

Simon Thompson / SOMETHING ABOUT ME

Then I knew I was dreaming
fishers stand shoulder to shoulder
like soldiers of Chinese clay
and every one smoking Players or Dunhill
at the point where the two rivers meet
a bridge just for standing
for going from this side to that side
and now all the fishers
have no purpose but hauling in salmon
bright from the green ocean
and fat from their feeding
on minnows and hatchings
and dulled by the excess
and dulled by their instinct
snap at the colours that flash by their sides

the Lakelse flows out
and the Skeena flows in
on a border of mud
or a bubble of mud
that's aquatic and moving
and breathing and formed in the pool
where the lines and their lures
come to a rest

the forest is folded like linen
or napkins in restaurants
as creased as a wedding suit
funeral suit
straighter and blacker
than rainfall

you ever saw
fall in a Japanese woodcut

the trucks are all dirty
and lined up the road side
smoke of a fire threads the damp morning air

someone yells "fish on"
and the water is beaten
the fishers move listlessly
jealously
then there's a flash of dark silver
and the Spring slips the hook
like a gripe that's forgotten
in a moment of loving
and then swear words meet echo
at this meeting of killers
at a bend in a river

I am the salmon
and I am the fisher

and on waking
I cough up some dust
that's collected for years now
that's caught in my lungs
and a choking ensues
that fixes my mind's eye
on pictures of tumours
sprouting like mushrooms
on cigarette labels
the thickness of mucus
diverted and tortured
stuck in the valleys
that are blackened by ashes
and dreaming of grasses that grow on the outside
and the dreaming of twinning

that keeps them together
as ashes and grasses
ashes
then grasses

I doze and I stretch
as forgotten an empire
as ever existed
then feeling comes back
and the cat looks me over
and sizes me up
with unclouded eyes
like the eyes of the painters
Vermeer and Pissarro
and behind those gold coins
are millions of years
of noiseless shooting through grasses
on nocturnal trails of ashes
and dark compounded and broken
by wind and by leaf and by moon

on waking
my hands are as weak as
a monster
I spent the night
battling

then the song of birds

fills up the bedroom
paints the walls ochre
makes the house fragile
as a finger of ash

unseen they vibrate
the top of the yew tree
their restless wings chipping

and weaving a fabric of air
their perch is concealed
their song is a language
confined to a world
made of feathers and bones
that are hollow

I feel myself grow smaller

I am not dreaming
but drunk on this morning
and my children are sparrows
that shit on the sidewalk
cracked with the cold snap
which killed half the trees
turned the cedar boughs red
and the rivers to ice
speckled with gravel
blown from the highway
and the endless pulsation of trucks to the pulp mill
the tree to the paper
the farm to the dinner
removed and remote

as I rise from the bed clothes
happy and stupid
an idea is forming
intersected by knowing
the shortness of summer
in a place where the weather
shifts without warning
the green of the mountain
turned blue by the downpour
that stays without welcome
that eats up the Spring
and floods out the trailers
set close by the river

damp without respite
erosion of hope

but this is the idea

to be at the beach
skin tight with sun
with much too much sun
and radio on
dulled by the music
dulled by the chatter
dulled by the sound of the wind's little waves
that wash out the sand
the river bore here

and Oh!

What is happy?

This is my breakfast
a glass of ice water
half pleasure
half torture
and sand in an ice cube
is the grit at the centre
of the thing that is real
or claims it is real
as it grinds on my teeth
and I wonder from where did this sand come
that shatters so strangely
when I did not expect it
when I did not think
that a remnant existed
the way that an oil slick
that runs through the gutter
reminds me of fishing boats
moored at the docks of my childhood

But the beach has to wait
there is work to be done
work I must do

as I'm walking downtown
I'm drifting and thinking
of the things I must say
and the way I must say them
as I get older
and lurch to the middle
of life as I know it
and count up the times I should have been stopped
I think of the title
with which I describe myself
and refuse to share

then
in the midst of my efforts
to trace my self-pity
my conscience is pricked
by the knowledge
that Indians sleep in the lot over there
they make little nests in the leaves and the grasses
their nests are left empty during the day
the grass is pressed flat by the weight of their slumber
the afternoon sun does not reach their bower
to bring back to life
the stuff of their bedding

they tear the limbs off the cherry trees
to get the cherries

broken black limbs
a great beast torn apart for its eyes

who are the sleepers
from where did they come

one left a note
and I picked it up:
“Dear Mum and Dad
I’m leaving today
to go back and live
with Mama and Daddy.
Things just won’t work out
and I’m sorry for the hurt
that I’ve caused.”
I will burn it to ashes.

The long grass disguises
the dens that they’ve made
in the darkness afforded
by the grove that they rend

and I’m one to talk
with my sensitive soul
and my eye for a bargain

like that house over there
with the broken-in door

the press of the grass
of the grass fueled by ashes
will break up the concrete

it’s hard to believe

in the fallen-down building
and the burned empty lot
a mysterious power
of grasping and tearing
and slow-motion breaking
is working away
and replacing each screw
and straining each girder

little by little
so I don't notice
but one day I'm surprised
when the house has collapsed
and the bulldozer's there
to clean up the mess

so I keep the grass short
at the house where I live
it's famous in town
but is now slightly swaybacked
and slightly run down
it might be condemned
if it weren't for the fiction
of caring and whiteness
invested by we
with the beautiful daughter
and the rusting old car
and a circuit burned out
that cannot be fixed
the breaker is ancient
and the workman
scratches his head
and laughs at the chaos of wiring

"what you got is a mess"

I'm reading the face of the workman
decoding the cipher of those people
who work with their hands
and take pity on us
whose hands are as useless
as glass eyes to a doll

and as I reach halfway
I understand clearly
the rules of some games

are written in motes
that shift in the sunlight
and scatter in wind

and now that the workman
has told me the circuit
is ruined and must be replaced
the smell of burned wiring
comes back like a church bell
ringing for no one

what do I say then
and why do I say it
somnolent one day
sorehead the next
I wish to dissolve
into the form
of a swan's carcass
half-buried in sand
and my bones and my sinews
are still brown from blood
and the recent closeness
of muscle and fat
my spine like a piece of modernist sculpture
or the space needle
stretching and rising
to the point where my head used to be
shoulder blades dovetailed into my sternum
picked semi-clean by blow flies
all parts still held
by the glue of my life
the chaos of feathers and sand-powdered sinews
warped to odd angles
fractures and hollows torqued into my bones
by the pressure of flight
my rib cage a boat's thews
my purlins of ribs

my tenons of vertebrae
waiting to lead me
where the grass is still burning
and ashes are flying
like locusts on heat waves
that ruffle the grain fields
greying the daylight
and clouding the idea
that nothing is solid
and the roots of the grasses
are searching for succor
the flames and the gasoline
stinging their fibre
and turning their life
into something that's lighter
the thing that is flying
is the swan that is me

I drive an old car
that is undeniably rusting
and clunking in unfortunate rhythm with potholes
on my search for the real
my map is quite useless
the terrain is unknown
the compass won't work there
the map will catch fire
and then I'll be lost

I've been told to step back
to somewhere the words that I use
are untinged by theory
to draw on my memory
the instinct for living
instead of my habit
of using a trope
to fix my position

those Indians know
that theory is no good
when you're sleeping outdoors
when you're shitting outdoors
and your nose has been broken
and your eye has been blacked
and no one invites you into their house
to eat a good meal

do hungry men drift
from hunger to greed to a state of confusion
impulsive like prophets
or desperate like junkies

I don't have the words
to make their lives better
I can hardly remember
to shave once a week

sometimes it comes to me
round about lunchtime
the feeling of stubble
surprising my hand

my face in the mirror
chin coated in foam
I consider the steam
that condenses on glass
and vanishes magically
when the door opens
How like the steam
is my attention!

I nick myself badly
and watch the blood spatter
and spiral away
this fragment of self

that cannot be captured
is only enclosed by the thinnest of margins
and contains all my secrets
in a code I don't know

and as I watch closely
hypnotized even
the blood sliding neatly
into the drain hole
the truth of the matter
hangs right before me:
my moment has happened
and nothing has happened

and now I retreat away from the mirror
drop into the basement
where the tools I have bought
to try to make myself
line the walls
as in a museum of me

I pick up a hammer
this is the instant
when the tool bounces up
from my fingernail tip
and I know I've done it now
the pain in a second
strangely destined to be forgotten
but now nauseous

when I'm down here
and injure myself
I don't see the point
in letting out curse words
they only being for the ears of the public
a failure of effort
a dubious wave of the hand

of the monarch who passes
from cathedral to castle

grunting or moaning instead
I'm not visible
glad to be hidden
in my primal condition
throbbing and sweating
the prop of a seaplane swings through my head
a thousand feet over
up in the clouds

the floor of the basement
is cool as the earth that it keeps out
I press my damp forehead
and listen to cars pass along
the street I know best
drifting like clouds
each cloud with a tenant
enclosed in the odor and sound
of a world made of steel

Seeking relief
I think of the liquor store
aisle upon aisle of whisky and vodka
the scent of the juniper seems to drift in
but its only the smell of machine oil
used to cool drill bits
as they cut through soft iron

then there is knocking
I sprint to the front door
the piano needs tuning
with the shift in the weather

and my friend Al
tell's me his heart's not so good

with uncontrolled surges
and hands set to shaking
he says that he's drinking
far too much wine
he better cut back
he's not getting younger
his hands hold the tuning fork
silver and ringing
he presses the keys
and wrenches the tone right
away from the flats and sharps of last winter
towards a bright past
and I dig what he says
about uncontrolled surges
his hands always shaking
but then he plays Bach fugues
and the piano sounds better
I write him his cheque
he asks me to dinner
and I ask him what wine should I bring
a bottle of red or a bottle of white

After he leaves
I go to my library
look up some words
demagogue
demigod
and I can't decide
which one best applies to me

I stand in the hallway
soaking in summer
the hope for the summer
like a hole in my shirt
that grows with each washing
inspected in darkness
the ludicrous gloom

of laundry rooms
and piles of clothes
and the odor of soap
and my clothes fall apart

Inertia is law
and it comes to dictate
the terms of surrender:
the salt cellar stays empty
because it is empty
and waiting for something
or someone like me
to fill it with salt
but while I am watching
the birds in the cherry tree
sing out in random
I see life is not simple
just eating and flying and waiting
for whatever comes after
the moment in which the hawk swoops down
to break the fine neck
or the windowpane beckons
with a flight path much clearer
than the one afforded by berries and grasses

children next door bounce on a trampoline
higher and high
the chickadee reports and the wind chimes jangle
there is a weight
I am looking into the leaves of the maple
to feel something pressing

the smell of fried chicken
that plugs up the neighborhood
pulls beautiful children away from their homes
to walk down the alley
with bottles of beer in their hands

mosquitos siphon me
drink up my blood
and fly off to spawn
in some dark place
using my blood as the engine
to drive their young

the blackflies that cut me
chisel their meal
withdraw without notice
and slip into distance
it's a cliché to say that blood is crimson
it's more like sealing wax
clotting and flaking
to wine-dark red evidence
the only calling card
of their assault on my skin

and what has been proven?

fill the air with the smell of fried chicken and french fries
and fill my hands with a bottle of beer
stare deeply into the spot where my father
meets the evening of memory
and remember when I set the prairie on fire
let me go to the river
and not see the beer cans
let me walk down the street
and not see the people sleeping in grass

and then there's the portrait
of me in my carport
a technical starting point
subtle fragility
amorphous passivity
a sense of the self that's been split into fragments
and I am a passenger

among many passengers
faces with scars
and hands with tattoos
their teeth are all rotten
and their breath stinks like hell
so hell is not hot
like a bus ride it's clammy
my face needs a wash
my teeth need a brush

Yet here stands the scoundrel
in transient colour
of water in summer
or fire in winter
the painting of water
affected by rainfall
the middle of evening
with candlelight dipping
from each insect's death

and starting to drink now
in the room that booze makes
where no one but me
has a comfortable chair
and a view of the grassland

I oscillate wildly
like radio signals
that bounce from the mountain to the wet valley floor
from no then to yes
and from fame and from fortune
then nothing that once was is yet meant to be

I smoke my last cigarette down to the end
and watch the stars burning
and see the lights of town

smolder to ashes
of stars
of me
irrevocable
standing in dark
some rain falling now
for two weeks the ground has been burning
my skin has been burning
and God damn
I'm a failure
just like my Dad
aware of the failure
a scapegoat is missing
I must take the blame
for my pleasure
and self-congratulations on another day
and sweetgrass prayers
that I don't know to make

and the dream of light smoke that is ruptured
when the phone rings so late in the night
and I speak softly
as if to honour the softness of the evening
or the respectful tenderness of dark
who am I in my barely-lit kitchen
speaking in these intimate tones
to someone who could be a lover
but is instead the purveyor
of a freezer load of meat

the fridge motor clicks and hums
something comes to life
I want the door to open
and the little light to come on

music resonates from the bedroom
"trust in me"
where a woman lies alone beneath quilts
listening with one ear
to the passing cars

In the pitch black I fumble around
my good wife pretending to sleep
as she wonders how she came to this thought
where the grass becomes ashes
and the bed is set spinning
for a few moments
the shallow turbulent sleep of the partially wicked
subdues me like smoke
and I am submerged to fight through the grasses
and breath in the ashes
of the fire that smolders
just out of sight

