the hospital
shouting their gospel to careless travelers:

One says you will never be truly paid back for the years of work you put in.

Another claims trust has been the enemy to success. It's only money from now on.

Another complains It's so hard to be accepting. These "new gays" lack proper respect.

The last one shouts that the world continues to get more twisted.
Today marks the return of the messiah! Oh how it all will change!

The Prophets' words would echo in the halls.
That moment I'm sure everyone felt the Significance,
the Change;
The hospital rumbled when I was born.
A divine light peaked through every window blind.
I think Jesus was probably born a few rooms down,
but it easily could have been me.

My Religion

should be simple:

A kettle of boiling water

Kernels of corn

Inflatable life rafts

The edge of waterfalls

The edge of cliffs

A hill to roll down

A tree to climb

A cracked glass

A carbonated drink

A campfire

A country flag

A stop sign

A piece of tinfoil

A rusted bike chain

Roasted chesnuts

Roller coasters

Rivers

Rifles used as baseball bats

The end of a road

The edge of a state

A flower to pluck

A fence to climb

A fallen branch

A cracked leaf

A burning house

A copper wire

A patch of grass

A grain of salt

Hot sand

Skin

Swords used as canes

Marriage of Heaven, Hell, and Earth

There is another world
in constant civil war.
All soldiers there have vigorous wings.
One side, Heaven, lives in the stillness of icy clouds,
toxic in their dependence
on the safe bliss of ignorance,
the comfort in reason.
The other, Hell, lives in the ferocity of fiery depths,
in the toxic desire
for deserved knowledge,
to experience delight.
No side is completely wrong,
yet their conflict will always go on;
convinced they're each other's antithesis,
convinced they're not on the same world,
with the same wings.
No wisdom, celestial or infernal,
can stop their fight.
To them, there is right,
there is wrong:
These are the stakes.

Limited to the abyss of our senses,
we rely on this flawed world
where they can never be any wiser than us.
Soldiers with useless wings,
we never have any leaders.

Becoming Utterly Useless

I want to know how to live on earth and be utterly, utterly, useless:
To reach nirvana on some mystic mountain, feel the inner peace.

I could get enlightened, sit sober with no object; feel the inner peace,
quit the job! Lean onto a simple tree, grass, dirt; give up desire.

Or I could quit the job. Lean onto my bed, couch, dirt; give up desire.
I could sleep all day, dreaming of a world where we're all useless,

and get depressed. Stop eating and taking care of myself, it's all useless,
I'll tell them I chose melancholic solitude when people start to worry.

I know! Get fired. Tell them they're delusional when people start to worry.
I'll become some nasty character, play God until I convince myself.

I'll go insane. Tell everyone that everything's fine until I convince myself;
explain to everyone that their pain is their fault. Make myself a reality.

Whichever direction I take, I will remove myself from their reality.
Finally, I'll be unbound from this earth that is utterly, utterly, useless.

Nighttime Greyhound

Past the Ridgewood stop
and the large graveyard
where I hold my breath,
after my legs fully stiffen,
comes a point it's impossible
to look past the highway.

Webs of branches
weave together a thick blanket
that buries the horizon,
and wraps around my face
tight; a blindfold
comfortable as silk.
In this metal box
deprived of light,
deprived of space,
almost deprived of air,
almost deprived of purpose,
I know exactly where I'm going—

Next time I take this route
I'll be leaving my cousin's shiva.
I've assigned him a window seat
since a nighttime Greyhound is the best coffin.
There is a destination:
the dead can join the living in certainty
moving through a timeless pitch black.

All the Times I've met Uncle John

I was 12 when I first met Uncle John,
and my mother confirms it that he was there,
"He died young, but not like Peter
John was shot,
it was too violent to tell you."

I was 16 the next time I met Uncle John. I think.
I asked my mother for more details
"Some crazy man shot him
in the house on Fire Island,
and was caught a year later."
I stopped asking.

I meet Uncle John again at 21.
I learned we both stick our tongue out when we focus.

Most recently I meet John online.
Curious for an obituary,
I find an old 1985 New York Times article:
MURDER OF SON OF EX-AIDE TO CUOMO
"John Starkey, 25 year old student, son of a former aide to Governor Cuomo,
was found clutching 12 brown hairs, the roots showing traces of blood.
Killed by four .38 caliber bullets fired at close range.
10 days later, a deer was found buried behind a neighbor's house,
the bullets that killed the deer also came from the suspect's gun."

I hope to meet Uncle John again,
the only dead relative of quite a few
I know almost nothing about.
A true ghost,
whose memory now always comes up
with that unearthed deer;
a short-lived life I know was lived.

Inherited Bureaucracy

Set the table for 50,
extra chairs are in the kitchen,
placemats in the closet,
can you please find your father?
I have no idea what he could possibly be doing,
take this out the oven in 45 minutes,
guests are coming in an hour,
take all of your belongings from the kitchen
throw them out the window,
yes, all of it,
clean your room,
then come down and set up
the microphone stand next to the piano,
put the guitar somewhere else,
unless one of dad's friends is using it?
Then tune the guitar,
tune the stove,
tune the microphone,
tune the piano,
tune the ukelele,
imagine if one wasn't tuned?
Especially when Uncle Jim is singing tonight,
your sister is also singing with her friend tonight,
Jack, Beverly, Walter, Lisa, they're all singing tonight.
did you prepare a poem to read for everyone?
Are you still making the cake?
This has to be perfect.
Since you're not doing anything
set up the cooler,
24 pack of Coronitas, 15 of those Izze cans,
4 packs of raw beef, those 3 IPA cans Walter left here,
please wear anything else?
Anything nice?
Scrub the kitchen walls,
I don't know, they look horribly filthy,
did you find your father?

He needs to set up the bar
and make me a cocktail.
God we should've started an hour later,
We don't have the time,
hopefully nobody is on time.
What if nobody comes at all?
Where's your sister?
She didn't sweep the leaves.
Oh please scrub those kitchen walls,
why can't we do anything on time?
Why is there beef in the drink cooler?!
Set up the cheese, crackers, liver,
cut that baguette,
main course is going to be late,
that better not have been the bell.
Answer the door,
those better not be guests,
we said in the invitation to come at half past,
Oh please find your father so he can make them cocktails,
please stop laughing with your sister,
guests are arriving already,
scrub the walls!
Sweep the leaves,
they will slip and die on the leaves!
We're making something perfect,
you'll have time to laugh when this is over,
what do I always say?
When you're having fun, you're doing something wrong,
is the dishwasher clean?
Empty it now
how embarrassing,
I'll apologize to the guests,
I'll apologize to Lisa
for the kitchen walls,
dirty and damp,
take out the walls
before more guests arrive,
Have you set the table?
Shouldn't we make name tags?
There may be old tags we can reuse,

take the potatoes out the oven,
put it in that glass dish.
Wait, no, the dish is dirty,
break the dish
pick it up,
don't bloody your hands,
the last thing a guest wants to see
is your bloody hands, now
get a new dish,
I'm going to sit down—

It's going to be great. Everyone is going to love it.
As Grandpa used to say: not just success, but triumph.
Uncle Jim will sing.
It felt good, didn't it? The rushing around,
the fear it might all go awry, sacrificing any relaxation,
personal wants or needs, to bring it all together,
and we did. We brought it together.
We brought people together,
and god, it was just perfect.
We don't need or want recognition;
we just love to be host.

A Paranoid Case

There's a stigma around my case of paranoia,
but I'm not crazy, it's not useless to reminisce
on times I felt collected and calm;
at the park with family sledding in the snow.
Those memories give me will to live,
though now I despise all the maples.

The chairs and tables, all abrosia maple.
I need to know wood types, part of my paranoia;
all symptoms of the time and place we live
that makes it so much harder to reminisce.
All that flutters around my mind is snow,
and a need for everyone to feel calm.

Every dream of violence holds a certain calm.
Haven't you seen a woodsman chop logs of maple?
I swear I need to move away from all the snow;
something about it draws out all my paranoia.
The future is all I have when I try to reminisce,
The past and present scrape away at me while I try to live.

Some hot tropical arcadia is where we should all live:
everyone I depend on to gain any level of calm.
That's all I can think about attempting to reminisce,
A land of paradise, absent furniture made of maple,
absent my present and past paranoia,
no need to cry where it never snows.

I'm scared to go out now to shovel the snow;
scared to look in the eye of anything that lives.
All of their ignorance poisons the world with paranoia.
Do you notice it? How now even the rivers aren't calm?
I used to love to swim in banks surrounded by maples;
gentle streams are only found when I reminisce.

I've started to get headaches when I find myself reminiscing
about when I worshiped the angels I made in snow.
I want to feel how they feel about maple,
but the last thing I want to hear is that I should live;
that every little thing could've been taken with a calm,
that the stigma was right: I'm cursed with a useless paranoia.

No more can I enjoy maples, any small moment ruined by paranoia,
pathetic, I hermit myself to reminisce in tall castles of icy snow.
Yet I know no other way to live, I only wanted to feel calm.

Brooding

Under some rocks,
dug into the dirt
you may find a brooding little man.
He may liken himself to a Stoic,
grunting as he burnt himself
on his coffee pot.
Oh, the pain,
he laments silently,
pacing over the
burden
he carries,
and he carries alone!
He scoffs,
thinking of things said;
hates critique.
Oh, they don't understand;
it's different for him,
what he's been through.
They wouldn't want to know,
what is left unsaid.
It's why he walks
with little concern
for anyone else.
Don't blame him!
Communication, uncomfortable;
his depression, undeniable;
his oppression, incomparable.
Don't deny it,
Oh, woe is *him*,
and instead of
wallowing, settling
in some unknown
emotion,
he sees the strength
in whining, clawing
at the world to be different;
the world to be for him.

Ode to The Manhattan Bridge

Look at the aged navy blue bridge.
Metal rusting, concrete degrading,
the white paint is now cream colored,
the cream color now all orange from the rust
The sky's between sheets of metal.

Look at the bottom towards the water
between the diamond railing and ground,
where the concrete chips away
and the rebar pokes outward.
Look between the bars:
In between the islands,

the sun shines slightly
on foam at the tips of waves
of a sickly looking river,
the color of ash from smoke
shipped in cargo boats.

Look at the depressing chainlink fence,
fixed clumsily atop the railing,
carving itself above our heads;
the sky's between a chain-link fence.
In between the diamond wires:

Look over there, at that better bridge
everyone comes to see. What a view!
Its beige bricks distinguished.
The metal seems far from rusting;
the boardwalk is vibrant with bodies
every season. The sun shines brightest
between those magnificent pilings.

Amoretti LXXV The Beloved Replies: One Day Spenser Forgot My Name

One day you claimed to care about my pain.
Our legacy held in high regard, you claim
you cared about mine. Your poems for me: so vain!
Those sonnets after sonnets, all the same.
You “know” of love, you “know” of *she*. Such tame
declarations all fail. You’ll gain wife three,
the way you flaunt your fame. Your ego stains.
Of course, you wrote me sonnets. All stripped of me—
my name removed! Instead, *your* name I see!
Your verse, *my* virtues rare to find. The truth:
you were my father’s age when we married.
Your “love,” a sham; it’s clear you seek my youth!
You selfish fool! As a muse, I was subdued.
I’ll spit on your name, and make my life anew!

Learning Lessons Learned (Ricochet)

In silent moments every thought will ricochet,
bouncing across the walls like flickering moths.
When we last spoke he told me to clean my jewelry,
since then my earrings have been on my ears; dirty,
dusty, rusting, I don't appreciate break-ups over text,
of any size. We both know it's a tired repetition.

I know it doesn't seem like it, but I hate repetition.
Every word, pattern, routine, they all ricochet
tearing through the page, cycling through text.
Tortured by the same pestering swarms of moths
making sure each day, that I don't swallow dirt.
I know it's disgusting not to clean my jewelry.

Why should I do what you say? It's my jewelry!
This time I meant to try not to make it a repetition.
Self-improvement is reflecting on every dirty
word or action towards someone undeserved; a ricochet
piercing them in the leg, lessons gather like moths.
I intellectualize any present thought, put it in text.

It's apparent I'm better at communication over text.
It's also apparent I need new and shiny jewelry:
Something bright to attract every dull moth,
something sharp to cut through my repetitions,
something wise to make sure thoughts don't ricochet
projecting my pain onto others spitting out dirt.

I find it productive to sit on grass, pretend to be dirt,
It feels more freeing than it would seem in text,
A divine stillness. nothing fires out and ricochets.
In such stillness, there is no correct condition for jewelry.
I will keep same as before, comfortable repetitions:
I have nothing to learn from past attics filled with moths.

It's beautiful what can be seen focusing on a moth;
beige celestial patterns mistaken for dust and dirt.
Nature can teach anyone to appreciate repetition,
I remind myself as I do a final reread of my texts,
and reflect the shine of my new jewelry.
It's hard learning every lesson ricochets.

Life has painful repetitions that feel like a ricochet,
making every moment feel like rooms of moths and dirt,
but beyond those texts and rooms, I find lessons in jewelry.

Light

I've always found myself overwhelmed by the sun.
I'll dig myself underground to avoid that star.
Something I never liked about that ferocious light:
the way it makes me shrivel like paper under a flame.
Burnt eyes turn my sclera into shattered pearls
barely held together, they fall through tears.

3am on those cool important nights: moonlight tears
through a black sky almost as bright as the sun.
The moment the moon strives to be bright as a pearl;
Drowned under dull gray sand, the moon is a star.
The moon and I wait for our starting flame.
When can we release our light?

I never minded the intensity of the spotlight,
until I fainted in a youth chorus, forced to tears
by that blinding light, I tried to keep my flame.
Imagine being stranded, forced to sing to the desert sun.
Mid-song, slumping into the bleachers, I was the true star.
Now, I only appreciate the luminicent shine of pearls.

Should I use earrings or a necklace of pearls?
To receive and give out a calming light
wherever I go, leaving a trail of radiance like stars.
I hope that radiance is seen and appreciated through tears
unseen as I tilt my head away and down to avoid the sun.
Will anyone appreciate the beauty of my underwhelming flame?

I cringe at the times I have found myself with a fierce flame.
I wore aggressive bright colors, and I knew pearls
were found in old dull wooden jewelery boxes hidden from the sun.
I was determined to project some unknown light,
unknown to myself, unknown to them, tearing
through their attention. The worst kind of star.

Pushed to contest the shine of our closest star;
I'll tilt my head up, challenge with an authentic flame,
Walk through the morning's flash with eyes full of tears
held high for everyone to see the resilient pearls.
I'll sing for myself in the desert, a known light.
Stand straight with my eyes towards the sun.

My stare will be piercing, tearing through the sun.
Never again would I be a star doubting its flame,
hold onto my pearls and guide with my light.

Management

I proceed in a 5/4 time signature,
the extra beat lurching out, limbs flailing in every direction,

I love my distractions from distractions.
Meticulously rebellious in my avoidance, I'm never still;
I need so much more time.

Dragging or rushing? Be productive
with my time. How does time management find me peace?
Time makes me a manager!

I'm tired of my mindset surrounding time,
Following sheet music each day, we stay meticulously measured.
24 hours, 60 minutes. 7 days? Useless.

I'm never still: I need a week
in solitary confinement. When time disappears, I'll be free!
(To peel off my fingernails or something)

God, I wish I could be stagnant.
Would anyone blame me if I play nothing as my tune?
to sleep and dream a timeless adventure.

How does meditation and enlightenment find me peace?
I have time to manage!!

Speak up

“Suck in your stomach, back straight, speak up,”
I try to keep my head up, the sun keeps me blind.

I try to ask for what I want, but complicity keeps me blind.
It’s hard for me to imagine my voice as important.

Many arrogant egotists feel their voice is important,
intent to burn their eyes on an intense spotlight.

I work to fix my eyes on some intense spotlight,
to grow under it, tall and straight, peel back every petal.

I feared getting taller, yet being stripped of every petal,
that it would never be enough; all I’ve been given.

A series of enough wise demands; all I’ve been given.
Taught to follow paved paths, now told to make my own.

Shouldn’t I rejoice to have a path to make my own?
So I’ll suck in the stomach, back straight. Speak up.