

BROKEN CAGE

poems

Joseph P Wood

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Broken Cage
© 2014 Joseph P Wood

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Part I: Variations on an Innocent Axis

“[N]othing can be more ingeniously mischievous, more playfully sly, than this tiny trill of epigrammatic melody, turning so simply on its own innocent axis.”

-Edmund Gosse, “A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse”
(1877)

OF ANXIETY

Joseph, why do you shake like an egg
in quiet, why do you pontificate to the pan
like a wife, why do you hold the pen

shaking, Joseph, why do you like to edge
yourself toward minus signs—which leg
will you jam in the blender, why scan

the why's of Joseph while shaking, egg
the quiet with pontification, fry and pain
and the parachutist drowns in the reeds—

why the fascination with parting clouds
that live to part, why does the sky need
the parachutist, what drowns in the reeds

when the utility wires blacken the weeds
and kill the wiffle ball field—those sounds
aren't the parachutist or drowning in reeds—

the fascination of why, the parted clouds,
the little boy's house, the shots of mead
held in laughter, the porch lit garish save

in summertime, I remember the way I read
in the little shotgun house, bottle of mead
dumped in the garden, stealing the seed

of every failing Joseph, every slow wave
a little house of boys, the shots of mead
lit on garish Joseph laughter never saved.

POOR EX

We has failed. Loss is no *where*. Captured,
our hands slip apart—every word is a mountain
to diminish the other's *I*—our self a fracture
of failure. *We* is *loss*. *No* has captured
each dark clad butcher inside us. The juncture
yawns out. The future unfurls—the certain
failure is *Me*. *Loss* a new *where*. Captured,
every words slips—apart come the mountains.

Fall in a fjord and die already—be mythic
in your last air—clouds like broken teeth—
nothing's wiped clean—ground a tectonic
falling—already dying—snow—our photos drift
like the fjord's mythic collapse—quit
deed hoisted—a flag in space—between
falling and dying—our fjord ready—mythic
clouds outlast the air—I break your teeth.

Better?—*Remission?*—what’s a name but a crater
whose bottom bottoms out—a buzzing some days,
a buzz-saw others—a social prosthetic—my mother
is no better—never a remission—her name a crater
I barf down deep—whoops, that’s my wife—a horror
showed—she shakes my shoulders—expletives fly
like a better name, a remission of *what*—a crater
bottoming out—buzzing—whose sum makes days?

Stripped of direction—the rifle skyward—
you left me behind—blizzard of feathers:
I want to ____ you—this isn’t backward—
the rifle’s direction—striped sky, a ward—
strapped-down souls—moving toward
the absence of clarity—a terrible weather:
direction—stripped of the rifle—skyward
you left this blizzard—behind me, feathers.

The brainpan—here lies a gray meatloaf—
resigned like rain—some days owned me—
beneath *this*—the stalk of a thought—aloof—
here a grayed brain—the pain lies—a meatloaf:
our baby—her mobile turns—little scarves
barely warm her—never worn, her shoes—
a gray lie her brain—canned meat—loath
the resigned rain—some days own—me.

The overpass twists—a thin, dark line—*where
are you*—an inquiry defibrillated: a wolverine
mauling—*eating soup, combing your kid's hair*—
the past twists—over a thin dark, the line where
her future has retreated—an ice floe, a hard tear—
*do you remember—the cup you—the one scene
in the dark*—over is past, a line of thine where
inquiry fibs—dilate, I—*are you a wolverine?*

My hands shake like boats—tossed on the sea
into which I'm falling—Captain, my pills!—lost
among the inlets—babble-brained—morosely
my hands shake—tossed like a bad boat, I see
the nimbus as prediction: never to *better*—we,
Love, are done for—this house—tome or tomb,
boat or handshake—tossed into this sea
of falling pills—which, where—Captain, we're lost!

From the lookout's steal beams: a drunk coldly
billows from his mouth—he carries a snow
globe—shaking—he, I—fake flakes in a row,
we steal the others look—the drunk beams cold
radio waves—charged, we merge—and are sold
short by speech—we try to budge and tow
each other from the lookout—he steels the cold
from my mouth—billows and carries the snow.

VYVANSE

I.

Inside this capsule must be birdseed:
arm flap hawk gaze torso a real
cloud-lightness—jaw drop, touch cheek.
Honey, inside this capsule must be birdseed:
I can eye your eye, can rip the ragweed
out from my tongue—flooring—
Inside your capsule is that really birdseed?
Flap your arm. Gaze like a hawk. Make me sore.

II.

A verb is born—and will leave—my tongue
is not the subject. I'm an idiot—I mistook
ought to as *is*—thing about the old days: one
verb tense—*will*—begets and leaves the tongue
wanting—what?—an eternal set of whale lungs
large enough to suck the night dry—by that brook
a fawn is born into a leaf bed. Its thin tongue
subject and verb—an id it's not—no mistake.

III.

Reborn self: a blathering of *how you do you do's*—a speech where I explain the breakdowns, even-toned, an equation reaching its finite end—as if friends were a faculty to teach my mind's blathering—*do this now, don't think don't*—speech sends them scattering. One pat on my back, their ears reach a finite end. They take their air, eat their eats. Their relation to themselves my utter mystery. Never blather, their speech is even: they don't break down each breath's equation?

IV.

Tics. Tourette's. Rotten arteries. Heart valve could erode. Mostly, a five second silence, a swarm of sand blown inside the skull. Sniper mime: senses explode: *tick* of the tourists' arteries, the boardwalk wood could not parade its whirls more. Coked or killed, one loud boom, the sea invades. The white light above—land or lyre, tick or tourist, a vault is exploding—and cold, five senses silent. Mostly swimming, the eroded sand.

V.

What are joy's forces?—how do they perform?—do they choose which meteor molts, which face is jaundiced?—a despondence opposes the term and composes it—if every animal were loose, what force would bring them joy?—a hunt?—a choice of two ducks in the bush, a turkey in the road—is the taste a factor?—where on the chain is that appetite absent?—what's a snail's force?—where is its ornament?—can joy choose its face—meteor, jaundiced, molted?—is its core responding?

VI.

So great my grief? O Hardy, you should've had Facebook, a galaxy of performative acts. We choose the wished joys we project into space, or desperation others can overlook and comment—give you grief or share their grief. Book a seat to the lonesome's fast-fingered pleas—worms on hooks, we—the also lonesome—lodge into our cheeks—toys to our despondent cores. Jaundiced meteors, molted faces, forces greater than performance—we can't choose joy.

VII.

A mistake: the subject enabling the verb—
I, born—never to bear—each thin bed
of mispredictions, of mores—I, curbed
by my subjects—mistake: enabling the verb
I wrote severed like a child—eyes turned
to sparrows in negative space—my head
the subject, a mistake enabled—its verb
is bare—I bore *never* in my inch-thin bed.

VIII.

Forget the equation. *We* are *they*—broke down breaths—
no blather, no speech—a microbe's job is no mystery
and its work ends too—the eclipsed, bald sun explodes—
an equation *we*—and *they*—forget. The homicidal breath
might be a gallon of space dust. Our two-block towns,
their little stores—our currency, our trinkets—memory—
an *I* or *We*—consumed in fire. The equations of breath
so much blather—give me your soul—microbe, mystery.

IX.

The sand is silent. Eroded or shoveled, heated or frosted—the tourists arrive. These pyramids flaunt blueprint and whip, brick and brick, feats of erosion. The shovel never stays. The sand heats and shifts. Misperceived, the bleached dunes seat nothing. We carry the water, lower a camel's lip. Silence never stays. We shovel, we ride. The heat arrives. The tourists froth. O these pyramids.

X.

Gaze—flap—hawk soars—my arm in talon—inside its guts, to be shitted as ten stone seeds, a dropped whisper to the land. A day I live in soaring, flapping, gazing—my arm its talon. I could be the mouse or the rice field swollen with rain. I won't remember anyone—stolen gazes; flapping, sore bodies—my arm a talon ripping the guts of stone, shit, seeds. I'm ten.

ABOUT THE POET

JOSEPH P. WOOD is the author of four books and five chapbooks of poetry, which include *YOU* (Etruscan Press) and *Fold of the Map* (Salmon). His work has appeared in venues such as *Arts & Letters Daily*, *BOMB*, *Boston Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, *Indiana Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Verse*, among others. Wood's held residencies at Djerassi and Artcroft, and is currently managing editor for Noemi Press. He lives in Birmingham, AL.